



THREADS 2021

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Threads is a journal of student writing and art published by the English, Foreign Languages and English as a Second Language Department at Hudson Valley Community College, Troy, New York.

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Message from the Editors

We would like to thank all the students who submitted their work to *Threads* this year. We received many quality submissions, and we continue to read with pleasure the enthusiasm and creativity each submission presents. Of course, all pieces have merit, and we would like to publish everything submitted, but the limitations of space will simply not allow it.

It is important to note that *Threads* reflects works that are not necessarily perfect in their format and composition, but exhibit insight, creativity, social awareness, and a unique perspective. These works—of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and visual art—reflect the range of experience, culture, and imagination of the Hudson Valley Community College student. The editors relish the opportunity to travel and explore the territory each new issue stakes out.

Every year we are extremely pleased to highlight the exceptional work of the students at Hudson Valley Community College. Please plan your submission for next year.

Please submit your work to *Threads* electronically. Visit us at <http://clubs.hvcc.edu/threads> for more information.

Happy reading!

– *Threads* editors

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* *Threads* Art Award Winner ** Dr. Maria Palmara Award for Fiction

*** *Threads* Writing Award Winner

Mask Up

Anna Clement

I used to be afraid of staring eyes
Vortexes in my treacherous social journey

I used to fear the steel-like beam
That results from eyes connecting

Feeling vulnerable yet linked
Deep dark pupils drilling to my core

I used to rely on grins and dimples
Quirky expressions to reflect my own discomfort

Eyes intimidated me
Absorbing everything in their path
Like blackholes in the solar system of my universe

Observations stolen
I do it, too
Form an opinion without knowing you

Exist as the person
I am
Yet transfixed in a different light
Stuck as the sole impression
Made from ocular plight

I used to be afraid of staring eyes
And the anxiety they'd spur
But now I feel for staring eyes
Curious of each expression
Because staring eyes are all we have
To make a first impression

The Handshake I'll Never Forget

Anne Moon

In 1989, I was nine years old, part of a “gifted and talented” program meeting weekly at a school across town. One February day, there was an announcement: “There’s a special guest coming to speak at the King Dome next week, and we’ve been invited to hear her.” The gravity of this was lost on many of us, as we did not immediately recognize the name or know the history, but we were all thrilled; no child our age didn’t get excited about a field trip!

When I presented my permission slip to my mother, her eyes widened in amazement, and she all but vibrated in excitement. “Oh my god, she’s coming here?! You’ll get to see her?! This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, kiddo!”

The significance began to seep into my juvenile mind, and over the next few days, the name echoed everywhere I turned. The following week, as my siblings and I prepared for school, my mother startled us all as she informed my elder brother that he was not going to school. He stopped in his tracks as he readied himself for the day, stunned by her pronouncement, but she continued, gesturing at me, “No, you’re going with us.”

I was even more confused than he had been, but it soon became evident I was not going to be meeting up with my program. Instead, my family would be accompanying me, I realized, as we dropped my little sister off at school and, along with my three-year-old brother Benjamin, headed to the King Dome. In the bleacher-like seats of the giant arena, we found space in the general vicinity of but not with my program.

Someone came out onto the stage to introduce the guest of honor, and my young mind tuned out; I fiddled with things in my pocket, pulled at threads, poked my brothers. I had been so excited to go on a field trip, to hear this speaker, but it started out so boring. My young attention flagged, even when the presenter left the stage and a wizened black woman, barely bigger than myself and seeming positively ancient, was wheeled out, lap covered in a quilt with colors as muted as herself.

I would love to say that what she said was powerful and moving, that I did not forget a single word; that my life was forever changed by what she imparted; that I would hold to the ideals she espoused forever. I’d love to say that...but it would be completely untrue. I cannot recall a single word she said, no matter how much I want. Not how she was introduced, nor her story of what happened that fateful night, nor how the bus driver made her feel, nor any of the things that happened immediately after the arrest or how Dr. King contacted her, nor anything about her activism in the decades since.

At nine, the significance of what I was hearing was wasted; I fidgeted and fiddled instead of paying attention and absorbing the weighty lessons being imparted. At least, with the lens of three decades, I imagine they were weighty lessons.

After Mrs. Parks finished speaking, as everyone filed out, my mother made note of something; the Girl Scouts, who had sponsored her visit there, would be able to meet her and shake her hand. Somehow, my mother navigated us into the line with the Scouts (I think she justified it as I had been a Brownie), and as it moved forward, I saw Rosa clearly: her wheelchair seeming somehow, to my young self, like a dais, her spectacles as big as her face, her snowy hair a cloud of steel fluff atop her head. My earlier impression of her as ancient was only reinforced.

But when I reached her to shake her hand, it was not frailty I felt; there was an iron to her grip, even at 76 years old. It was the same strength that had held her in her seat all those years ago, that had sustained her in the jail cell, and that had carried her through the attacks against her in the ensuing months and years. She was old, yes, but she was still strong.

When Benjamin, my sweet baby brother, stepped forward, reaching his tiny coffee-colored hand up to shake hers, she instead commanded, “Come up here and sit on Grandma’s lap,” as she pulled him up to embrace him, his chocolate curls tangling for a moment with her steel ones, his smooth brown cheek against her lined one.

I could barely believe it, my brother in this amazing woman’s lap. It was almost impossible not to love Benjamin, with his riotous curls and huge brown eyes, but at the same time, this honor...it was surreal. Since his birth, I had learned harsh and sad truths about the state of race in

our world, things no child should have to learn, most related to this beautiful child who wore skin the “wrong” shade for many, and who didn’t “match” the rest of our family and caused our family to not “fit” what many others thought was proper and right. After all of that, seeing him sitting in the lap of this woman who had gone through so much for those who walked in darker skin like his...it sent shivers down me, shivers I still feel at the memory.

That was over thirty years ago. That amazing woman finally passed away sixteen years later, at the age of ninety-two; I was a mother by then, and recall holding my infant daughter when I heard the news, saddened that she would grow in a world where Rosa’s story was completely over. But I have raised my daughters to honor the legacy Rosa Parks left. I have wanted to mold them into people that that woman, both the young woman on the bus saying, “I paid, same as them” and the older steel woman that I had met at nine, would be proud to shake the hand of.

I like to think I have been successful.

Veins

Mary Murphy

I wanted to feel your soul to see if you were real

I found a crack and I slipped inside

I had to make myself small so you wouldn’t notice

Deep below your flesh I built a home

I started a fire to keep you warm

To piece you together

To rid you of darkness

The crack was filled, and you were whole

Somewhere along the way our souls became intertwined

I was trapped in a fire I started

I tried to stay awake, but I melted into you

Can you still feel me coursing through your veins?

Sweet Dreams to a Terrible Nightmare

Samara Butler

As dawn approaches, orange and yellow rays mix with the residual grey left in the room from the night. As I sleep, I dream of the pirouetting flames and laughter. Then, like a fish taken by a seagull, I am snatched from the dream; awoke by the loud “bang” at my window as if the window was screaming at me, warning me of the nightmare to come.

“Wake up! They are dead Samara! They’re all dead!” my cousin Brandon screamed frantically.

I am met with the realization of what I had heard. Like leaves in the wind, I whisked to the front porch. From there, I see the red and orange flames bursting like air from a popped balloon out of my friend’s house. In that moment, the fire went from a memory of spending time with friends roasting marshmallows and listening to the crickets in the distance while sipping on an ice-cold Corona, to the means of destruction, agony, and turmoil of August 7, 2004.

The dream is of cool summer’s night. The breeze is soft, and a mix of cedar and pine fill the air. We gather around the flame, and share laughs about our day. While listening to a friend talk, I am entranced by the rhythm of the embers. The warmth of the blaze calls to me, like the cry of a baby draws its mother. The embers whisper in my ear, calming and relaxing me. The smell of soil and twigs isn’t overwhelming, and in the distance, the crickets call out to one another and the mosquitos buzz about looking for their next meal. The dream erupts forcing me to face a new nightmare of my reality.

Although the dream was full of hope and joy, reality is quite the opposite when I awake. Like a ton of bricks, heartbreak and misery take over my body, and I began to sob uncontrollably. Soot and clouds of coal filled the sky, and tears streamed down my face like a raging river. Like a cannon ball shooting from its cannon, the inferno bursts out the house. The flames brought the wood to life as it danced across the house. Suddenly, a big piece of siding fell from the house, and the ground rumbled as if a volcano was preparing to erupt.

