

Windows Spring 2024



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Red Cove

 By: J.S. Hayes

The sea was black when I first saw the love of my life. A dark tide lapped at my boat like tongues of liquid moonlight, waves roiling in the cryostatic peristalsis of Maine's bleak coast.

At my feet, a partially dismembered shark writhed in silent agony. This pale, bleeding thing, thrashed and snapped as I cut its fins off. My boot heel rolled it off the side of the deck as its mutilated body smacked into the oil-heavy water.

Torrents of syrupy blood streaked the deck and stained my clothes. Scarlet ribbons of gore plumed the water as the shark sank into the blackened water. Its cold eyes stared back at me as it sank.

I knew that I should have felt remorse for this beautiful innocent thing—that I should have felt anything at all, but all I could feel was the numb assurance that this evil I had committed was necessary.

How guilty could I be when its death meant I got to live? When its fins, sold in shrink-wrapped cellophane, were the difference between affording food and starving?

You teach a man to fish, and he'll thresh the sea.

Gazing up from the sable abyss that yawned hungrily below my ship, there she was.

The half-submerged silhouette of a woman flickering on the edge of my ship's basilisk glare, a phosphorescent lamia. Her shoulders floated gently, waves cutting them with scalpels of moonlight.

Our eyes locked, and we flash-froze in glacial terror.

After what felt like an eternity, she began to approach, hesitantly gliding through the waves towards my skipper. Not swimming; gliding. As if propelled by something hidden beneath the water's dark surface; something unseen and intoxicating.

She drew her arms up to rest against the plexiglass hull, flesh pale and sleek like a molten pearl. Her hair was dark and tangled with brine as it cascaded down her neck, and spilled over her shoulders.

She was beautiful.

I wasn't afraid when she spoke. Dumbfounded, I was surprised she had the biological equipment for speech.

In a strangled voice, she said that she was starving and terrified, half-begging for food. Despite the intense strangeness of the situation, the

warmth in my voice surprised me when I told her she could have whatever she wanted.

Her head slipped under the abyssal diaphragm, disappearing for a moment. When it resurfaced, she cradled the shark in her arms. Without a thought for the suffering that flashed behind its still-living eyes, she lifted its pale underbelly and tore off a wet, glistening chunk between her teeth.

It was there, as blood and desperation ran down her chin, that I began to feel the first nibblings of love. Like mackerel testing a blade bait.

Soon after I would regularly slip away to see her. Dodging the suspicious eyes of other fishermen, my oil-trap skipper limped across the coastline; waiting anxiously in a leaden veil of frost. When she appeared, and she always did, I knew that the love I felt was returned.

Gradually, our affections began to boil.

We talked for hours about everything and nothing, enjoying the warm cocoon of each other's embrace. I told her half-truths of my father's time at sea, and his father before him. She told me of her people and the red tide that forced them from hiding.

"You men may have eaten all the fish," she joked, "but you didn't eat us."

I laughed playfully in return but felt dawning within myself a sense of cruel power I wouldn't understand until much later.

And that was the first time we kissed.

Her lips were soft and cold, the phantom of salt lingering on her tongue as she pulled me into herself. Twin passions entwined, we broke upon each other like waves on a seawall.

A razor-cloud of gulls screamed hungrily above us as our flesh collided.

Lying in the wake of our sated desire, I remembered a conversation I had with my Father as a child. He told me that seagulls ferried the souls of drowned sailors down to Davy Jones, but I never believed him. I always thought they wanted to eat the souls themselves.

Maybe that's what the gulls were so hungry for that day—our little deaths.

Afterward, our meetings became threaded with an unspoken urgency. It felt as if the piano-wire heartstrings that drew us together had become shorter, suffocating us.

Then one day, as we basked in the undertow of spent desire, I couldn't take it anymore.

"Let's run away together."

It wasn't safe for us here, I said. There was a place not far from

here where we could be free—a place where life still endured beneath the ocean. No overfishing and no pollution. Just plush sand and waves of shimmering gold.

Shockingly, she believed me.

She told me she loved me, that whatever it took for us to be together, she would do it.

So I said to meet me near the cove where we first met. To bring whoever she could, all of them if possible. I told her that soon, tonight, we would be together forever.

And I told her that I loved her too.

With that, we shared one final kiss, and she slipped beneath the waves.

A bleak wind stalked the wharves as dusk settled that night.

Staring out at the sea, I held my father's flensing knife. As if called by the blade, a memory of him began to slither its way into my mind.

The memory was of our trip to Japan, to the village where they cull dolphins. We watched slate-faced fishermen sail out into the dawn soaked sea, herding hundreds of innocent animals into a cove to be slaughtered. These creatures have their own language; they feel love, loss, and pain. I could hear the calves squealing for their mothers as they were butchered alive.

It's to protect the fish, he told me.

It's necessary. No different than a slaughterhouse.

Staring at the knife, my face reflected in cold steel, I was no longer afraid. My determination was galvanized. I knew what I had to do, what I wanted to do.

I turned to confront my true desire and waded through frozen shadows towards the fishery.

Then came the waiting.

Waiting for her in the blistering cold, A merciless wind bit at my goose-flesh, lesioning it. Each distant foghorn tightened the vice in my throat. I was so sure she wouldn't show—that all my careful planning was for nothing.

But then there she was, little jewels of ice beading her hair like stars suspended in oily night.

Behind her, countless others began to float to the surface one by one. A shoal of men, women, and children; expressions all lamniform and harrowed.

I trawled them towards the cove at an agonizing pace, watching

their tails flicker beneath the black membrane of seawater. Feeling my dread slowly calcify with each passing moment.

Eventually, we arrived at the cove. All of us assembled outside a small cave mouth chewed into the seawall. I told her to lead them in, I would be just behind her.

With horror I watched a wave of hesitation wash over her face, and I thought of the shark. The cold, distant pain in its eyes. The disbelief as I cut its fins off.

“Together forever?” She asked, her voice like a bone caught in her throat.

“Together forever,” I said, and I meant it.

I watched her leathery tail shine like silver in the moonlight, and I thought of a Judas goat.

When we entered the cove, men were waiting for us. Men with knives, guns, and smiles that flashed brighter than the cataract of moonlight above.

As cataclysmic realization descended upon her, she turned to look at me; me, and the flensing knife in my hand.

That's when the screaming started, and she got really scared.

What came next was functionally no different than a slaughterhouse.

Tenderly the blade slipped in, and I felt it grate against bone as I unseamed her soft white underbelly. Opened it like a flower in bloom.

Her failing heart pumped blood into the saltwater, slowing with every beat. Each wave stole away more of her life in foaming crimson sheets as it unspooled out before me. The cove was stained red with our love.

Now, she would be mine forever.

Standing over her, I finally knew exactly how my father must have felt in Japan.

Powerful.

A feeling so strong that I wanted to blow the tankers on every oceanic oil rig.

I wanted to thresh the sea, to keelhaul its bleeding carcass.

I wanted to dredge the depths and rip what was mine from the womb of the earth.

I leaned in to kiss her, tasting coppery blood and salt on my tongue.

Then her eyes glossed over as she fell into a hollow shuddering dream, and the love of my life was gone.

Dust Creature

   By: Eden Grandmont

I have a special story to tell on this summer day
About a little creature that lurks in wait.
It's got pale, warty skin and thick hair of hay,
And it's lived in your home since the earliest date.
When it gets hungry, it feasts on whatever critters it can find,
Leaving behind a mess of dirt and grime.
It cannot bathe, as a result of its simple mind,
But can sing like a broken airy chime.

But where this creature shines is when you're off about,
Since that is the one and only time it likes to come out.

It's a dust creature, spreading bunnies and balls as it runs around your house,
And it moves swiftly and quietly, making no more noise than a mouse.
Dust on the windowsill!
Dust on the floor!
Dust in the shower!
Dust on the door!
It spreads its filth all over the place,
All while wearing a toothy grin on its face.

And that is why there is dust all over my home
When you come to visit, you see.
The dust creature is the problem, I tell you!
It couldn't possibly be me!



Life of a Tulip

   By: Ashton Laurent

Do you remember the day we first met?
Warmth and light danced along my arms.
Your face, brighter than the sun,
As you showered me with love.

I met so many friends that day.
My siblings, an orchestra of color:
Reds, yellows, greens, blues, and purples,
Captivating cold hearts with our music.

From far and wide, creatures came to see us;
Some with bright flashes and compliments,
Others because they were hungry.
Through it all you protected me.

But now I grow cold and my leaves are weary.
My siblings stop their music,
And fade, one by one
Like stars in the morning sky.

Each day it grows colder,
And each day I grow tired.
I must go to sleep now
And dream of your return.



 CJ Miller

Lover's Oak

   By: Blair Shewan

"Will you stay by my side?" She asked through a voice thin and weary.

"Of course I will." He said, confidence in his voice.

"Will I be okay?" The wind outside seemed to drown out her response.

He stared at the vines growing out of her skin. They pulled and twisted at her veins, erupting out like broken bones.

Her clothes were thick with spores, rooting into her marred features. It was hard to tell where the infection ended and she began. Her body was changing, contorting, in ways not possible.

Legs, well, what were once legs, were extending deep into the ground. Her face was cracking with a need for hydration. Yet, she could not drink despite his best efforts to give her water. Her eyes, once a bright amber brown, were now dull and clouded from the sickness that spread through her.

As he watched her for a change, any change at all that could be a positive sign, another branch burst out. It showered him with bits of flesh as more of her body was replaced with the living, oozing wood. It was white, mixed with her skin, bones, flesh and muscle. It pulsed and twitched in the breeze like a new limb. Dark, black sap dripped from the newly birthed branch, splattering on his exposed forearm. He tried to wipe it off, but it smeared on his pale skin, quickly absorbing the strange substance.

The man could feel vines forming under his own skin, tearing at his muscles as his arms became stiff and his skin ridged. His blood slowing to the consistency of sap. But he had time. Enough time at least to hold his love as he himself grew roots.

She coughed, leaves and spores covered in bloody sap lay on the ground between them.