The firefighters fought to contain and suppress the fire for three hours before they could enter the house. To do so, they had to come at the fire from separate angles; the only hope to contain the roaring inferno. In shifts, the firefighters sprayed the blaze, swooping from left to right starting at the base of the home, and then, the house began to fall apart. As the water beat against the house, the wood seemed to melt off the house in tiny pieces, like wood chips.

Once the flames were extinguished, the firefighters entered the scorched remains of the house. The smell of burnt wood and flesh filled the air as they began to bring bodies out. The sight of their charred skin and the thick black smoke that filled the air, haunts my dreams.

Now when I gaze into the embers, there is no joy. The screams and cries of friends and family replacing the sound of crickets and mosquitos. Fire, once a symbol of strength and courage, is now a source of weakness and spiritlessness. When I gaze into the flames, I no longer feel safe and untouchable; instead, I feel vulnerable and lost in turmoil.

Faster than the speed of light, dreams of Bryan and Elijah take trips from heaven to hell. Surrounded by darkness and misery, I hear Bryan and Elijah’s voices calling to me; and then I wake to a chill whipping across my neck that gives me goosebumps, and in a mist of sweat. I hear ever so slightly, “We’ve never left you.”

In Loving Memory of
Vincent R. Manning Jr.
Dec. 23, 2003 – Aug. 7, 2004

Scottie K. Self
June 14, 1996 – Aug. 7, 2004

Bryan J. Self
May 4, 1991 – Aug. 7, 2004

Elijah J. Self
Feb. 6, 1989 – Aug. 7, 2004

Nancy D. Self
July 3, 1987 – Aug. 7, 2004

Lost Tragically in a Fire August 7, 2004
Forever Loved, Forever Missed, and Always Remembered

Lasagna?

Mackensie Jack

On a dead-end road in Glenmont sits a little brick house, tchotchkes lining its stone wall, and a little heralding gnome with a sign that says “Willkommen!”

Inside, the oven is billowing with steam and my grandparents’ dogs are barking in the window. A procession of us, our cars lining the narrow street, are ascending the crooked stone steps to the door.

My grandmother is a quintessential hippie, having spent her youth in the seventies, trekked across the country over and over, and finally settled in her brick cottage. The house is adorned with garage-sale and flea market treasures, dozens of plants, three dogs, and a bird. My grandmother cooks the mashed potatoes with the flame too high and whisks butter into them with ferocity. She smiles at everyone who crosses the threshold, some tool or bowl or other crowding both arms, short pieces of hair flying over the lenses of her cat-eyeglasses. She gets an array of food on my shirt when I hug her.

“Shit,” she says under her breath, and one of the grandchildren giggles. She removes a casserole dish from the oven, and beneath the steam, you can see her lasagna, the last layer of pasta baked hard onto the pan.

“Lasagna for Thanksgiving?” my mother quips at me below her breath. She says this every year as if she is truly surprised.

My mother is the shortest person in the room, and she is the loudest too. I’m happy to shrink in her shadow, tasting gravy off a wooden spoon for my grandmother. My mother stirs a different pot.

“Pam,” my mother groans, looking out the front window at my uncle Justin and his wife, Pam, whom my mother does not care for. My grandmother rolls her eyes and bumps my shoulder. My mother, surely, is already roiling with backward compliments and shady comments; Pam probably is, too.

You cannot miss my Uncle Josh. He’s wearing a shirt that he bought himself that says Best Uncle Ever, a cloud of expensive cologne following his person, and a huge backpack slung over his shoulder. First, we get a detailed itinerary of his current fitness and diet routine, down to specific macros and weekly rotations. Then, he fills us in on his current dating conquests (but later we will console him about his ex-wife). He starts streaming a video of himself mountain-biking on the TV, and my grandfather patiently obliges him. Later, while drunk, he pulls a drone camera out of the backpack and flies it over top of the house. You can see each of our cars in a line, like colorful ants, and the pale blue roof of my grandmother’s house. He insinuates that he followed his ex-wife to her new boyfriend’s house with this drone, and we pretend, for legal reasons, that we did not hear him.

My grandfather is tall and lean, with a thick grey beard and long silver hair. His hands are well-calloused from a life of tough work, dirt underneath them from planting garlic in the garden beds. He smells as much like garlic as you would think, but each one of us hugs him tight anyway. The pigeon, Larry, rests on my grandfather’s shoulder, and my grandfather rests his booted feet upon a velvet ottoman. The two of them sit with knowing smiles between my mother and Pam, who no longer keep up their pretenses. They are too full of dinner to work up that kind of energy.

My grandfather’s peculiar laugh sounds like that of a vampire, loud, deep, and maniacal. He is wearing a Harley Davidson vintage t-shirt, and he’s tapping out the drumline of the Black Sabbath playing on the turntable. My grandfather does not talk much. He is here for the lasagna.

The Junkie That Stole Christmas

Melissa Fritsch

It was a random weeknight, and I was managing a Five Guys, or attempting to. I was strung out, and had been for ages, but I needed drug money, so I tried my best to keep up appearances. When my employee brought me the wallet, I did not think at all, because I was at that point you reach in your heroin addiction when thought has been completely cut out of the picture. Instead, I simply assured them I would put it in the safe and then look through it for contact information after the dinner rush. I suppose both of those things are true, but they don't tell the whole story.

I got unbelievably high that night, the kind of high you rarely achieve so late in your addiction. I dragged myself into work the next morning, a living corpse, and slowly shuffled through the morning prep. After about an hour, the woman called. I answered the phone, and suddenly, the remnants of my high were gone, the world suddenly too bright, too painful. I listened to her as she spoke, near tears, about her children and the Christmas they would be missing. That was her whole paycheck, you see. I said the things I needed to say, assured her we would look into it, took down a phone number, promised to look at cameras, but of course told her I couldn't guarantee anything.

Somehow, I acted like a real human being when I was talking to her, and it was the worst feeling I'd experienced in my life. No one ever suspected a thing, but part of me wished they would. Shortly after that, I cashed out a \$10,000 401k and spent it all in under a month. But no matter how many drugs I used, no matter how close to death I came, I didn't die, and I was still myself, the junkie, thinking about the time I stole Christmas from two little innocent kids.

The Moment of Clarity

Melissa Fritsch

I have no idea how long I've been in the little room at this point – it could be minutes, hours, perhaps days. Pieces of the night are coming back to me as the cops take their turns peppering me with questions, none of which I'm answering, at least certainly not truthfully. Through a lone window, I can see light coming in – daybreak. I suppose that means it's been about twelve hours since this night started, since I got the call I had been dreading for all of this long, long summer.

A few months ago I was your average heroin addict – running the streets trying to score, getting fired from jobs or just not showing up, slowly selling the things I had acquired in a life that now were just a distant memory. But something changed in me when we got the news. My mother, my best friend, the one person in the whole world who still believed in me and supported me, had cancer. At first, it was just a tumor on the tongue, and I continued on with my life, assuming she'd have it removed and life would go back to normal. But in June, when she went in for a routine PET scan, my whole world topped upside down. Stage IV, and the doctors said. They'd never seen anything like this; the cancer had metastasized, taking over her whole body, and she had over twenty tumors and lesions in her heart, her brain, and her lungs. The news shocked me into submission.

I settled into a new routine as much as possible. Every day, I drove to the methadone clinic and drank 90 mg of bitter solution – even the three days a week I spent at my parents', thanks to guest dosing. At my parents', I helped my dad around the house, made dinners, cleaned up when my mother got sick (she had no control over when she would vomit, so the floor was covered in towels). Sniffing dope became a passing thought. I no longer had the time, I had to be there with my mom as much as possible – I'd probably have just moved there, but she wanted me to keep some semblance of a normal life. The days I spent in Plattsburgh, I mainly worked my job at Wendy's.

Summer quickly passed, and I barely saw my girlfriend, Steff, at all. I assumed she was doing alright because I had to – I did not have

the mental energy or space to worry about anything but my mom. Unfortunately, that all came crashing down in the middle of August when I found the wallet stashed away in the spare bedroom. Alcohol wipes, q-tips, foil, a couple of empty baggies... and the needles. I had never used a needle, it was a line I never crossed, and seeing them left me conflicted; my mind raced, but my heart hurt for Steff. When I got back to Glens Falls, my mom was in severe, constant pain. The largest of the tumors in her brain was pressing against her eye and temple, and so she had a permanent, throbbing headache. She tried to hold on, but on a Monday morning, my father and I called 911, watched them load her in the ambulance, and then followed it to the hospital.

In the hospital, I was alone with my thoughts. I stayed with my mother all week, calling off work. I slept there, on a recliner that some nurses were nice enough to bring sheets for every day. I only left her to go smoke cigarettes in the parking lot, and occasionally scavenge for food. Despite my constant company, my mother never spoke again – the last words I heard from her were good-byes when she got in the ambulance. Her birthday passed in the hospital, but she didn't understand that the cards and flowers were for her. On the following Wednesday morning, I decided to drive back up to Plattsburgh. By this point, my mind was constantly racing, and had been for weeks. I had to go to work, and I decided to take just two Ativan so I could manage to get through the shift. A few minutes after swallowing them, I got the phone call. I needed to get back to the hospital immediately, my mother's condition had deteriorated over the few hours I had been gone.

My mother passed away before I made it back. I stayed there, with my father, for a few hours, but eventually decided to drive back home. The bottle of Ativan had come with me, for some reason, and I continued taking more throughout the evening, so my memory comes in flashes. I decided to get ahold of Steff and have her get some heroin for when I got home. I just couldn't take life anymore. I was pulled over halfway home, run through field sobriety, but I passed. The cops followed me up to Plattsburgh, after making me lock my phone in my truck because I was "so obsessed" with it. The minute they turned away, I got out and hurriedly checked the phone. Nothing. So I decided to drive around and try to find Steff (she was working, driving a taxi). The longer that passed without hearing from her, the angrier I got. My driving showed this as I whipped around corners, speeding around the city, until I grazed a lightpost while on the college campus.

And now I was in the little room, reflecting on everything that had brought me here, when I was coherent enough to think. The cops knew I was on something, but they couldn't figure out what. Suddenly a new cop entered the room, one I hadn't seen before. He grabbed my purse to rifle through its contents, but I was unconcerned, as it had already been searched a few times by this point. But when he took out the bottle of baby aspirin and started looking at the pills in his hand, I knew I was done for.

After riding to the hospital and getting blood drawn, all while handcuffed, I finally got home. I know we shot the heroin, but I don't even remember it. What I do remember is the feelings of shame and guilt. I threw away over 100 days of clean time and caught two misdemeanors, and I don't even remember it. That night was the lowest I have ever been, but it gave me a new sense of clarity. I continued to work on myself, and I'm proud to say I now have over five years clean. Now I am in college to become a drug and alcohol counselor, because I want to help others escape from the self-induced prison of addiction.

Alone, Together

Alexandra Thomson

“Sophia, I’m about to lose that plate, will you grab it off my tray?” Chris asks me in a shaky voice. He is walking through the 3 foot wide serving station with a tray full of plates, the tray lopsided. It’s almost as wide as he is tall.

“Which one?” I ask facetiously. As if I can’t fast forward and see the shrimp scampi toppling to the floor.

“Are you serious?” he says in a grumbled tone.

I quickly snag the scampi off the tray, making sure to balance the rest of the tray out. I am consciously making an effort not to have my vision come true.

“Thanks,” Chris mumbles as he walks away with the tray, simultaneously shaking the worried look off his face. I follow him with the steaming and scrumptious looking scampi.

It is not that the restaurant would have cared; one plate of scampi is nothing compared to the revenue brought in annually. But Chris would have been left explaining the results to his table, which would have affected his tip. This is definitely not the most pleasant experience; we deal with arrogance and ignorance daily.

After returning to the serving station from Chris’s table, he turns to me and says, “Thanks Sophia, you saved my a**.”

I turn to him with a smile, responding, “Of course Chris, that’s what friends are for.”

“Friends?” he says, smirking.

“I like girls,” I say wittily, totally not realizing what had just sputtered across my lips.

Quicker than I imagined, he spits back the words, “I have the Grindr app and that just made you 10 times hotter.”

I laugh, responding with a mere, “No way, seriously?”

He promptly turns to walk away, looking back at me while muttering the words “Just kidding.”

I smile from ear to ear because I’ve known Chris my whole life, and I know he’s not kidding. We are standing in the most confined space of our “million dollar view” restaurant, both dressed in black collared button-up shirts, slacks, and black dress shoes, conservative at best, but I feel some sort of unity. We are under a roof owned by people who discourage us from coloring our hair with absurd colors and we commit to the fact that tattoos need to be covered at all times. Chris and I are dressed the same as every other server; yet we share something under our skin. It’s not seen to the world but there is a sort of belonging to be felt.

The words I have just said, had never been projected out loud before, but I don’t feel so alone and I don’t feel scared anymore. I stand in shock at the triumph I now feel. I guess you never really know where a treasure lies.

Fairy Dust Fades

Anna Clement

In Neverland our dreams frolicked and sparred
One minute we were laughing,
then it all went dark.

And on that flight around the clocktower,
sprinkled in fairy dust,
I knew there was no other person
who I would ever place my trust.

Suspended above pirates,
evading crocodiles,
I was blinded by our fate in the glow of your tremulous smile.

Tremulous, indeed, as we grew apart.
My future calling me forward,
your words breaking my heart.

It's no surprise I stopped visiting.
Stopped glistening in fairy dust.
I found truth in your silence,
your refusal to grow up.

I thought Neverland was our fantasy.
The start of our forever.
But I was clouded by the imaginary,
clouded like the weather.

As rain suffocated my lungs,
our bridge struck by lightning,
I realized Neverland was our reality
but under a different lighting.

Our love was never land.
Two warring island countries.
Never land
Never land
My romanticized ideals of you.
Never land
Never land
The person I couldn't live up to.

Captain Hook showed me the truth.
And at least with him I knew,
no lost boys heard my secrets,
the things meant just for you.

Never land in Neverland;
our love would never land.

A World in Four Walls

Anne Moon

Looking around this room, this space, my space, I take it in: four walls, six counting the jutting closet, all a vague pallid yellow that tries to justify itself as "not pure white." A thin white door, never closed nor really open, a thing which impedes both ingress and egress. The yellow dresser, a sentry at the foot of the bed, never big enough for what I need. The black-draped bed in the center, swallowing the space, fighting with the other furnishings for supremacy. The clutter attempting to tell my life.

This is my space, my world. Mine. Ninety-eight square feet, made so much smaller by the life inside them, devoured by that life and its needs. A space taken for granted for so long, I only spent my time here sleeping or dressing, living my life outside of that half-opened door. Then came the day I woke up coughing, throat raw and chest burning. The doctor saying the test was positive. Positive...a word defined as "constructive, optimistic, or confident," but there was nothing positive about that moment on the white-sheeted table, and it drained my optimism and confidence, throwing me into a state of panic, fear, anger even. That word was full of dread, that positive solely negative.

I went home, and I turned that 98 square foot box into my world for the foreseeable future. After quickly gathering what I could for my time as a pariah, I closed the half-opened door; anything else thereafter would have to be passed through by mask-adorned children. Lozenges in five flavors, a canister of Clorox wipes, a hissing can of Lysol, a bottle of sticky sweet cough syrup, all made their way inside.

For over a month, my home has shrunk to these walls. Even when it became clear that the closed door, scrubbed and sprayed to remove the taint of my touch, was pointless, that the masks were senseless, that the infection had already overrun the family outside that door, still this room has been my home. I've spent nights staring at those pallid walls instead of my eyelids, fantasizing about rectifying the color with paint chips I can't retrieve. Mornings unsuccessfully attempting to tidy the onslaught of mess and disarray in the tiny space. Afternoons

hunched over the small plastic table that's now my desk, its thin metal legs thwarting every attempt to place my legs comfortably. Evenings watching the world beyond through the window of the television above the dresser. And all the while, through that half-opened door, listening to the bustle and chatter of the others in the house, now hale and healthy unlike myself.

At times, I'm not alone. My girls, brimming with the latest story from Minecraft or TikTok, will burst into the tiny space, making it at once smaller and yet somehow larger by their exuberance. They crowd the bed, the space suddenly cramped by their bodies and their energy and their youthful chatter. Sometimes one daughter comes alone, intent on sharing whatever has made her laugh at that moment, and she shares my escape through the false window into whatever show has caught my fancy. We lose ourselves until several hours have passed, and either because the show has run out of steam or we have, she leaves once again. And the room is both enlarged but also shrunken by her absence.

Of course, even alone, I have diversions aplenty stocked. They suddenly overwhelm the faux-wooden cabinet that Alex calls his "dresser," crowding him out of the room that once was nearly his alone. Myriad boxes of crafting supplies; tools aplenty to create with; markers and pencils in neat rows in their cartons; rainbows of dice wrapped up in pouches; books dog-eared with years of use; all claim the space where his shirts not long ago lay. And my textbooks, strewn carelessly on the side of the bed where Alex used to sleep, their pages my new silent sleeping companions since sickness made him flee the room.