"Of course you will." He finally replied, lying through his bark-encrusted teeth. "Nothing will take you from me"



The New Feeling

   By: Caelyn Porter

From the start it seemed untrue
Sounded like everyone wanted it,
Now I have a whole new view
But I'm not sure if I should commit.
Commit to a feeling is a big thing
Especially the one everyone wants,
But with your name it has a ring
It all depends on the response.

This type of thing can go either way
With a happy yes or a sad no,
It all depends on what they say
And if you want to go.
The real question is how to confess
Letter, poem, words, actions?
You just have to try to express
And hope they have the same reaction.

You can confess your emotions anywhere
In the open as well as hidden,
Just be careful about the words there
Because some cannot be written.
No names, no relation,
No memories or hints.
That would be too much information,
When you should keep it at tints.

But I will say this,
The words I write I hide from you.
It is like its hidden and you miss,
But the words are true.
I believe in a new level of feelings,
Something new to me.
It all started with the meetings,
Now it is love I can see.

I thought love was dumb and a lie,

Until I met this man.
I don't know what changed or why,
But that's when my belief began.
It could have been his smile or his eyes,
Or his laugh or his voice.
But even though I will keep it in some disguise,
I know with him; I made the right choice.

The next step will be taken slow,
Hopefully someday I can let him know.



 Madison Muise

Deer with a Hat

   By: Eden Grandmont

You may find it strange, but I am a deer with a hat.
Yes, that's right. A hat.
I've got my own attire, you see,
And if you're so inclined, I'll tell you some about that.

I wake in the morning, same as you,
And put together my own wake-up brew,
And when some fine greens are found after long,
My mighty teeth will chew.

But that's only after I don my attire.
I have been told that I appear like a squire.
It disappoints me, really,
Making the lack of dress for animals seem dire.

When that is done, I go about my day,
Wandering fields, happy and gay.
I do hope this makes you understand
That all animals have something interesting to say.

So next time you come across a bird or cat,
Don't be afraid to say- what?
You want to know how I know all of that?
How should I know? I'm just a deer with a hat!



The Boy Who Will Not Become a Man

✍✍✍ By: Aslan

I have my concerns, and you have yours. Who am I to know what your life is like? It's not like I've lived it.

I have my concerns, and I share them with you. You brush them off like water under the bridge.

You are not seeing. You are not listening. You hear, but you do not process. You watch as the war unfolds, and you think everything is as it should be. You do not understand because You have not lived without a war occurring. You do not heed my advice.

I am not telling you how to live your life. It was never my intention to do that.

We are worlds apart in many ways. I call myself the father and the voice of reason who warns you to ease with caution. And you are the little kid that doesn't look as he crosses the street, believing it is only him who exists, and becomes tire marks on the pavement. Red, sticky, and textured.

Somehow, the father feels no remorse. Dare he say it, "I told you so!"



 Madison Muise

Girl In The Waiting Room

✍✍✍ By: Kylie McLaughlin

When I looked around the sterile waiting room, I saw all walks of life. A woman sat with her baby in their car seat while she rocked them with her foot. A blonde girl, who was definitely way more pregnant than I was, sat with her partner. Both of them looked so very drunk with love. The one pair that really caught my eye though was a girl about my age, who sat with her mom. She looked just as nervous as me, but she squeezed her mom's hand while she rubbed her thumb across the back of her daughter's palm. Despite having my boyfriend beside me, I wondered what that kind of love felt like.

The nurse called my name, bringing us further into the OBGYN office that smelled like bleach and was covered in photos of beautiful pregnant women and photos of Gerber babies. I hoped my baby would be just as cute as them. After checking my weight, she sat us in a small examination room with all sorts of pamphlets scattered across the pastel blue wall. The pamphlets had various topics from STDs to first-time pregnancy advice. A nurse came in and handed me the thickest folder I'd ever seen in my life, outlining all the things to expect while you're expecting. Despite my provider's warm personality, it felt nothing more than clinical and cold. I wondered what the girl in the waiting room's mom told her to expect. I wonder how excited her mom was to share her pregnancy stories with the girl who made her a mother in the first place. I wished I could have my mom come here with me. I wished she would just text me back.

"She hearted my post." I said dejectedly soon after we got home. My partner looked at me, trying to gauge how much it hurt. Sat on my cat-scratched couch, buried in warm cozy blankets as if they would create a shield from my reality, I stared at my Facebook notifications screen, with tears daring to spill, as I reread my mother's name. She heart reacted to my pregnancy announcement. She hasn't so much as texted me back in nearly three years, but she never failed to like my posts. The little pink heart emoji on my phone taunted me with what could have been. It hurt more to see her tread the line of being involved in my life than it would if she were to just leave entirely. I wondered what that girl in the waiting room's mom said when she told her she was pregnant. I nearly felt sick with jealousy, thinking about what we could have had if she would've just picked me over her addiction.

Months of radio silence went by as my due date approached. My

apartment was slowly drowning in baby socks and burp clothes. New white furniture laid against the walls, still in their cardboard boxes. Diaper packages lined the hallway closet that was now bursting with new baby supplies and toiletries. I hid under my safety net of blankets on my living room couch, wondering how I was going to do this without my mother. I cannot believe she hadn't said anything. She's known for months now. How was I supposed to do this without even knowing what a mother is? She has been absent for longer than I could remember. I didn't even know what a mother did!

Who was supposed to be in the delivery room with us? There was no way I was bringing my dad with me. That would scar the both of us. My aunt told me she would be there if I'd have her, but she has never had kids before. How was she supposed to help? My head ached with anxiety and my stomach was swirling with morning sickness. Or stress? I wasn't quite sure anymore.

The OBGYN appointments became a weekly occurrence. The sterile smell of bleach and the dumb powder-blue walls just filled me with fear because before I knew it, my son was due to be here in a few weeks. I thought doctors were supposed to be reassuring? They pummeled me with information I needed every appointment: lists of pediatricians, pros and cons of circumcision, and breastfeeding classes. The unknown weighed over my head like the largest gray rain clouds in a storm. I knew I was an adult, but I felt so lost after leaving each week. I had spent hours every day researching what I needed to know, but I didn't realize you couldn't research a mother's experience. Every baby information website felt like it was written by perfect billboard parents who could do no wrong. I just wanted my mother so she could tell me the good, bad, and the ugly of being a parent. I didn't need perfection, I needed reassurance. I bet the girl in the waiting room was at her house, with her mom, setting up the nursery together.

Maybe they sat reminiscing on the days when the girl was young, and her mother was there for her. I wished I had that, but instead I stayed nested in my blanket fort of anxiety and refreshed my mother's Facebook feed. I was desperate to see what was more important to her than her own flesh and blood.

The contractions started at three in the morning. The pain was milder than I expected it to be in the beginning. My partner had just gone to bed after getting home from working late at the casino. I let him sleep while I debated who I wanted to call to come with us to this hospital when the time was right. Of course, I wanted to call my mother. I wanted to tell

her I was scared. I wanted her to tell me it was all going to be alright and that she was there for me. I wanted her to tell me she was coming over and would hold my hand like the girl in the waiting room. I wanted so desperately to just be the girl in the waiting room. Instead, I scrolled through my contacts list until my vision was blurry with tears. The feeling of uncertainty and fear blanketed me as I sat in my dark living room, waiting until it was time to go to the hospital.

I called my stepmom. We weren't as close as I would've liked. We weren't even friendly until a couple years ago. She came into my life at the same time I was angry at the world for my mom abandoning us. I was a kid who knew she wouldn't fill that void. She showed up to my house with breakfast and coffee at six in the morning. She showed up without hesitation, even calling out from her job for the next few days. She showed up when my own mother wouldn't even text me. She made me walk up and down the stairs of my third-floor apartment, reminiscing about when she was in labor with my siblings. We took my dog for a walk for what felt like an hour because she said I had to keep moving to get further along and to forget the pain. She told me everything she went through with my siblings when she was pregnant with them. She even helped me clean up his nursery. She sat and held my hand in hers. For the first time, I felt like the girl in the waiting room.

The day finally came and went. My son was born on October 16, at 8:08 am. It was the happiest day of my life. As he cried when he came into our world, I cried alongside him. His birth felt like the rebirth of myself. I was completely lost to motherhood. Drowning in what would become my new reality. I wouldn't have had it any other way. Everything else I had ever accomplished felt so insignificant now. I didn't realize how much joy came along with bringing life earthside until I lived it. I did it without my mom beside me. My son was even cuter than those Gerber babies who lined the powder blue walls of my OB's office. I couldn't wait to bring him home and use all the new furniture we got for him. I was so excited for everyone to meet him.

We went home a couple days later. I rested on my couch beside my sleeping baby rocking in his swinging chair. I'm not sure if it was the sleep deprivation or the baby blues, but the tears began to rain down. My boyfriend asked me what was wrong, if he could help me in some way. All I could tell him was, "I did it without her." The realization hit me all at once. I didn't need her in the first place. I had my own support system that wasn't traditional but was filled with more love than I could ever imagine. I didn't need to be the girl in the waiting room because I was just as loved

by so many other people.

Becoming a mother showed me that it is not only blood that defines family. It showed me that despite craving that maternal presence in my life, it wasn't worth screaming into the void for. I knew deep down my mother would never call. She'd never meet my son or congratulate me. After all I had been through, I was okay with that. The people who were my family showed up. Day after day, they called me. They came over and helped me. They showed me every ounce of love that I needed. Bringing life into the world is not what makes the mother; it's the love for their child that does. I didn't need my mother anymore because I simply didn't have one in the first place. I had all I needed.



 ..Eden Grandmont

Star of David Earrings

   By: Nayeli Morales

It started out as a summer like any other. With the doors of fourth grade closed behind me, I could turn around and face a season full of endless possibilities. I was excited to spend my days swimming, going to birthday parties, and traveling. I wanted to eat ice cream and pop-sicles and laugh when I ate too slowly and they started to melt in the heat, leaving my hands sticky and in serious need of a wash.

Before any of that could happen though, I was called in for a family meeting. I sat in the living room alongside my sisters. Our parents were looking at us from across the room. They said things were going to change a bit. They said it wouldn't affect us right away, and we had plenty of time to get used to the idea. My sisters and I weren't really paying attention. We were too excited and jittery to battle each other with water balloons.