But joining me in the space, new and jarring, are reminders that I'm not here merely to escape the noise of my family nor for my own comfort. The top of the dresser, once crowded with everyday clutter, now is crowded by medications: sterile white packets in a sterile white box; amber bottles, their transparency marred by glaring white labels; nasal sprays with tops like blunted needles; the cough syrup, a sickly sticky sweet orange. The nebulizer sits coiled and compact on the nightstand; I dread hearing it hissing and spitting, the vapor streaming from the back of the mouthpiece as if I were a dragon exhaling smoke instead of inhaling the salty mist making my heart race and my hands tremble, but allowing me to breathe. And dangling above my pillow is the pulse oximeter, a minuscule gadget assuring me that I am improving, I am

breathing, even when my chest tightens and every inhalation feels like I've reversed that dragon and inhaled fire. Assuring me that the paroxysms of coughing haven't robbed me of air entirely, even when they double me over like a punch to the gut and make my face a ripe eggplant.

I know that little by little, there's improvement. I feel the cough releasing its hold on my cracked-glass lungs, the dizziness becoming less frequent, the weakness subsiding. Little by little, my need for the seclusion of this room lessens, and I find the freedom to venture from it, released for a time from the chains of illness shackling me to my bed. Little by little, my world begins to expand once more as my lungs regain their capacity. But "little by little" isn't now. For now, the time that I might finally be able to again view this room as a temporary space is out of sight. It feels as if it will last forever, just as every coughing fit keeping me confined to this box feels like it will last forever.

Gemini

Praniva Pradhan

“Do you consider yourself Nepali or American?” It was a question that I’d constantly heard from people of all ages, aunties in Nepal to the kids that I tutored in New York. I never knew how to answer this question and, in an effort, to escape the situation I simply gave the answer that they wanted to hear. Americans couldn’t fathom wanting to be anything but American, Nepalis couldn’t fathom wanting to be anything but Nepali. These were the most frustrating moments of miscommunication; the impossible dilemma of deciding between the Nepali or American table in the dining hall. These situations fueled my identity crisis, a fear that I would be labeled as a foreigner in all places. Not Nepali enough to be Nepali, not American enough to be American. The problem was that I thought I had to pick one instead of embracing the two.

In an effort to find identity, I went back to Nepal the summer before my junior year for the first time in nearly 10 years. To keep myself busy through my six-week stay, I decided to volunteer at a local school and teach English to Nepali children. Coming in with an American perspective, I thought that I would be working in a small, underfunded school with poverty-stricken children, like the press photos I often saw celebrities in. The reality of this school was quite the opposite. I wasn’t working in just any school I was at Ullens Kindergarten, the best primary school in the country. These were the children of the most successful people in Nepal. These kids loved their lives, they didn’t want to live in America because they were proud of their country. They weren’t impressed that I was from the United States – the kids couldn’t have cared less.

Maxon Price was one of these children, but he wasn’t like the rest. Maxon was born in Manchester, England and wore the accent well. His blond hair and blue eyes caused him to stand out, but Maxon didn’t see a difference between himself and his classmates. They were all attending school, they played together, lived in the same city and drove the same cars. In his eyes, they were all the same. Even though he considered himself British, he was also equal parts Nepali. He loved his life both in Nepal and Britain and was proud to be a part of both countries. Maxon ignored the identity crisis nearly all immigrant children feel – the one

I was trapped in. Maxon lived carefreely, he wasn’t weighed down with expectations. By being exactly who he was, nobody questioned his identity. He taught me to never forget who I was and use it as my greatest strength. Meeting Maxon led me to consider a new question, “At what age do we decide to define our identity?” By holding no label, he was free to be whatever he wanted to be. In his own youthful way, Maxon had shared with me an invaluable lesson in self-acceptance. He may not be much of a role model in any other respect yet, but Maxon Price did not let labels define him and I strive to live by his example every day.

I came back to America with a new answer to my least favorite question. Do I consider myself Nepali or American? Now I proudly answer “both.” Not half Nepali and half American, but 100% Nepali and 100% American at all times. When you’re not part of the majority, when things are not designed for your success, you have no other option but to find your own place. I spent so much time trying to fit into the mainstream, minimizing what made me different, I didn’t realize those are the things that made me unique.

All the Colors of My Rainbow

Shawn Watts

Some people spend a lifetime with the freedom to construct a version of themselves they're comfortable presenting to the world, I did not. I came out to the world at sixteen to mollify those that spent my childhood trying to kill a side of me I hadn't even met yet. I hated the version of myself I allowed others to paint for me and I spent the three years following, trying to paint my own. I spent some time trying to suppress what I had grown to resent; what I was taught to reject. It wasn't until I was nineteen that I finally came to peace with the me I was rebuilding. The one they tried so hard to dismantle. It was at nineteen, I had learned of all the colors of my rainbow to paint my own self portrait, and my life has been different ever since.

Before my coming out to the world, school was intolerable. I was bullied relentlessly because kids thought I was gay. I had never said or done anything at that point to make them believe this. Perhaps it was because I walked and talked differently. The reasons changed almost as quickly as the methods in which they used to torture me. Since I was nine, I was followed home, almost daily. They'd chase me with weapons and insults, and if they caught me, they'd spit on me and beat me up. I've had guns and knives pulled on me. I've had my locker spray painted with obscenities. During gym class one day, a group of kids approached me in the locker room and wanted to fight. Three boys jumped me, and while I was in the office – they urinated on my clothes and books. I had to go home in my gym clothes, in the middle of January. I eventually began to fight back. I was suspended from school, almost routinely. The school had a zero-violence policy, so if someone came up to me and hit me, I'd be suspended anyway for being "involved in a physical altercation." I might as well have fought back. I had a handful of friends, and they were all girls. I felt uncomfortable around boys, because I didn't fit in with them, and we both knew it. My family and I moved often. By the time I graduated high school, I had gone to twelve different schools. I was always the new kid. It was partly that fact, coupled with the fact that my hometown of Troy, New York was so small, and everyone knew each other that I never felt welcomed in the new school I attended. I had seen the boys in my class, at my house before I even transferred to that school. They were cousins, or half-siblings of the kids that followed me home from the last school I went to. The sad truth was, that I lived

in the "hood" and I didn't act "hood." I walked with my head down. I never initiated a conversation, and when spoken to, I spoke softly. My mother couldn't afford name brand clothes, so we wore Walmart clothes. I read in my spare time and always had a book in tote. In every possible way, I was different. My mother couldn't fathom that the bold, mouthy, confident kid she had at home, that ran her house in her absence – could be meek and bashful at school.

Before my coming out to my family, home was troublesome. I was the oldest of four siblings. My mother worked often, and I was always left home alone to tend to my siblings. I was always a sassy, mature kid for my age. This made it difficult for my mother to believe that the kids at school were picking on me "for no reason." The truth is, I only talked at home. I stood out at home too, but there at least I was allowed and expected to. My relationship with my father was almost nonexistent. My relationship with my mother was always more of a friendship. The year I turned sixteen, I had also begun family court proceedings to legally emancipate myself. I was finally successful. But it left a rift between my mother and I.

Before my coming out to myself, I honestly didn't even believe I was gay. I had always found boys attractive, but I had never been attracted to one. I then, and still now believe that everyone can find anyone attractive, and that doesn't necessarily have any impact on their sexuality. I had always had girlfriends, because I felt like I was supposed to. I only got along with girls, and my first kiss/ first love was my best friend, whom, like all my friends, was a girl. I had practically dropped out of school, and felt compelled to just tell the bullies what they wanted to hear, so they'd leave me alone. I had never been in any relationship with a boy. I wasn't convinced that these people had been right about a part of me, before I even knew it. I couldn't wrap my head around how they could have known such an intimate part of me, since age eight- when I had never done anything before. I refused to let my mother's fights at the school, defending me, be in vain. I either didn't believe I was gay, or didn't want to believe it. I knew, however that telling my peers I was would grant me the freedom to talk how I wanted, and walk how I wanted without the constant scrutiny. I didn't have to worry about "what could happen" because I was getting punished for it already. I was liberated, and free to be whoever I wanted to be, without societies permission to do so... so I said it.

I first told my family. I started with my brother, then my girlfriend and

then my parents. Though my father wasn't around, my mother thought it best I let him know before I posted to Facebook. I agreed, and then made a Facebook post that changed my life. I posted the following: ["Hi, I'm Shawn. I'm 16 years old. For years, I've been called gay. I've allowed people who don't know me, or want to know me- to make me not even want to know myself. I've caught myself tripping over nothing, paying too much attention to how I'm walking. I'm done with the talking. I'm bi, get over it. I'm no longer concerned with what you can call me. I have decided it's what I call myself that matters, and I'll never have to call myself anything out loud. I will no longer fight for who, or what I am. I trust this will change how some people see me, for other's you'll say you've known all along. But for me, this is something new, and I'll have to get used to it. So, thank you to everyone who helped me find this part of me. You haven't met this Shawn, so this is my reintroduction. It's been nice meeting me; I hope to meet you all soon. I'll be back in school on Monday."]

My open letter went viral, and almost overnight, everything changed.

Now, after coming out to the world, school was tolerable. I wasn't bullied every day. I had finally validated their suspicions. So, while I was ostracized from a lot of the boy groups, I was friends with their girlfriends. I wasn't followed home anymore. I wasn't being chased with weapons and insults. Nobody spit on me or beat me up anymore. And up until recently, I hadn't had to fight over it anymore. [In August of 2018, a man pulled a gun on me while I was bartending at a club in Schenectady because he thought I was gay.] But, besides that, I haven't had any other weapons pulled on me. My locker wasn't spray painted anymore. Nobody ever urinated on my books and clothes again. I never changed for gym class again. So, during my senior year, I had to take three gym classes in order to graduate on time. I still had a handful of friends, and for the most part they were all girls. I still didn't have many guy friends while I was in school, but once I graduated, many of the loudest homophobes, found themselves in my DM's. The caricature they had panted of me was crafted from paint they eventually used to paint themselves.

After I came out to my family, home was just me. I still adore my siblings, and strive to be a good example for them. I continued to become the first in my family to graduate high school, and to join the military. My relationship with my father has gotten a lot better. I think he holds on to the idea that I like females, with hopes that it's "just a phase." My relationship with my mother was always more of a friendship, and I think that because she never expected me to leave and I did, that

regardless of how she originally felt about me coming out, she was determined to repairing our friendship. Just like the real world, there were people in my family who were intolerant to the idea, and those that were open minded enough to make room for exceptions. Those exceptions left room for more, and eventually breeds tolerance. For the ones that couldn't get with the program; they're no longer my family. There comes a time in an adult's life, where we stop seeing people as friends and family, and begin to see them as people. It's at that point that we are able to make the conscious decision as to whether these are people are ones, we want to surround ourselves with. And just as we paint our own portraits, we use these colors to paint our family portrait as well. It was in this process, I learned that I could not paint people black and white with a rainbow brush. The only thing I had left to do was amass my pallet and see what colors I had left.

After coming out myself, I felt complete. I spent the three years after my Facebook post, trying to convince myself that I was straight. There was a lot more than my popularity that changed in that three years, so it's hard to say what had the most impact. I had hit my growth spurt, and went from 5'4" to 6' in one summer. I had always been relatively skinny, but now I was defining my body. I had graduated high school and joined the army. I was in the best shape of my life and felt like I had attained financial security. The bullies that made my childhood miserable were now in my inbox trying to seduce me, secretly. I had the confidence I begged for as a child. I think it was that confidence that introduced me to my ex. My first male best friend, and eventual boyfriend. In teaching me I don't need to be with anyone to be happy, he taught me that I didn't love him because he was a guy, but regardless that he was a guy. That relationship validated that the relationships before him weren't because they were girls, but regardless that they were girls. I didn't yet understand myself, and felt drawn to people I felt like understood me. He showed me all of his colors, and gave me some along the way. It's because of that friendship and relationship that I dug deep enough inside myself that I am finally content with who I am, by myself.

I didn't have the freedom to paint myself from scratch. But looking back, I'm not sure I'd have wanted it. I came out to the world at sixteen, and out to myself at nineteen. I've spent my life, drawing and painting, and never erasing pieces of an image of myself, I want to share with the world. I'm now at peace with the me I've been rebuilding. The one they tried so hard to dismantle. Even now, at twenty-seven- I'm still adding finishing touches to this portrait I've been drawing since I was sixteen. I can look back and say that my life has always been different, and I have only now found all the colors of my rainbow to paint my own self portrait.



Spiritual Cleanse by *Moriah Sherry*



Good Vibrations by *Moriah Sherry*



Beyond Death by Moriah Sherry



Trouble by Megan Hale



The Beauty of Nature by *Jahkeal Johnson*



The Sky by *Mohammad Shaikh*

Mais yeah—

Jessica Harrison

There was a heartbeat thrumming low
A constant hum, I remember well
How the air, tar-thick and sickly sweet
Dampened your clothes and clung to your skin.

Late summer the murky waters rose,
We drowned. Some say we were cleansed,
Left with rot and a city of ghosts
Streets purged of sin and meaning.

Years later your heart lies still,
No blues rhythm melody struming along. No—
Here the streets echo the crashing waves and
the infinite silence of muddy waters.

My Rock

Zach Phillips

Sitting with my eyes closed, I hear the wind as it gently caresses my ear and the side of my neck. The high altitude is invigorating and I can hear insects attempting flight. When I open my eyes for a moment I see the struggling bugs being bullied into a new direction with every push of the wind. I close my eyes once again and wonder what will ever happen to the bugs that are gusted too far away from home.

The centuries old water running to my left is perfectly in order as it slides down the smoothed path from years of erosion. The water is clear allowing the emerald colored moss growing alongside it to illuminate the sides of the stream. The water drops to what would be our doom with such grace. The capillary stream lets loose a spray of cold water that fills the surrounding air, gently blanketing my face with droplets. The rocky surface the water has manipulated to smoothness gives way to a large rock that protrudes high above the water's edge. A substance spared from the water's might.

My rock stands tall above the horizon. There is one spot on the back side of the rock perfect to place my foot to use as leverage for vaulting my body onto the top. My rock is covered in tags from others who have also come to sit on top of it. Some have wounded my rock and etched their family name and year of the malformation, dating back to the 1700's. There is also a tag that reads "XAH", a marking done with a black paint marker that has survived three winters now. Atop my rock I sit in the middle, resting my back against the fracturing in the stone. The sun cooks all below it; the bugs in the breeze, the orderly rushing water, my rock and me. Any saplings that have managed to sprout on top of my barren rock only survive due to the fluffy clouds passing in front of the sun. The clouds have dark underbellies and warn of possible rain.

My rock is the epicenter of peace and stability, sitting proudly on top of the three tiered Kaaterskill Falls. My rock accepts me as part of it. I sit with my legs crossed and my hands facing the sun while my arms rest to my side. My eyes close once again and with a cleared mind I hear a controlled buzzing flow past my ear and take a stand in front of my face.

As I gently open my eyes, they fill with sunshine. My eyes adjust as the buzzing continues and approaches my face. It's a bee.

Yellow as the sun behind it and curious like someone who has just seen a familiar face, the bee comes in closer and lands on my nose. I greet my new acquaintance with a simple "hello, friend.", and as quickly as it landed, it takes off once again into the wind.

My rock is my happy place. Anytime I am at a crossroads or need a moment of reflection, I go to my rock. I listen to the water and feel the sun and the wind. The dirt beneath me grounds me, but it has the possibility to betray me with a swift trip. One wrong step and I could fall with the slithering water down the falls to a painful death, but on my rock I am at peace. Once winter retreats, just like the bees, I too will return to my rock to enjoy its nurturing.

My Skeletons

Leithe Miller-Kramer

There are skeletons rattling in my tomb of a closet,
Bones shifting anxiously as closer they creep to the door
No longer is she there to hold them back
The girl I once was
Finally at peace.

I hear their distant chattering come closer as the days and nights
progress
Her hushed whispers no longer calm them to settle
Instead only silence meets them
They grow more unwieldy.

One day, they too will be happily at peace
Their tireless energy drifting with memory to sleep beside their guardian
Aches and pains forgotten
Bursting through my door
Into the light so that perhaps they may be cured of the sins that haunt
them.

But until that day, they lay in wait
Biding in time for their time to rush towards their salvation.

I am ready for their freedom, I am afraid of their power.

Secrets left in shadow come forth into light, spilling from their lipless
mandibles
Chittering with the clacking of their bones
So much and so little to give up.

What worlds will crumble when their truths are brought forth?
Whose hearts will be ruined as with the shaken foundation in this
webbing of lies
So long have we been trapped by its binding.

How is it, even as she is gone and sleeping in the dreamstate of memory.
At peace from the trauma she suffered, that these restless spirits clamber
forth

Anxious to join her,
 Like puppies their mother
 Like children
 Scared without guidance
 Angry without care,
 Chaotic without control.

I should let them go.

But once they come into the light
 There will be no taking them back
 Words and conversations that I've thought would never happen
 Should never happen
 Are forced from my lips in means to cleanse my body and mind of the
 wrongs that He has done
 But what can I do to heal the broken ties, fragile and fading as the clock
 ticks
 What do I do to heal frayed ends, loose and lost without touch and
 connection.