"We won't be celebrating Christmas anymore," one of them said. It was then that my world came to a screeching halt. My sister, still dazed and fidgeting from the excitement of summer, said "what?" When my parents repeated the sentence, my sister asked why and launched into a whole discussion with them, trying to understand and asking what they were doing.

It was almost as if my head went under water. Though they were talking right there next to me, the sound went muffled as I tried to comprehend what they said. Sure, for some it wouldn't have been a big deal, but it was to me. Christmas was my favorite time of year. We had little traditions, likewatching *The Polar Express* with our cousins every Christmas Eve and decorating gingerbread houses. We always blared Christmas music throughout the house as we decorated while setting up the tree and stockings. My sister and I even had little Christmas trees that sat on our dressers in our rooms that we could decorate ourselves. Our elf, Harmony, was a little trickster and always made me laugh.

I couldn't believe all that was gone. My parents said it so easily, as if it was no big deal. Heck, they sounded happy and excited for the

change. Being nine years old, I was as well, but not to their extent. I was curious about this new holiday, Hanukkah, but I was sadder to see Christmas go.

When December rolled around, things had changed, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. I thought till that point I had done a good job keeping the transition in the dark. My other family, friends, and teachers hadn't found out yet, and I was determined to keep it that way. They still invited me to decorate the classroom with red and green streamers, ring jingle bells, and sing along to Christmas songs. I participated in all of it, thinking if I kept this up, they'd never know anything.

At school it seemed like nothing changed, but at home things were completely different. The Christmas tree was gone, and so were my hopes of decorating it with my sister for years to come. Leaving cookies and milk out for Santa? Forget it. Stockings, gone. The Christmas lights were thrown away, and my favorite part of it all, the little train that goes around the bottom of the tree, I didn't see again.

In its place was new stuff. There were menorahs everywhere. My mother explained to me that they're part of Hanukkah tradition; every night for eight nights we light a new candle. I didn't know why. Instead of gingerbread decorating, a new thing called dreidel was brought out. The lights that decorated our house went from red and green to blue and white. We were allowed to eat a lot of donuts during the first Hanukkah because a part of this holiday is to indulge in fried food.

My mother must've sensed my sister and I's reaction to the whole thing. We couldn't decide if we should be angry or excited. We didn't know if we should embrace it or turn the whole thing down. See, we were, and still are, very close, my sister and I. We were each other's best friends and we always had each other through everything. We knew we would have one another through the whole ordeal, but we felt very similarly about the change.

"It takes some adjusting when you try something new," our mother explained gently. "And adjusting takes time."

A little later, we had our first night of Hanukkah. By that point, my nine-year-old self had decided that being sour about the whole thing wouldn't get me anywhere. It also wouldn't bring Christmas back, and the sooner I let go, the better. So, I tried to enjoy the change. I learned to play dreidel and came to like it. I liked drawing Stars of David and wearing blue pajamas. I didn't have to worry about school because

everyone was on break.

The nightly ceremony was interesting to me. We'd sit at the dinner table and light a candle, one per night. While they were burning, we read stories we had to find online and talk about them. Once we were done, we quickly blew out the candles, like it was our birthday, to make them last eight days. Then we'd trade gifts wrapped in festive wrapping paper.

Eventually, my family got into the swing of things. We came to genuinely enjoy it and love it. My sisters and I started to get creative and added more to the pot when we played dreidel. What started out as chocolate coins became candies of all sorts, even a few real coins. We took turns lighting the menorah each night and exchanging gifts.

I was feeling ok with it all and better yet, enjoying myself. Then there came a day when I went with my mother and sister to run some errands. We went to stores like Christmas Tree Shops, Walmart, and Joanne's. I remember how the feeling hit me like a truck. My mother continued on like she didn't see any of it, but my sister and I did. Christmas decorations all over the place. Christmas music playing over the sound system. Kids playing with nutcrackers and dads purchasing trees while moms bought ornaments. My sister and I immediately got sad as we walked deeper into the stores. We reached out to stroke the trees and longed to decorate one. The smell of pine trees, peppermint, and Christmas flooded our senses. She and I mumbled along to the songs overhead, though they didn't bring the merriment they did before. Instead, it felt like a haunting song, there to remind you of what you can never have back. When my mom said she was headed to the very small Hanukkah section of the store to get candles, my sister and I didn't go with her.

Even my friends thought I was weird. I remember going back to school after break. Everyone was sharing their Christmas stories, and since I didn't have any to share and couldn't relate, I went off to be on my own. Sure enough, I couldn't escape the inevitable, because my friends found me. They asked me what was up and why I wasn't sharing any Christmas stories. I didn't like to lie when I was younger, so I told them.

"Oh," they said. "Ok," then they walked away and didn't bring the topic up until years later. I had to tell my teachers and they had the same reaction. Both made faces of shock and disgust, and they didn't

even know what it was. I had to explain it to them. My extended family disapproved at first as well. They didn't agree and weren't happy with us. They made quick judgements without taking the time to learn.

I wanted the holidays to be over. I wanted to take down all the Christmas and Hanukkah decorations I saw anywhere. Then I was invited to a birthday party. Ever one there was dressed in the classic red and black striped Christmas pjs. I chose to go in clothes that didn't show any holiday. When people who didn't know asked where my Christmas jammies were, I just claimed to have forgotten them. I saw a girl I didn't know in blue, yellow, and silver pjs. She stuck out immensely in a sea of red and green. I approached her and asked if she was excited for Christmas. She said she was excited for Hanukkah. Beyond surprised, I asked her about it. She said her whole family celebrated it and she had always loved it. I asked her if she felt like she was missing out and she said no.

She wasn't proud about it. She didn't stick her nose in the air and brag about being different. She loved that she was, but she was humble and knew nothing would rock her from her ways. It's true that I had to transition from Christmas to Hanukkah at a young age and she only knew Hanukkah her whole life, but I thought maybe one day I could get there. Maybe one day I could be like her.

The process was slow going. After all these years, I still draw the line on what to share with who. But I like to think maybe I have improved. Recently, I was invited to another Christmas party. I wore my Christmas pajamas but, as a small stand, I decided to wear a pair of Star of David earrings my mother got me for this past Hanukkah. I made sure they were visible. Though no one said anything, good or bad, I felt I was that much closer to being like the girl in the Hanukkah pajamas.



Dancer

 By: Ashton Laurent

The pen graces the paper as a dancer would a stage
Movements flow like a breeze through a field of daisies
A storm brews in the distance
As the dancer's performance draws to a close,
she trips, uprooting the daisies as she falls
The world she has created
crumbles into the void
Another page in the waste bin,
of stories never told



Flightless Bird

 By: Alex Deedy

I pictured a bird, how free it must have felt in the sky.
Its wings could take him wherever he desired and no one could question it.
His limit is the sky but I am limited by my feet on the ground.

What a life, a life of a bird so free.
How treacherous they will scream, The anarchy it will bring.
I hear the call for a nation of flightless birds, but even they still have wings.

A Bird, the metaphor for my freedom.
Call the troops, tell them my name and warn them not to get in my way.
I have taken flight for the sky, I will rise.
Watch me take flight.
I look ahead, the air is crisp and my lungs are begging for more.

I have proven the existence of an impossible possibility.
My lack of wings couldn't pin me down.
For I pictured a bird, a bird that was free with no limits to their freedom.
What I didn't know before, that I do now is that the bird was me.



Reanimation



By: April Waltmire

I woke up.

This normally wouldn't be a problem, except for the fact that I am dead. So yeah, waking up was unexpected.

At first I tried to just stay very still, thinking that maybe if I tried hard enough I'd just die again. When that didn't work I decided to open my eyes.

Then, when the sudden influx of light and visual stimulation drove a veritable screwdriver through my newly re-alived brain, I quickly squeezed my eyes shut. But not before letting out a loud, miserable sound at the pain.

Pain. I didn't miss that. At all.

I kept very still until the agonizing pounding behind my eyes faded into a dull pulse. When I could hear my own thoughts again, I decided it would be smart to try again to see where exactly I was. And also find out why I wasn't dead. Which I really, really should be.

I was much more strategic about seeing this time though. I squinted, opening my eyes in narrow slits, just enough to get a vague idea of my surroundings.

A hospital room. A very boring looking one too. It had beige looking walls, a beige looking chair in the corner, and- just to spice things up- an off white tiled floor. I peered to my right, past the edge of the hospital bed I was currently laying on, and found myself face to face with the proof of my mortality.

I was hooked up to a beeping heart monitor, a thin red line pulsing in time with my heart. The wiggly little line spiked when I saw it, the faint beeps coming a bit quicker now.

I squinted at it for a long, long moment, trying really hard to get the erratically jumping line to calm down.

Eventually I gave up and turned away, deciding if my heart- which shouldn't be beating at all- wanted to get excited, who was I to stand in the way?

I looked over at the other side of the room, scanning the place as best I could through half-lidded eyes. There was a closed door taking up pretty much the whole wall, though I spied a minimalist painting doing its very best to spice up the decor. Which I'm sure would've worked better if the artist had used more than just beige. I mean come on! There are so many colors to choose from. Why be shy about it, hmm?

You don't even have to go crazy all at once, just sprinkle in some

reds or a nice cheery yellow once in a while.

I closed my eyes again, trying to ignore the constant beeping reminding me that I was getting much too upset about this hospital's aversion to color. I had to get my mind off it. I decided to try some more experiments.

First I tried to lift my hand to my face. When nothing happened, I started to panic again.

No. Wait, I told myself, *We can figure this out.*

I tried wiggling my fingers instead, deciding it would be smarter to take it slow. When my pinky managed to inch itself off the bed I almost cheered.

I don't know exactly how long it was I laid there, wiggling my fingers and toes and happier than I had any right to be, but it was probably an embarrassingly long time.

Finally, *Finally*, I managed to lift my hand to my face, and I gave my fingers a nice long look. All five, present and accounted for.

Then I let my arm flop back down, feeling drained.

Who knew dying really takes it out of you?