I should have done this sooner
 More cowardly than protective
 My words, bound to the frightened memory of a child with the desire to
 simply forgive and forget
 Her fight is gone
 And with it mine.

We are tired.
 We are done.
 We are proud.

But we are not foolish.
 When the tides rush in to claim their bodies, there will be no forcing back
 the waves that will come with it.
 Reaching the sun, writhing in its heat, they will scatter into dust and
 taken into the soothing water where they will truly be allowed to sleep
 It's time.

But yet it's all too soon.

They are at the door now.
 They're scratching phalanges weakly caress the wood
 Too weak by now even as they so terribly want to leave their punishing
 cell
 Their time is coming
 A storm brewing
 Moaning and groaning from their terrible pain
 How much have I deprived them of
 Chained so cruelly to the back walls
 I have kept them there
 To keep them safe
 To keep me safe.

I did this
 And now I will undo this.
 I will forgive them for all that they couldn't be and I will forgive the little
 girl for her frightened denials.

Caitlin Doughty: Reaper for the People

Sierra Hipwell

“A culture that denies death is a barrier to achieving a good death.” This is a quote from one of Caitlin Doughty’s books, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory* and embodies the main ideology behind her advocacy. Caitlin Doughty is a prominent mortician, author, and activist. She is credited with the formation of the “death positive movement” and foundation of the organization known as “The Order of the Good Death.” Caitlin Doughty is perhaps the most influential mortician of the 21st century.

To thoroughly comprehend Caitlin Doughty’s contributions to the funeral industry, it is important to define the term “mortician.” The word “mortician” is synonymous with the two terms “undertaker” and “funeral director.” According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, an undertaker is “one whose business is to prepare the dead for burial and to arrange and manage funerals” (“Undertaker”).

Interestingly, Caitlin Doughty was born on the island of Oahu, Hawaii in August of 1984. When she finished high school, she moved to Chicago, Illinois to pursue a degree in Medieval History. “Her thesis, entitled ‘In Our Image: The Suppression of Demonic Births in Late Medieval Witchcraft Theory,’ is the summer must-read for all lovers of demon sex and the late medieval church” (Doughty). She then moved to California, where she obtained a job at a crematory. There, she was responsible for the operation of the cremators, and transporting bodies to the crematorium. After gaining some experience in the field, she earned a second degree, this time in Mortuary Science, at Cypress College in Southern California.

In 2011, Caitlin Doughty formed an organization called The Order of the Good Death, which encompasses the “death positivity” movement. The main goal of the two are to address the negative ideologies surrounding death and dying (Kelly). The term “good death” was coined before the Civil War and refers to the optimal circumstances in which an individual would die. If one were to review the Order of the Good Death website, they would find tools to help plan their own funeral, as well

as information on a variety of “green” burials. The term green burial refers to the disposal of corpses that are not harmful to the environment. In Doughty’s eyes, a good death occurs when a “decomposing carcass helps nourish the roots of a juniper tree or the wings of a vulture—that is immortality enough for me. And as much as anyone deserves,” (Doughty).

Caitlin Doughty is also well known for her YouTube channel, *Ask a Mortician*. The series of videos addresses the questions all curious people have about death, dying, and what happens to corpses once a soul has left it. Most people generally avoid the topic of death in casual conversation because contemplating the unknown is challenging and uncomfortable.

With her quick wit, charm, and humor, Doughty challenges the modern funeral industry while simultaneously destigmatizing death as a taboo topic.

Perhaps Doughty’s most notable achievement is that all three of her books were New York Times bestsellers. Her first book, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory*, was published in 2016 and examines the harsh realities of the funeral industry, and how death is viewed in American culture. Her second book, and my personal favorite, is called *From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death*. This book explores funerary traditions around the world, and discusses newer earth-friendly death technologies surfacing in the United States. Doughty’s third and newest book, *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? And Other Questions About Dead Bodies* is a book of questions pertaining to death that children have asked her. Yes, “will my cat eat my eyeballs?” is one of the questions.

In 2020, Caitlin Doughty expanded her advocacy into racial issues. In *Smoke Gets in Your eyes*, Doughty wrote “It is no surprise that the people trying so frantically to extend our lifespans are almost entirely rich, White men. Men who have lived lives of systematic privilege and

believe that privilege should extend indefinitely." It is unsurprising that she started a scholarship fund for Black mortuary science students at Cypress College.

In summary, Caitlin Doughty has offered a refreshing perspective on death and dying. Not only is she normalizing conversation about death, but she makes it fun to do so. Before I read her books, I had no idea that there are alternatives to embalming/burial and cremation. I know now about many green alternatives and am eager to discuss those options with almost everyone I meet. I am pursuing a degree in mortuary science and can only hope I'm half as cool as Caitlin Doughty when I grow up.

Ode to The Alcoholic

Teresa Goyette

Pour a stiff drink
Trying to mute the misery inside
The sirens song was beautiful
Leading me straight to the source
My ship is smashed into the rocks
Splintered wood cutting into my flesh
Waves rush over me, quick and clean
I cry out, as I am pulled down
Darkness waits at the bottom of the sea
Time is collapsing in my head
The storm clouds gather
She is trying to swallow me whole
My body moves involuntarily
The exhaustion is consuming me
My heart is drained
The bottle is empty now, it is time to rest
Tomorrow will lead me back to the sea

Echo

Martin Martin

The house was never warm when I was a kid. Neither were the woods, but they were welcoming in a way. Those leafy branches in the canopy my protectors, and the trunks my company. They never yelled or struck me. The woods were my home.

My father and I had built a cabin for my little sister. Overlooking the creek bed below, a small waterfall trickled down the sides of the embankment the small structure sat atop of, feeding into the waters. That creek was my favorite place to escape to. I'd follow raccoon tracks, catch pollywogs, clear leaves from the murky waters so the flow would be smooth over the polished river stones. My stepmother never liked me playing in the mud, but she liked having me around the house, her own sanctuary, even less.

After getting myself thoroughly soaked in an act of childish rebellion, I trudged through the dead leaves coating the forest floor. There was plenty of time – too much time – to kill before supper, when I'd have to return to the house. Particularly adventurous that day, I followed the current, laughing at the water which squelched out of my beat-up sneakers as I hopped from stone to stone. They were slippery, but certain types of danger, I enjoyed.

So downstream I went, hopping, sloshing, and giggling all the way. Looking up, the shade from the canopy cast doubt on my face. This was farther than I had ever expeditioned on my own before, but nothing was there to deter me. A new dark part of the woods didn't scare me one lick. I had the creek to lead me back home, to the cabin. With no fear of getting lost, I ventured on.

Call it naivety, bravery, whatever you will. But I was at peace in my woodland home.

To my left, the embankment began to slope as I trekked on. The steep cliffs which I would try to scale like Indiana Jones back near the cabin mellowed into a soft, rolling sort of hill. To my right, the creek diverted and pooled into a swamp.

Oh, how child me loved swamps.

I bounded through the mucky water, staining my raggedy hand-me-down outfit a deep brown. The bright orange of my safety vest wouldn't fade however, and a good thing too. Despite my complaining, my father, the caring man he was, would always scare me into wearing one. "I don't want you getting shot out there by poachers, or trespassers thinking you're a deer," he'd frown.

I'd try to mimic his chuckle and tell him, "I'm too small to be a deer, and too skinny for the cannibals!"

My puddle jumping came to an abrupt end at a sound to my left. A skittering through the leaves. Instantly my overactive mind went to those poachers, and I waved my prodding stick angrily in their direction. But it was only a squirrel.

With the second sound, my heart dropped. And the squirrel did too. I hoped he was only playing dead.

Over atop the ridgeline, stood a buck. His massive antlers tossed up in the air like a symbol of pride, as he snorted once more. I dropped the stick. He dropped his head, and began pawing at the ground, almost like a cartoon bull.

Then he charged.

The buck smacked face first into a sapling that lay between us. I would've been skewered, had he not needed a minute to regain his sense of direction. Dashing back to the cabin, I could hear his hooves clacking against the stone creek bed behind me. My thighs burned as I scrambled up the embankment, finally reaching the door of cabin. Locked.

Slumped against the door, I bring my knees to my chest, and I pray through the tears. The buck is going to get me. His heavy breathing, his footfalls right on the other side of the cabin. Soon, I can't hear anything at all, drowned out by my hyperventilation, my mind in overload. I'm dead. He's going to kill me.

And then nothing. I peer around the cabin, nothing. He isn't there. Was he ever? An echoing snort in the distance, a seeming answer to my question.