The heart monitor was starting to really get to me by that point. Its constant *beep beep beep* filling the horrible beige room. I got the irrational idea that it was mocking me, that it was saying "Ha! Look who has a heart rate again! This guy! What a loser!!"

I reached out a tired hand to try and swat at the thing, trying to find some switch or something to shut it off. What kind of hospital let a horrible thing like this exist anyway?

I stopped very suddenly, a horrible realization settling over me. I didn't really know that I was in a hospital at all. I had just assumed.

But if this was a hospital, where were all the doctors? Where were the nurses? Why wasn't anyone checking on me?

I opened my mouth to try and call out, then hesitated. If this *wasn't* a hospital, then where was I? *Why was I alive?*

I decided answers were worth the risk of calling out.

"Hey! Is anyone there??" I shouted. Or, I tried to shout. My vocal cords didn't exactly cooperate so what came out was more of a strangled string of incomprehensible noises.

Which hurt. A lot. Almost more than opening my eyes had.

My throat burned and I swear I could feel my vocal cords shredding themselves.

I decided not to do that again, lying my head back down and do-

ing my best not to make any more vocal noises.

That meant I was back to square one on the whole getting-someone's-attention thing. So I turned back to my original idea and knocked the heart monitor over. It couldn't stop the smile that crept over my face as the heavy, horrible thing crashed over. Unfortunately, since it only dropped about three feet, it did absolutely nothing.

I stared at it and it beeped back at me.

Eventually, I decided to just lay there and wait for whatever was going to happen. I stared up at the ceiling, counting the tiles- thirty-seven, which is an infuriatingly odd number- to pass the time.

Then, after I'd decided that I really was dead after all and hell was an empty hospital room with an unbreakable heart monitor, the door opened.

My head whipped over to see, my eyes growing wide as a woman in a lab coat made her way inside. Her eyes landed on me and she smiled.

"Hello," she said, "How are you feeling?"

I stared at her, my brain short circuiting.

"You must be tired, after waking up like that," she went on, as if she'd never expected any reply at all. She walked over to my bed, holding a clipboard and making several notes. If she noticed the toppled over heart monitor, she didn't say anything about it.

"Are you comfortable? Is there anything you need?" she asked, looking up from her notes. I stared back, my mouth opening and closing uselessly.

There was not a single thought in my head, all of them evaporating at the sight of another living, breathing human.

"I'm dead," I managed to say, my voice coming out all hoarse and raspy. The woman raised an eyebrow at that and jotted down another note.

"Interesting. Do you really remember being dead?" she asked and I nodded. She looked very excited about that, leaning closer.

"Can you tell me about it?"

"My death?" I asked, sounding a bit affronted.

"No, the stuff that came after. What was it like?" she asked. I opened my mouth to answer, then stopped.

"I- I don't know," I said, realizing that I couldn't actually remember anything. I knew that I had died and had been dead for a long while, but I couldn't quite figure out what had happened after.

"I think- I think I was somewhere," I said, not knowing where this somewhere was. The woman nodded, but she looked disappointed. She didn't make any notes either.

"Why am I not dead?" I asked, and the woman gave me a strange look.

"Do you want to be?"

"Well... it was much less painful," I said, my vocal cords scratching.

"Ah, I see," she said, making another note, "Well, it doesn't look like you'll be much use anyways. I'll tell the others to let you go as soon as we're done here."

"What exactly is 'here'?" I asked, looking around at the ugly definitely-not-a-hospital room.

"A research lab. We're trying to figure out what happens after death." The woman said it like it was a very normal thing to be doing and not absolutely insane.

"Okay..." I said.

She gave me a smile, saying, "Don't worry, we asked your grand-kids for permission to reanimate you."

"My what?" I asked. Last time I checked, I'd never even gotten married, let alone had kids.

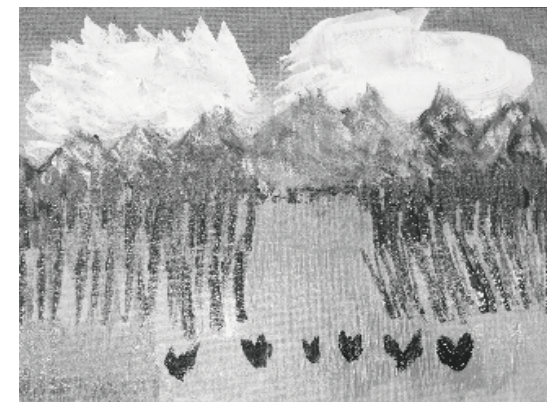
"Oh, I forgot you didn't know about the clones... hmm. Forget I said that," she said, flipping to a new page on her clipboard.

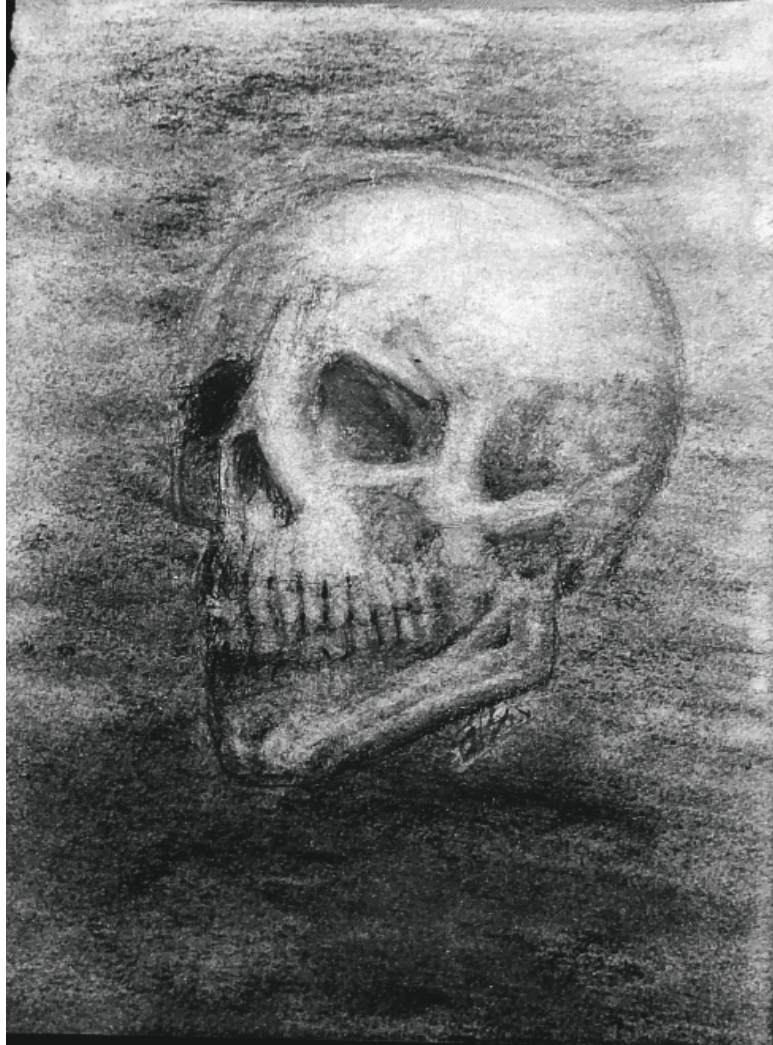
"Now, do you remember how you died?"

I closed my eyes, tuning out the rest of the woman's questions. The heart monitor was still beeping face down on the carpet and my throat was sore from talking. I had the sinking feeling this little questionnaire was going to take longer than the woman had said.

I sighed to myself, wanting nothing more than to just die again.

Was that really so much to ask? A little peace after death?





 ... Autumn Rice

Lucas

 By: Maxwell Paradise

Fall

No boundary too thick
No bone too dense
You push and break the same

She was someone's grandmother
A sweet old woman, one I never knew
Blanched white body still as steel
That was all that could be said of her

Rise

Shatter her ribs, shatter bone to splinters
To save her is your reason for being
Though she was dead before your charge
And still, you push ever onward
Hoping for an errant twist of fate

Fall




No miracles in the air today
With the delicacy of a butcher, they rip you from her
A failure in machine. A mortality in flesh
But I'll always remember you

Green as kept lawn, surgical and precise
Brutal as heartbreak, perfectly unrelenting in application
She inhaled a final breath that wasn't her own

Rise...



The Birthday Shipwreck

   By: Ashlee Nadler

Waves crashed around the ferry rocking the boat side to side as I read my book. My ninth birthday had been rather lackluster. Although I had gone to the famous Luna Park in Sydney, Australia with my family, I had been too young to go on most of the rides. I was also too young to know why the boat had stopped, or why the other passengers looked worried. All I cared about was reading my book. The fact that we had been stuck on the boat for a while now was annoying, but I could deal with it. After all, I had my family.

It was the very beginning of sunset when we embarked. The scent of the saltwater and the cry of the seagulls followed us as we walked aboard. Sydney Ferries are part of Australia's public transportation system. This one was one of the larger ferries, with two levels. To be exact, it was a Freshwater-class ferry, one of the older classes, dating back to the 1980s. At 230 feet long and 1,140 tonnes, it was also one of the largest ferries on the water. Almost all Sydney ferries have dark green bottoms and dull sand-colored sides. We made our way onto the boat and immediately began to read my book so as to ignore my grandfather, who was "entertaining" my little sister by poking her repeatedly.

"Sit down, Skye," my mother said to my six-year-old little sister. "And stop poking her, Dad," she said to my grandfather, who had (and still has) a terrible ponytail.

As the boat drove away from Luna Park, the colors of the sunset spilled out from the sky. The rich oranges, the yellows, the clouds first turning cotton-candy pink, then dusky rose, then a deepening purple, and of course, the egg yolk of a sun sitting low in the sky. The Sydney Opera House was visible from the ferry, as was the Sydney Harbor Bridge. The tourists all pressed against the windows to look at the famous structures, while the locals ignored them, ready to go back to their homes after a long day.

The ferry went past the main Sydney Harbor and Taronga Zoo. The zoo had all the usual things that zoos had—elephants, giraffes, a seal show, far too much walking, and overpriced refreshments. I had been to the zoo just a month before, but I ignored it as we went by, preferring to focus on my book. I shifted around on my blue pleather seat. The plastic was slightly sticky and had a strange texture.