Inside Apartment Number 228

Maxine Sarfo

Last night, I swear I heard those familiar footsteps again. I'm in my home, in my kitchen- she shouldn't be able to find me here. I thought I was safe. The heavy footsteps are coming from the hall, closer, closer now, ever so slowly. The knife I grab from the butcher's block shakily in hand, I point it out in front of me. She's just out of sight, in the shadows. I know she's there, I can feel her breathing on me. That evil laughter rings through the house.

It's too much. This is all too much. Knife still outstretched, I slump down against the wall, keeping an eye on where she'll pop out from. Any minute now, any minute now. The lump in my throat so harsh I can't speak. Can't even beg to be left alone. Will I even be able to scream when she gets me? My lungs are on overtime; I can't breathe. I'm dead. She's going to kill me.

And then nothing. The knife clatters to the linoleum floor, narrowly missing my bare toes. But I'm too focused on listening to care. Always listening. Was my stepmother really back here again, coming to get me, or did I imagine it? A resounding silence echoing throughout the house I try to call home, my answer.

[If you believe you or a loved one is suffering from flashbacks, don't hesitate in reaching out for help. <http://www.ptsdalliance.org/> Treatment can save lives.]

Cars and more cars. Traffic and more traffic. Escape the grumbling engines, only to park in a space congested with the very machine. Every visit, to this home away from home, is like this. Do guests simply not leave or do residents have more than one car? If they have more than one, surely they can afford a better living space. One where the no-smoking sign chases the clouds away. One where cars tread lightly as not to wake them. One where their cars have room to breathe, so mine may have room to rest from such a long drive. Even with time and help and precision and faith, squeezing is all that can be done. I hold my breath, my muscles tense. Slow, steady, careful, smooth through the eye of this needle.

Climbing through the back is the only way out. Again.

The clouds welcome me back after so long, and ask why I'm still holding my breath. Inside, flimsy walls shush me. Inside, worn floors are tired of quick pounding feet. Inside I question why even the hallways feel cramped, but I don't dare speak my mind. Ah, but so numerous are the doors inside, squished into such a stubby hallway; concealing compressed living spaces meant for compact people.

Petite are the relatives that live here. In comparison.

Kin envy and praise my height, but couches laugh at my curled, dangling legs. Yet here is where I'm lax, where I laugh, where I love, the company. Family. Here I stop caring about the condition of the car, the building, the city, and the people who don't know how to read signs properly. I spend the entire day inside, huddled with others near where the air conditioning sits, until we're popsicles. One bathroom means eight desperate people have to battle for a seat at the throne. And no matter how many times we visit, someone always forgets their toiletries, or can't remember which way to turn the shower knob for hot water. Our silliness concludes as Uncle Kofi and Aunty Christy call for sleep. They head to their room, my cousin Akua heads to her's, and the remaining five have to divide the living room. I don't even consider

Misunderstood

Jazmin Galloway

sleeping in the pint-sized bed my cousin stretches on. I've been crushed against the wall adjacent, too many times to gamble again. Factoring in the rule of seniority eliminates my place on the pull-out couch and blow-up mattress. I amble across the room and the recliner snickers at my reluctance.

Overnight, as my feet dangle from the couch, I think about what the next day will grace us with. Aunty Christy's crisp, soft, heavenly pancakes. My brain can no longer eat other pancakes without comparing them to her mouth-watering bites of pleasure. I crave the slight crunch that doubtlessly accompanies the edge of each pancake. No tongue could forget the delicacy which forms from this small kitchen. Every nose anticipates waking up to its divine scent. 'How many sheep are left in this barn?' grumbles my stomach, too impatient for morning. The gentle sound of a water filter tickles my ears. I forget my predicament as the soft glow of the fish tank lures my attention. Generations populate this tank, and every successive stay in apartment 228 discloses even more. A humble space is shared between them; likewise, our two branches of the family dwell together for these few nights. I find delight in that one section of the floor which creaks no matter how lightly I step, how quietly I wish to use the bathroom at night. Glee in catching up, playing with, and relating to these precious individuals. Amusement in the loud, foreign speech of our heritage, still baffling to me. There is contentment here.

So I'm thrilled to sit through traffic, squeeze into parking, cough my way to the door, and resist the urge to run through the tight hallway, if it means I get to spend some additional time inside apartment number 228.

I misunderstood what it meant to be me.
With lips so fine, and eyes like wine...
liquid in a bottle of poison.

I misunderstood the deep shade of my skin,
the touch of my words like a rolling raspberry...
ink on your paper.

I misunderstood what it felt like to betray myself.
The sharp blade cutting into my mind with ease...
smooth like velvet.

My misunderstandings cost me my time, wasted my life.
I could no longer see my path...
dark like tar that swallows animals whole.

One misunderstanding leads to another.
When I dubbed thee finished...
I lost what I never knew I had.

I misunderstood my voice.
It was swallowed and guzzled...
forgotten in a world of sound.

In a place where you misunderstand most things, I thought
this was normal.
The fear to be lost in a tunnel...
where your voice does not echo.

Forgotten.
Lost.
Quiet.

My Hometown: A Place to Remember

Omokhele Itebe

I misunderstood the value of being loud and proud.
How the color of my skin gave me the opportunity to
make noise.
To shout...
To scream, and everyone will look.

I misunderstood that because I look like me,
I have no choice but to be great.
When I am not...
they watch, and wait to strike.

I misunderstood the fear of being my shade, in my
skin.
I misunderstood being shaped like me, my height, my
weight.
My soul.

I misunderstood for the last time.

They say to forgive, but I won't forget. I will not be
fooled again.
Mised, and mistreated...hopeless.
I misunderstood that this is who I am. I can never
change that and never hope to.

I will be me.

I am the misunderstanding of a nation.
Because no matter what, who, how, when, or why. I
am here,
forever rising through the voices of
misunderstandings.

We all have that one person, place or thing we feel connected to. Well, for me, that place is my home country. Growing up, I never realized how much love I had for my culture and my home, Lagos, Nigeria until I left and moved to the United States. Though moving to the United States has been one of the many good decisions my family and I have made, it can never replace the personal connection I have with where I spent the majority of my childhood.

Lagos, Nigeria is a place with unknown beauty to some. Most people generalize it with Africa. Yes, Africa is a whole, but it has different parts or countries. Just like the human body, it is a whole with different body parts. Africa is a continent, and it has a north, south, east, and west. Nigeria is a country in West Africa and Lagos is a state in Nigeria. Within Nigeria, there are 56 states. The state I grew up in was Lagos. It is a unique state because it is the center of gravity for commerce, tourism, and rich cultural heritage; it is culturally diverse. Lagos is usually very loud and lively but can be quiet and boring; it can smell fresh or chaotic. The late-night summer breeze in Lagos is like no other. Whenever the breeze blows, one can feel it sink into their body, giving them chills. The climate in Lagos is a tropical wet and dry climate; it is usually hot throughout the year. The hotness can make one feel like the sun is glaring directly into their skin. Just like the rest of the states in Nigeria, Lagos has two seasons. The wet season and dry season. The dry season tends to be the coldest and it is usually called harmattan. The wet season feels mushy and slimy, while the dry season feels like the desert dust. Both seasons can be brutal, nevertheless both seasons have their enjoyable moments.

There are variety of languages spoken in Lagos, but the most common languages are, Yoruba, Igbo and English. Another dialect that is spoken in Lagos and mostly across west Africa is pidgin English. Pidgin English "is a mixture of English and local languages which enables people who do not share a common language to communicate" (BBC News, Nov

College Started: After Gwendalyn Brooks

Donal O'Flynn

2016). The city in Lagos I grew up in was very busy. It's like New York City; it never sleeps. What I miss more than anything is the food and the snacks. Yes, some types of foods are still able to be prepared and very few snacks I'm still able to get here in the United States, but it doesn't bring the same enjoyment. Most of the foods are made from fresh products from the market which makes the food more authentic. The fresh fruits, vegetables, leaves used to prepare authentic meals are grown from the ground, which is why most of the meals are healthier. The markets are the best, it's like entering a whole new world. The markets have a certain type of smell, that unforgettable and recognizable smell of fresh fruit and vegetables, brand new clothes etc., just by perceiving it one knows they have arrived at a market. The sound of the little chit chats between customers and sellers, the hollering from sellers urging you to buy their product brings an overwhelming feeling at times, but it's something one can get used to. There are various things being sold at the market like food, fresh fruits, clothes, shoes, jewelries, etc. These things are usually expensive, but here is the exciting part: one can always bargain for a lesser price, which is something that can't really be done at the grocery stores or malls here in America.