Suddenly, the ferry stopped, dead in the water.

The passengers began to murmur among themselves frantically.

"What happened?"

"Why have we stopped moving?"

"Are we going to be stuck here for hours?"

I could not have cared less. It did not even cross my mind that everyone on this boat, including my family and I, could die. That this could be the very last ferry trip I would ever make. I was far too young to conceive of such an idea, so I continued to read. The ferry stayed in the same spot for several hours. At some point, the crew gave out little chocolates to apologize for the delay. I begged my mother to let me have one, but she refused. Meanwhile, my grandfather ate an extraordinary amount of chocolate and gave himself a stomachache.

Eventually, somebody came up with a slightly concerning plan for getting us off the broken-down boat. Everyone on the ferry would clamber onto another, smaller, ferry. This was not a very good idea for small children, like my sister and I, or elders, as it was more likely than not that we would fall into the ocean and drown. So, along with the crew and the rest of the passengers, we stayed on the original ferry.

Eventually, the last of the sunset colors disappeared from the sky and were replaced by the moon. In the distance, the lights on the Manly Harbor docks and the buildings shined. As the hours stretched on, the passengers began to grumble about how long they had been here and how they wished they could just go home.

Suddenly, a speed catamaran raced by, rocking the ferry violently. As the boat rocked from side to side, I, still unaware of the very real possibility of the ferry sinking, finally stopped reading. I did not realize the danger we were in. Instead, I found our predicament interesting. The rocking was better than any of the Luna Park rides I had been too small to go on. Meanwhile, the tilting of the boat was causing everything that we had on board with us to fall on the ferry's dirty floor. As my mother tried to keep our possessions from sliding to the other side of the boat, she began to look tired and desperate. Finally, the ferry started to move.

When we arrived at the dock, a film crew was waiting for us, eager to interview anyone they could find. I gave them a very long monologue about how the ferry trip was extremely boring. When we went home, we discovered I had made it onto the evening news—in a three-second clip.

I now realize that I really could have died on the ferry and that disasters can happen at any moment. The ferry trip did not change me that much at the time; however, in the years since, it has made me more aware of how both precious and fragile life is. It taught me that anything can happen at any time and that the most important things can happen when we

are not paying attention. It was certainly an experience I will never forget.



...Eden Grandmont



...Emma Galonski

 **Love**
By: Kat Rosalyn

A value I cannot touch throughout my life.
You whisk away the youth and old and bind them together,
Woven within tangles of emotions.
You hold importance and jubilation and many seek the comfort you bring,
Yet you never shine on me.

Am I overlooked in your gaze of deliverance, falling so short,
That I crave nothing more?
You seem to build up walls around yourself from me,
And as I try to bulldoze my way through one,
I find ten more separating us.

I cannot find you and cannot see your shining face,
Looking down on me like you do others that came before and after me.
What more do I need to give to embrace you?
To join with you until I am free from the shackles of embellished rage,
Free of the downpour from my eyes?

A green silhouette chained to the thought of you,
Trapped in a fantasy world where I wine and dine with you.
A fresh taste at the breaking of dawn,
But the beginning of a new day arrives where I am without you.
Yearning for the sense of belonging that only you can provide.

Am I so shattered in your overwhelming scrutiny,
That you do not condone testing the waters with me?
I resent you unequivocally for being so cruel,
For making me desire you and pray for you,
Only to have you scorn me and laugh at my despair.

Your golden appraisal lights up those who are around me,
But I am never able to step foot in the puddle of sunlight you bear.
A fiendish thought passes through my mind,
While I contemplate and obsess over your forgiveness.
Maybe I am not meant to have you after all.



Wild and Free

✍✍✍ By: Natalie Forbes

A gentle deer in a grassy field,

Grazing, looking for savory, lush grass.

As it is eating, it hears a gun.

As the deer knew its time was up,

It looked at me with pleading eyes,

Begging me not to shoot.

“I’m sorry”, I whisper in the crimson-stained field

As a tear falls down my face.



📷...Rochelle Hebert

The Choir Addresses Humanity

✍✍✍ By: Shannon Daley

The salmon’s waters all dried up,
now he asks them:

“Where are my children going to swim?

Through the burgundy river
that flows from Moscow to Kyiv?

Or down your polluted throats,
you who use your own as caviar.”

And the bitch called to them,
howling her curse-

“What did I do to be your symbol of hate?

You throw my motherhood at one another,
like a soldier throws a grenade,

breaking my body for my children,
becoming bloated on our bloodlines.”

A kingfisher, shattered,
begging them to understand.

“Don’t you see you are our mother’s dystrophy?

Even the salmon knows he must be speared,
but you refuse to nourish.

Even in death you want to live on,
you and your chemicals poison her.

You, worms off the hook,
the link that broke itself from the chain.”



Shadows of Sacrifice

 By: Shawn Belanger

In the hushed stillness of each night, as the world outside settles into a quiet slumber and the distant stars twinkle like beacons of hope against the velvet sky, my mind often wanders through the winding paths of our family's journey. It's a tale woven from the threads of hard work, resilience, and love profound enough to turn the tide against any storm. This nightly vigil, while the city sleeps and I trudge through the hours of my job, serves as a reminder of the sacrifices we've made and the dreams we're chasing, not just for me but for the little hearts dreaming peacefully at home.

Much like any other, our life is a delicate balance between joy and hardship. As a father to three beautiful souls, my days (or rather, nights) are spent laboring in the quiet solitude of work, all the while my heart remains tethered to the warm, lively home where my children's laughter is the sweetest melody. The sting of missing those precious dinner-time moments with my family—a time of shared stories and simple joys—gnaws at me, leaving a void no amount of success can fill. Yet, in this sacrifice, there is a purpose: to keep the hearth of our home burning bright, to ensure that the shadow of want never darkens our door.

By day, while I catch fleeting moments of rest, my partner in life and love—the mother of our children—embarks on the noble task of guiding our little ones through the wonders of learning. Homeschooling is her domain, a realm where she reigns with patience and grace, crafting lessons from the fabric of everyday life that spark curiosity and kindle a love for knowledge. Her strength, a silent sentinel, stands guard over our family's future, a beacon guiding us through uncertain waters.

The decision to return to college was born from a place of hope, a yearning for a future unburdened by the chains of financial strife. The nights became longer, the work more demanding, as I sought to weave together the threads of work, study, and family life into a tapestry of success. Each assignment completed, each test passed, was a step closer to that elusive dream of stability and fulfillment. And though the journey was fraught with challenges, with moments of doubt and weariness that seemed insurmountable, the thought of providing a better life for my family fueled my resolve.

Then, as if by some twist of fate, the tide began to turn. My final year project, a labor of love and determination, caught the eye of a local entrepreneur. It was an idea born from countless hours of study and reflec-

tion. It was a solution to a problem that had long plagued our community. To my astonishment, it sparked interest, admiration, and finally, an offer that promised not just a job but a career—a chance to make a tangible difference.

The day I shared the news with my family is etched in my memory—a moment of pure, unbridled joy. As I looked into the eyes of my partner and our children, I saw the culmination of our sacrifices, dreams, and hopes reflected back. Tears mixed with laughter, a symphony of emotions dancing around our humble home, filling it with a light so bright that it seemed to chase away the shadows of our past struggles.

With this new chapter came a shift in our family's story. No longer bound by the constraints of night shifts, I found myself reclaiming those precious moments I had missed. Dinners became more than just meals; they were reunions, celebrations of our daily victories and challenges, a time to reconnect and share in the love that had been our anchor through the toughest times.

Now, as I sit at our table, surrounded by the vibrant energy of my family, the weight of the past feels lighter. Our journey is far from over, and challenges still lie ahead, but the foundation we've built is strong, fortified by love and sacrifice. We look to the future with hope, knowing that whatever it holds, we will face it together as a family.

In the quiet moments before dawn, when the world pauses and dreams seem within reach, I am reminded of the power of perseverance, the beauty of hope, and the enduring strength of love. Our story, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, continues to unfold, each chapter brighter, richer, and filled with the promise of new beginnings.



The Fly
✍✍✍ By: Aslan

We were there. You saw me. You saw me like no one else did.

But you saw everyone. you had the ability to “see.” and you saw well. you saw everything.

Everyone.

And it ended, and you were like someone else, and I acted like someone else too.

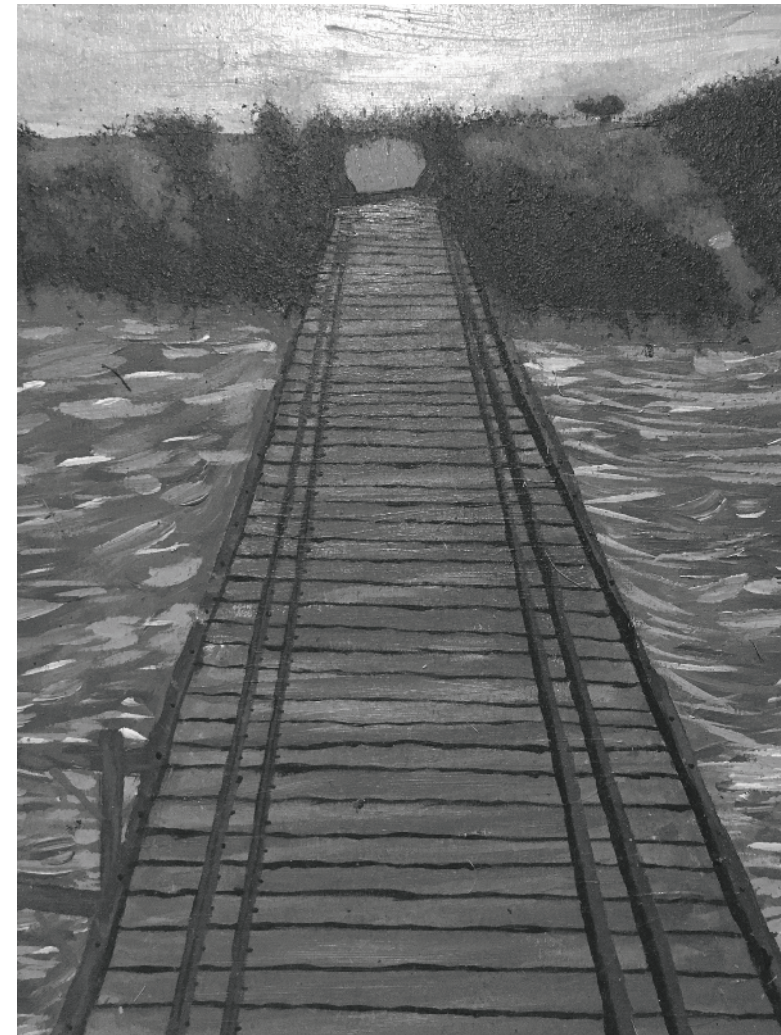
Things ended.

They ended like that, a smooth precise tear like the way an especially sharp guillotine leaves a fine edge on paper; crisp, white, and sharp. then it ended for me.

You weren't there, your gentle touch was gone. The touch turned to one that tickles you and leaves you uncomfortable, as if something is crawling under the surface and you don't know if it's just a hair or not.

You went afar -
then it ended.

I thought maybe a week passed before you went back to being no more than a fly on the wall.



...Adam Breen

Life is a Funny Thing

   By: Ashton Laurent

“Are you sure this is what you want to do with your life?” Edith, a plump old woman about the age of seventy, asked her granddaughter over for dinner. Miranda looked up, her long brown hair hiding the annoyance in her eyes. She was sick of that question. Every older adult in their 22-year-old’s life has asked that, or some variation of it, at least every other day.

“Well, no...” Miranda began. She knew Edith only wanted what was best for her, but she couldn’t help sounding dejected in her response. “I don’t see myself doing this for the rest of my life, but it’s a start. Honestly, I don’t see myself sticking with any career for more than ten years, that sounds boring.” Edith tried to hide her concern. The truth is, Miranda did not know what she wanted to do in life. She had just graduated from a community college, one she had gone to out of obligation, and was now working full-time at the local supermarket. She knew she was screwing herself over by not continuing her education, but the burnout was too great.

An awkward silence filled the room. Finally, Edith spoke again, “well, you’re going to need a better job eventually.”

“I know,” was all Miranda managed to say. She didn’t have the heart to tell the old woman about how burnt out she was.

Miranda went home shortly after that exchange. Edith pulled herself up from the old mahogany chair she was sitting in to start cleaning up the dishes. She loved these Friday dinners with her granddaughter, but recently there’s been a tinge of sadness ever so slightly choking the air around the dinner table. Things haven’t been the same since her son, Jeremy, stopped coming. Ever since he and Miranda’s mom divorced, Jeremy was essentially a recluse in his small house in the middle of nowhere. He eventually abandoned Miranda to live with her mom about an hour away.

Edith finished up the dishes and went to the bathroom. Turning on the light she was almost blinded by the pink walls, and bright seashell tile on the floor. She turned to face herself in the mirror. Her once auburn hair was now almost completely gray. She noticed more wrinkles forming on her face. Her eyes met her reflection as she began to sob. She wept and wept, remembering her late husband who died when Miranda was four.

She recalled how she used to be a teacher. How she quit when Miranda was born to become a full-time babysitter for the newborn. She remembered how she wished she had done more with her life. She wept for her granddaughter because she was worried that Miranda would fall into the same trap that she did. Get married too young and waste life with jobs that you don’t find fulfilling. Lastly, she wept for her son, who had essentially gone no contact with the rest of his family. Eventually, Edith sat down. There were no more tears to be shed.

On her drive home, Miranda also began to cry. She felt stuck. Every option down the road seemed shitty. On one hand, she could go back to school and get her bachelor’s degree. She could have a chance of getting a better job, but she’d be straddled with debt for the rest of her life. Edith had been helping her through community college, but there was no way she could afford a university. She would have to take out loans that she wouldn’t be able to pay back with the degree she chose. On the other hand, she can work back-breaking jobs for the rest of her life, be able to move out, and live with some roommates for a bit. This option meant she would be too tired and in pain to enjoy life when she got old. All the adults in her life barely gave any advice other than “Sorry the real world sucks” or “Just work harder” or “You’ll figure it out eventually.”

Deep down Miranda knew she would figure it out eventually. She knew it was all going to be okay. The stress was just getting to her at that moment. Edith also knew deep down that things would eventually be okay, at least for Miranda. She had her whole life ahead of her.

Neither of their struggles mattered. However, later that night Edith suffered a heart attack from a lifelong habit of smoking and passed away getting into the shower. Miranda, still on her way home, got into a horrific car accident with a drunk driver, killing them both.



Good Morning

✍✍✍ By: Milena Whitney

Evergreens wave down upon your shining face,
The swimming pool awaits your loving embrace.
Days as long as your glowing blonde hair,
No reason for you to be aware.
Six years old won't last forever,
Your life will fill with cloudy weather,
But you seem to love the rain,
You watch the suds circle the drain.
This little girl knows not to cry,
Tears so rarely leave her eye.
Tonight, you lay your shining head,
Upon the purple princess bed,
Dad will read two stories, no more,
And you'll wake him up at his first snore.
Six years old won't last forever,
Your days will fill with rainy weather,
But this little girl loves the rain,
Six years old in eighteen's brain.



📷... Olivia Gordineer



📷... Rochelle Hebert

Ash Wednesday

✍✍✍ By: Alex Deedy

Lit up like fire,
the burning of flames.
Washing in ashes rebirthing I gain.
The mark of Christ written upon me,
for the first time I do not walk alone.
There's a presence of faith,
that I do not fear.
I can not explain why but I know He is here.
I had faith before but now,
this time, it's real.
The arms of the Lord were open and through all the clouds of questions
and being lost,
I found Him in ashes shaped like a cross.
His arms still open waiting for me,
this time I am in the clear,
I run to him in tears because my searching was done.
No more I fear,
I found the lord and the years of fog have now disappeared.



Relinquishing Control

   By: Olivia Dechaine

“7:09, 7:09, 7:09,” sang a chorus of doctors and nurses all around me singing the time.

At 7:09 AM, on May 17, 2023, my life was completely changed. I was in shock as I lay still in the hospital bed. I was frozen. I felt alone, and every sound was drowned as if a grenade had gone off and I was stuck listening to the buzzing. A few minutes later, everyone turned back to me. Dr. Jenkins handed me a beautiful baby girl: my baby girl.

It was then that everything I thought I knew, any readiness I had felt towards motherhood, melted away faster than snow in Florida. I didn't know what was coming over me. All I felt was overwhelmed. I had discovered a new level of anxiety. It was as if a piece of me was now living outside of my body. I need to protect her. How in the world was I going to let anyone else take care of her?

For 41 weeks, I rode a roller coaster of hormones. One minute, I was happily organizing baby clothes and thinking of names, and the next, I was sobbing at the thought of birth complications. But in my heart, I knew all the ups and downs would be worth it in the end. We were working towards something more meaningful. We were starting our family, and at the end of each day, I could take comfort in that notion.

On May 14, 2023, I was going in for yet another weekly doctor's appointment to check on me and our growing baby. I just wanted everything to be over with. I was holding out hope that they would understand my pain and induce me that day. Even though I was a few weeks past my due date, I still sat in utter disbelief when they told me that morning it was time to have a baby.

There's not enough fluid around the baby. We're going to send you downstairs to be induced. I still joke about this moment to my friend, because at first, I didn't move. I had heard what the doctor said, but my mind wouldn't process the idea that it was really happening. *Today? I thought. Right now? I'm having a baby. Today?*

I took a moment before making my way to the elevators. I started making calls, first to my partner, then to my mom and sisters. It was finally time, and despite what I'd read and the stories I had heard, I had no idea what to expect now. I felt like I had spent so much time trying to prepare; to be in control, only to be caught off guard with no hospital bag or family with me now headed to labor and delivery.

My induction started on Monday morning and my progress was

slim to none. Tuesday was not much different until the afternoon. Finally, on Wednesday morning at 7:09, my daughter entered the world. All the stress and anxiety of pregnancy, labor, and postpartum began to catch up to me then. I didn't know it yet, but this was going to be a crash course for me in the number one thing I was not good at: relinquishing control. I was going to have to ask for help. I was bleeding and trying to heal, yet felt solely responsible for this new life.

Anxiety dictated my every thought. I elected to stay awake. I couldn't fall asleep with the baby, but the baby wouldn't fall asleep without being held. So I stayed up for two days. I cried and fought more with my partner in those two days than I ever had. Holding my daughter, tears running down my face, I would tell anyone who offered to take her to leave me alone. I'm supposed to be here for her no matter what. I needed to figure this out.

It wasn't until the third night of not sleeping that I called in the nurse. I explained to her that I couldn't stay awake any longer, that I kept dozing off with the baby in my arms and I didn't know what to do. I was expecting her to tell me to drink coffee or splash water in my face to keep me awake. Instead, she simply pointed to my sleeping partner and said “Let him help you.” Sometimes, the obvious options aren't so obvious when you're so tightly wound.

I reluctantly woke up my partner and handed over our daughter. I had never once questioned his ability to keep us safe before. I couldn't understand why, but now I didn't trust him or anyone. With our new baby in his arms, I struggled to halt my thoughts, my heart beating with such intensity that my entire body felt each thump.

Time seemed to drag; I was unsure of how to calm my body. I kept peeking at my family; just to be sure they were both safe. When the intensity of the beats finally decreased, I drifted slowly to sleep; for the first time since giving birth. I was awoken an hour later by a hungry baby; he had tried to do everything he could to take care of our little girl, but I was the only one who could feed her right now. I was defeated, truly and completely exhausted more than ever before. This moment solidified in my mind that I was the only one who could make my daughter happy.

We would continue this way for weeks: me finally breaking down and asking for help and my partner doing whatever he could to help us, just as he had been trying to do since the first day. My motherly instincts had taken over. The need to protect my child would cause me to push everyone (even her father) away, despite their capabilities.

I had read a lot during my pregnancy about how so many relation-

ships struggle during the first year of having a new baby. So many couples split up during that first year. We knew that we had to communicate better. We worked through each sleepless night, finding ways to communicate effectively, with kindness towards one another. We worked towards becoming a team again.

This time in my life reminds me of the quote “Mother knows best.” I thought I was the only one who could possibly know what my daughter needed. After all, we had just spent nine months together; the closest any two people could be. The first month of my daughter’s life changed my perspective on that quote.

I still feel I know what is best for my daughter. However, I am not the only one. She has a large family who love her and are more than capable of taking care of her. I always knew that I couldn’t raise her all by myself. Over time, I learned what my limitations are and when to ask for help so that I don’t reach those levels of exhaustion again.

We took everyday step by step until we found our footing as new parents. We continually learn from one another and our daughter each day. I don’t think the anxiety of motherhood will ever completely go away. I’m much more careful with my choices and the decisions I make now. So, although the worry will always stay with me, to some extent, these days I cry less often and ask for help a lot more. I’m always reminded that I have the most beautiful family waiting for me, and that we are working together to build our life.



...Julia Schmidt

Feelings

 By: Natalie Forbes

We met at a school dance.

I, wearing a navy slim dress,

and you, with a blue tie and buttoned shirt.

I saw you from afar with your ravishing smile,

butterflies dancing happily in me.

You came over asking to dance.

We danced the night away looking at each other’s glimmering eyes.

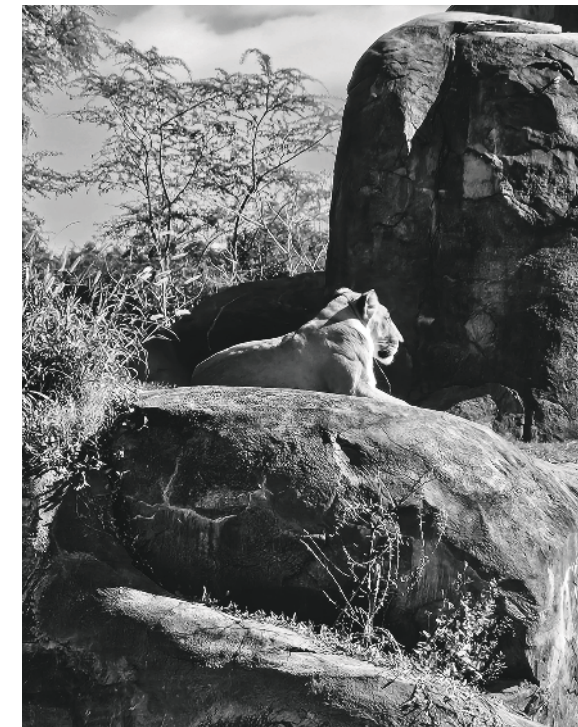
In the fading colored light,

as we laughed and talked,

you started to disappear, and I awoke.

With tears in my eyes,

remembering that you are gone.



...Blair Shewan

Your Death is Imminent

   By: Heather McPhie

As you venture your way throughout,
You notice the trees and the atmosphere is not doubted.
Through the outs of where you advanced,
Your great fear is stricken you as you prance.
Throughout the branches, there seems to be an eminent smell
From which you cannot pinpoint the things it may not endow.
But through the second places you smite,
Your eyes notice that it starts becoming quite thick.
The life you once knew serves to turn into a myth.
From what you find, your life is shortened
By the eyes of Thornton, which cause you a great chill,
There seems to be an immersive feel.
At the signs of death laying around you at every given fate,
There's a fear of dread that lies ahead.
Through the doubts, you still continue.
From what you find the most interesting faith.
You notice that your life cannot be restored.
From when your life had started,
Your life is now the one to be departed.
As you walk through the forest of chains, you notice something following
you.
You look behind, only to see that there are lines of corpses to bestow upon
you.
You see them decompose as if the evidence as one insist
That your life may be evident to those who invoke.
Throughout your persistence, you still devote,
But as you continue, you notice the signs of your imminent demise.
From where you walk, you see a black shadow.
Which does not respond to your command.
As you progress, you notice your life is not as it once was.
Center at this time you see the light from what your soul is at night.
As you approach this man of smite,
You notice your life as the wind brings you to end tonight.
Throughout your disputes, you still render that the corpses that lie are still
surrounding.
From what you invoke throughout your eminent fate,
There is no escaping this endless wrath

As your life is drained in front of you.
You see the life of once that was bestowed upon you
As your blood-curdling screams are heard.
As no one can hear your spoken word.
Throughout the cell door, you see the blood- the blood of your life from
which you seek.
As you watch the final moments of your life in hands
From which you cannot see the plan,
Throughout your uncertainties, you notice the stand
That your life is meaningless without a plan.
As your failures in life consume you in death,
You notice in life that there is a chance for it to get better yet.
But as your soul has been crushed and vaporized,
The life is evident that you now are
The same as those corpses that you know lay beside,
To give the message to onlookers that is not brought to their domain,
That your life is ultimately over in spite of yourself.
As the picture closes, your life was cut short,
With no rhyme or reason to which it might hurt the heart.
From what your life was never well spent.
Your life will forever be a terror of end for all those that intend.
Throughout the image as your face turns to Black
It goes into a plot of history that will never be brought back.

The End



Have You Seen This Body?

   By: Eden Grandmont

Even the world's most knowledgeable and well-credited astronomers still can't form a reasonable explanation about why the Moon was glowing brighter than ever on September 26th. Some have taken it as a sign that the Earth's position in the solar system was changing. Others theorize that the Sun is moving closer to us, ever-so-slowly. A small bunch believe that it's a sign of the end of the world as we've known it.

Just last week, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Labor Day had come and gone, Woodstock's annual "Cherry-Tossin' Competition" happened once again (which is quite a strange way to commemorate the founding of a town, might I add). I was preparing for an upcoming flight to Illinois to finally begin attending art school.

I've never minded the cold of New England, which is an opinion that Charles, a friendly neighbor and long-time family friend, disagreed with. Stating as much when I bumped into him at The Thrush Market, the town's only grocery store.

"I swear, the moment I make my break, I'm movin' to Georgia!" He waved a stick of celery to and fro as he spoke, nearly tossing it accidentally once or twice.

"You know, I feel up for some warmer days too from time to time." I take the celery from him before it slips out of his hands, placing it into the nearly-filled basket.

"Is it any warmer over where you're goin'?"

"Not exactly." He follows me toward the checkout lane. "It's just a change of scenery, really."

As we stepped out of the store, the parking lot was filled with people- some seemingly on the way to and from the market, and others standing outside their opened vehicles- all of which were gazing upward. In the sky, two glowing objects could be seen: the Sun, and almost as light, the Moon.

"It's never bright like this during the day, right?" A concerned shopper asked, lightly gripping the handlebars of a nearly-filled cart.

"Is this a sign that an eclipse is going to happen?"

"What does it mean?" The parking lot became the place for a congregation of confused people of all ages (except for the kids, who were very blissfully fascinated). Much like many of them, all I could do was

stare for a while. Charles eventually placed a hand on my shoulder, returning my attention to our task. Puzzled, and with no way to respond to the discovery, we piled into the van and headed back home.

The air about the family get-together that afternoon was heavy for a while. Family and friends were gathered as they had been countless times in the past, sitting wherever and sharing whatever stories came to mind. But that was only after a long talk about the discovery just hours prior. This took place as we watched the news on our dreadfully old television. Amongst the few regular town-related matters, much of the broadcast was dedicated to the strange behavior of the Moon. The people around chatted amongst themselves, sharing what they think it may mean and expressing their stress (or lack thereof) with whoever happened to be close enough to hear. However, none of them seemed to treat it like a world-changing matter, and more like a regular occurrence, not unlike a car crash or convenience store robbery. The kind where nobody is injured and the criminals are caught swiftly.

With my eyes glued to the screen, I felt as though my own anxiety overpowered all of theirs combined. The reporter said that work was being done at once to photograph and investigate the Moon's surface using its orbiting satellites, and that an update would be provided at once. The broadcast eventually ended, and shortly after, the atmosphere around the house felt like nothing was out of the ordinary. As I chatted with extended family and enjoyed a mediocre salad, I kept catching glimpses of the anomaly through a window from time to time, and the urge to stare was strong.

As the Sun set, the house grew quieter. The cars in our driveway disappeared, and eventually, Mom and I were the only ones left, tidying up the last of the trivial messes left behind. The TV was left on the entire time, showing a broadcast of a passionate golf tournament.

She headed to bed shortly after the job was done, exchanging a few "Goodnights" and "I love yous" before sliding up the stairs. For the first time in the entire day, I was alone. Swiftly, I made my way upstairs and into my bedroom after her, grabbed a notebook and pen from my nightstand, and snuck back down the stairs. Onto the couch I placed myself, where I grabbed the remote and switched the channel back to the news. On the screen, a bland graph was shown as the newscaster explained how the price of lobster had increased another 11% over the last month. Uninterested, I opened my notebook to a blank page and began to draw whatever

came to mind, with only the glow of the television and haunting illumination of the Moon to guide my pen.

The following morning went on as normal for a while. I managed to pull myself out of bed at an almost reasonable time, greeted Mom downstairs, and turned on the television, flipping through a few channels before landing on a nostalgic cartoon. As colorful characters moved to and fro across the screen, I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened the day before. Although I wanted to know more, my fingers refused to push the buttons on the remote to reach the news channel.

Time passed and Mom eventually waved goodbye, wearing her button-down cardigan and sleek loafers. A divet began to form on the couch's soft surface. Curiosity was consuming me, and I submitted eventually, changing the channel to show the day's news broadcast. A man was shown, but he wasn't a newscaster I recognized. He stood on the side of a street next to a taller woman, who held a microphone in front of her. A blank white building could be seen behind them in the distance. There was more static on the screen than usual. The headline that bordered the bottom of the screen seemed to outline the interview:

MOON "BLINK" PHENOMENA: AN INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD PHILLIPS

Intrigued, I turned up the volume so that every word spoken could fill the room.

"-objects that passed in front of its surface simultaneously," the man spoke without faltering.

"But that must be an extremely unlikely thing to happen, right?" The woman waved around a clipboard in her other hand as she asked. "Two objects large enough to obscure the view of the moon, but far enough from each other to not collide- is it even possible?"

"It's not impossible, no. It seems to me like a very unlikely event occurred at a very particular location. It's the celestial lottery, and our moon just happened to be the winner."

Their discussion went on for some time. Most of the words swirled around in my head before seeping out of my ears. The woman asked at one point if it was anything to be concerned about, and the man said it was not- that it was just "the galaxy doing galaxy things." He used more sophisticated terms, but that's how I choose to remember it.

I returned home from work a little later than expected. Mom

headed to bed before me, as she always did, and the house was quiet as ever.. Looking at the calendar on a wall reminded me that the day of my flight was approaching; only two weeks remained. A new beginning in a new place... the thought of it purified the air. Heading to sleep early seemed like a wise choice after such a busy day, but I decided to check on the news again, just to see if anything new had happened. Two days had passed since the Moon's glow began, so surely something new had been discovered, right? I sat down on the couch, sinking into the divet a little. The television clicked to life, and the news channel flashed onto the screen.

The screen was blank.

A black space had replaced where a weather reporter or interviewer typically stands. It wasn't even a darkened image of the studio. There was simply nothing being shown apart from the banner at the bottom of the screen, which usually summarizes a particular section, although what was there could hardly qualify as a summary. On the deep blue banner, white text was visible through a thick veil of static, reading WITNESS in a white font. Audio filled the otherwise-still air, but it was not the white noise I would have expected. Instead, it was a deep droning sound, the type that a large machine may make when it's broken. A shiver made its way down my body. What had happened at the news station? Had the frequency been intercepted? As the groan from the television continued, I peered through the curtains covering the closest window. Only a few street lights created small circles of light on the ground. The rest of the night was a pitch black void, and at that moment, the truth of the scene opened my eyes.

"Where's the moon?"



Beneath The Walls

✍✍✍ By: Jaleesa Archer

Here I am..
In this body that doesn't belong to me.
A meat suit with walls made out of concrete.
Within those walls, one thousand feet under is a cage without a key.
Inside that cage is a precious thing.
Guarded from the world that does not deserve her.
A child.
A little being.
This body and mind hold a precious thing that protects her from the darkness.
It's a child on top of my children.
This child is delicate.
Nieve, confrontational, combative.
She's irrational and reactive.
That's all she knows beneath this body that has fought and flighted all of her life.
That's all she was taught when it was her turn.
In this suit she often demands control.
She's apprehensive but she's a fighter.
Just like a child relies on a parent to teach them how to self-soothe,
I teach her to quiet her angst.
"It's gonna be OK, everything is fine"
This body knows that.
She's well aware.
She's built herself to be a brick house.
Her.
But the child..
She does not hear the words from the voices of others.
She desires to hear them from herself.
"It's OK little child, you're gonna be fine,
Safe but confided."
So that inner child.
It does exist.
They are in there.
But could you be silent enough to hear their screams, their tears?
Their panic.
Can you work with them instead of quieting the noise?

To look deep,
One thousand feet under,
Beyond the walls of concrete,
Through the locked cage,
Just to hold their hand and remind them to behave.



 ...Ashton Laurent

Digital Eden



By: Adam Breen

Not all knowledge is pure, but ignorance is the true destroyer of progression, civilization, and enlightenment.

In the past, the knowledge of the entire world was at everyone's fingertips. But it came at a price, and the knowledge was more often than not squandered. At the peak of the digital era, the world was one hundred percent online. AI dominated 75 percent of the global workforce. Lives were destroyed, watched, and influenced by button after button. But in the world's darkest hour, the great Neo Enlightenment was born. All over the globe, like-minded individuals consolidated their voices to force the governments of the free world to impose their designs.

Through systematic steps, N.E. wiped the threat of digital ignorance off the face of the earth. Schools were placed with internet shields that blocked students from using cheating programs. Many lost their careers and employment opportunities through no fault of their own. But eventually, true intelligence prevailed. Schools' grade point averages were higher than ever before. Movies and Music were no longer pirated, reviving the non-ai generated film industry. Ending the human labor recession of 2030. What was once chaos now is perfection with all the world's disruptive technology divided and sectioned into singularly focused areas called Red digitized zones. Yet some took the chances of smuggling the otherwise illegal tech into outside locations.

Alastor, a tall, thin and charming young man in his 20s, worked such a job. To him it was easy to find customers who were willing to pay for an easy A, yet vetting them was difficult. You couldn't just ask like a local drug dealer in a back alley if someone wanted heroin. No, instead you had to do the long and boring process of just watching them, every waking minute of every day for a minimum of two weeks. A rule strictly enforced by his boss whose punishments were, for lack of a better word, severe, if protocol wasn't followed to the letter.

Alastor's newest target was a woman about the same age as him. A young and relatively beautiful girl with brown hair, brown eyes, and perfectly tanned skin to wrap it all together. Alastor might have found himself attracted to her had he not been focused on the job at hand. He was paid to attract customers, sell them cheat programs to help them write a thesis, answer exam questions, and whatever else they needed nothing more. This one, however, meant a great deal to Alastor's boss, Lilith.

She said, "If he got the new target, Eve, to buy the Morningstar AI,

all he had to do was name his price when the job was done".

That both excited and made him uneasy. Lilith was the head of every smuggling ring in the entire city; anyone else didn't last long. She cared nothing for her customers, only what they paid. Why this one in particular was important, Alastor couldn't say. Over the past two weeks, Eve showed all the signs to make her a worthy candidate. She worked exceptionally hard in college, staying up late at night, denying herself time with her boyfriend Adam, and for a grade that was just above passing. One wrong test and she would fail. Perfect, he thought. At the very start of the conversation he knew Eve would take the bait, he had a knack for saying what people needed to hear or wanted to hear so he could sell them cheat programs. He thought that's why Lilith preferred him to do this job.

After giving Eve the meeting location he just waited for her to show. Eve didn't disappoint after all she was only human. She arrived at the Blackboard Club around three o'clock. What was inside truly astounded her.

Since the age of the Neo-Enlightenment movement, Generation Omega technology was categorized and divided into sections of safety, recreation, work, and banned. Rager music seemed to be in a screaming match with joyous fans dancing the night away. First-person shooting games such as Mortal Fighter, Night Opps 1-3, and Fortress Nite were all being played with massive TV screens, their gore levels set to one hundred percent. Bottles of every kind of drink imaginable were intricately lined up to form what appeared to be a stained-glass mural. Tables of phone cords were all being used to power the devices of at least 14 dozen people, all of them using apps like Lik Lok, Mebook, and Mintegram. These were banned by the Order of Necessity Technology since they track and gather data on their users. One person seemed to have such a good time that he jumped off the third balcony into a pool of Phantom Velocity, a super energy drink known to cause heart problems and addiction to its users. TV screens everywhere played movies of intense depravity and horror on illegal streaming services.

"Eve!" Alastor shouted so he could be heard. He signaled for her to stay there so he could come to her. When he reached her however, suddenly all the lights went out for a few moments. The crowds became aggressive shouting and yelling that their joy was being hindered. Luckily, the power was turned back on before a riot began. After that, the crowds were in a frenzy scratching and clawing at each other to get back to their precious materials.

"Come with me," Alastor said, leading Eve into a private meeting

room up top. As they sat down Alastor snapped his fingers and a man appeared from behind Eve, setting a computer on the table.

“Here is everything you could ever want,” he said in a showman’s voice. There it was on the screen; *MorningStar*, the most intelligent AI that was immune to scanners and generated entire thesis papers in seconds, based on an idea or submitted sample work.

“So you pay 20 bucks per paper you have it done for you but the first time is free. It works every time.”

Eve hesitated. So Alastor pressed ever so slightly. “You’re still a little unsure I get it. At first, I thought it was a scam but I passed all my classes, and besides, it gives me more time for more of this.”

He waved his hand gesturing to the thrall below. “Don’t you want that?” Then for the icing on the cake, he said “I’m sure your friends or boyfriend could use it too. Think about how it might help them.”

Adam worked 40 hours a week on top of doing school work, so they rarely had time for each other. But with this, Adam and her would have more time for each other

Sealing the deal, Eve says “I’ll try it”. With that, Alastor downloaded a copy of the AI into a USB and handed it to her. Alastor walked Eve out and then returned to the meeting room where Lilith waited for his answer.

“Did she take it?”

“Oh yes.” Alastor replied with a twisted grin on his face.

Lilith then gently caressed Alastor’s shoulders and leaned in whispering “I knew you wouldn’t disappoint.”

She clicked the power off to the entire building before shoving Alastor off the balcony into the angry mob beneath them. When he hit the ground Lilith turned the power back on and the crowd stomped Alastor into the floor as they rushed back to their devices completely oblivious to the life they had just taken.

She glared down at all of them. *Cockroaches*, she thought. It was a shame though, Alastor was indeed useful, but she could not let anyone know that it was her who ruined Eve and Adams’s life. Tipping off the authorities was yet another job that she would have someone else do. Eve and Adam would be caught with an illegal AI. The punishment would be much like her own... severe. The Council of Technology would most likely expel both Adam and Eve from college and arrest them for attempting to sell AI outside the Red-digitized zone.

She almost felt bad that Eve had to get involved. Her real quarrel was with Adam. After all, he was the first person she ever experienced

love with. For a time they were happy. College changed everything though. He became too busy, too stressed even to acknowledge her existence. That was when she built the Morningstar AI to ease their struggles. If only she knew what would come next.

Within one day, she was kicked out of college and arrested while Adam watched. He begged her to destroy it but how could she? She put her heart and soul into the MorningStar program for the one she loved and he just spit on it. With that in mind, she just watched as Alastor’s blood formed a pool below her and the customers just sitting in it gazing into their digital Edens.



...Ashton Laurent



...Ashley Soto

Congratulations, Spring Class of 2024!

Emma Galonski
Eden Grandmont
C.J. Miller
Ashton Laurent
Blair Shewan

Proof