Lagos has always been and will always be a place I call home. All the things Lagos is made of, good and bad, have contributed to my life experiences growing up. My experiences in Lagos weren't always the best, but I have learned to appreciate it because it has shaped me into the person I am today. However, Lagos isn't the same way it was since my family and I moved; a lot of changes have happened, and still happening. The government system keeps getting bad and politicians continue to engage in fraudulent acts with the money of the citizens; prices of products are increasing daily, and there is an increase in police brutality. Though I haven't gone back to Lagos since my family and I moved, I can't wait to go back. I have always been able to stay connected through my memories and social media.

We wake early. We
Open to p. 30. We

Earn A's. We
Labor days. We

Read to sleep. We
Textbook, me.

Playland from the Past

Morgan Torossian

An unframed photograph sits on my dresser collecting dust, the date “May 10th, 2003” printed in pen on the back. The picture shows an older man and woman with two children on each lap, a smile cheek to cheek on every face. The woman is covered in blue from head to toe, the color accentuating her curly red locks. She wears a navy-blue tank top, blue and white striped button up, and light wash blue jeans. She accents the look with gold hoops, rings, and a watch with a dark brown leather strap. The time ticking on her watch stands still in the photograph. On her right sits a man wearing glasses big enough to spot each ant feasting on the ice cream melting on the concrete below him- the ruined dessert another victim of a bright-eyed child. He sports a tan collared shirt, invaded by black and white stripes. On his bottom he wears black suit pants, looking dressed up in comparison to the others in the photo. The little blonde girl rest comfortably on the woman’s lap. Pink “admit one” tickets are spilling out of her denim overall pockets as she obliviously smiles at the camera. Her orange undershirt clashes against the woman’s blue attire. A young boy, evidently a bit older than the blonde girl, wears a red shirt with grey cargo shorts. He smiles with missing front teeth. The boy is holding a miniature red flag that reads “Hoffman’s Playland”.

Behind the family of four is a tattered wooden rollercoaster. The drop is no bigger than fifteen feet, yet as loud as a thunder clap in the dreary depths of April. There is excitement, anticipation, and regret on the faces of the children strapped into the ride. A mass of middle-aged beings are flocked at the gate of the popular ride, shielding their eyes from the scorching sun itching to capture the rollercoasters departure on film. Slightly to the right of the family is a food stand. The building is blue and white with a multicolored tent hanging over the ordering window. Inside are two women working, the desperation of clocking out taking life in the sweat running down each of their foreheads. There is a boy standing alone in a black short sleeve shirt and basketball shorts, big enough to swim in, ordering what looks like a snow cone. He is standing next to a trash can whose lid is in the shape of a clown’s head, the mouth acting as the garbage chute. The rubbish-filled clown laughs at the solus

boy who has sadness written all over him, as if he is the unwanted ending to a seemingly happy story. The boys back is turned to the family of four as they pose for the camera.

The photograph captured the day I went to Hoffman’s Playland with my brother, my gaga, and my papa. The picture is a reminder of one of the last few times I spent with my grandparents before they got sick. My grandparents were my best friends. Losing them was like getting caught in a hail storm with no umbrella. Cold, painful, and out of my control. Overtime, the memories we shared fade. My heart desperately grabs onto these moments in hopes of never letting them go, but the pain of losing the people I love causes me to let them slip from my grasp in order to protect myself. As the picture continues to collect dust on my dresser, so does the vacant space in my heart that my grandparents once owned.

The Lakeside

Megan Hale

The cool crisp air whips at my face and hair. Goose bumps raise on my exposed arms. I knew it was going to get cold. Why didn't I bring a jacket? I know why. It's because I can't stand to be in that house any longer with her. I have dated a lot of girls in my short life, but I have never come across one as creepy and controlling as Mindy. I just can't wait to be able to get away from her.

Ever since I was little, the lake has always been my happy place. The calm water sloshing onto the cool wet sand. The wild life that flourished around it, filling the vast open area with life. I just love everything about lakes. When I booked this getaway, I immediately fell in love with it when I found this lake.

I booked the getaway because I thought it would be good for Mindy and me. I thought we would be able to work out our differences without having all of these distractions, but now I see that there is nothing I can do. The girl I fell in love with is not who I thought she was.

As I walk down the path, the stiff grass crunches under my sneakered feet. The lake's metallic smooth surface grows ever closer. I shut my eyes and breathe in deeply. The cool air fills my lungs and takes away my stress when it leaves. Listening carefully, I try to make out the sounds around me, but I pick up on nothing. That's weird. Lakes are never this quiet when I go. They are always filled with life.

Reaching the beach I notice a figure of a woman standing at the water's edge. Thick fog looms on one side of the lake. It slowly drifts along the lake's surface. It kind of reminds me of a scene from a horror movie.

Once I reach the water's edge, I scan the area for the woman, but she is nowhere to be seen. Weird. Breathing out a heavy sigh I plop down onto the cool wet sand.

"Caw!"

Jumping up from the ground, I turn in the direction of the crow, but it's nowhere to be seen. As I try to sit back down, something in the fog catches my eye. It's the figure of the woman, but how? My eyes fix on the figure trying to make out any other details about her, but the fog limits my vision. The longer I stare the more my mind wonders. Who is this woman? Why is she here? There is no one around for miles.

Before my mind has time to react, I feel myself kicking off my shoes and walking into the freezing water. Digging my toes in the cool sand, I try to stop myself from moving, but it's no use.

The water reaches up to my waist now, but I keep moving forward. Glancing down, I notice that as I walk the metallic surface doesn't break. What's going on? Glancing back up, I notice that the figure is gone. Spinning around I try to find my way back, but the fog has surrounded me on all sides. My body begins to shake violently. I'm not sure if it's from fear or the freezing water, but one thing is for sure, I need to get back home. Mindy will be worried if I'm not back within a half hour. Lord only knows what she will do if I'm not back.

Leaning forward I begin to swim my way back towards shore. I am a pretty strong swimmer, and I think I can find my way back to shore. As I move forward I feel something pulling me backwards. My kicks grow stronger and the pull grows stronger. It feels like my feet are stuck in gum and I can't pull away from it. Snapping back to my starting point, I glumly look at my feet through the clear water. Nothing is attached to them, and nothing is wrapped around my ankles. Then why can't I move? Tilting my head back upwards, I feel something grab onto my leg. Snapping my attention back down, I am met face to face with a snarling Mindy. Her red painted nails dig crescents in my leg. Fear makes me want to kick her off, but something keeps me frozen in place.

"Come with me Jack. You're all mine, and I don't want you to forget it." Mindy says with a snarl.

Her nostrils flare, her eyes have turned a bright white, and her teeth have morphed into sharp points.

The unseen force loosens a bit, and I take advantage of the chance and kick furiously away, kicking Mindy or whatever she is in the face. A cry fills my ears, but I don't stop swimming. My body is frozen with fear, but I keep pushing forward. Suddenly everything freezes in place. Confused, I try to move my arms and legs, but I have lost all control over them again. The sucking feeling comes back, and my heart races. Turning back, I see Mindy standing on top of the water drawing me closer to her. I want to scream and kick my way out of it, but I can't. I am frozen in a swimmer's pose with a mask of fear plastered on my face.

"I told you that you are mine. Mine and only mine, and I want us to be together, always," she says as she pulls me towards her.

Her icy hands glide up my sides as I move towards her. Once my head reaches her, she flips me over and leans down towards my face.

"I'm going to show you what forever feels like."

Serene Escape

Astrid Fuentes-Dimas

I rest my head on my pillow and succumb to slumber. In a dark room I lay, and the only thing I feel is the floor. As I search for a way out, I feel the wall and trace the wooden grooves with my fingers. Finally, I feel what seems to be a doorknob. A light kisses my skin, and I am welcomed with a fresh breeze. A wonderful landscape lays before me, tall green grass, and an array of colorful wildflowers surround the land. In the distance, a mountain range that seems to run for miles as it wraps around crystal clear waters rises into the landscape. I am holding an empty woven basket. I step onto the soft grass and the door disappears behind me. The aroma of fresh flowers fills the air, and the birds above me warble lullabies. I make my way to the water as the breeze dashes through the nature around me. I do not know what I am doing here, but I am filled with pure bliss and appreciation of life.

There is a crescent beach before the lakefront. The sand is a shade of beige and grained smoothly. I pick up a shell, the only one in the vast beach and admire its shape and color. The shell enfolds itself and is an ombre of white and rose pink. I press it against my ear and hear waves crashing on rocks. As I hover over the crystal-clear water, I see colorful stones decorate beneath the rippling water. I desire to take a stone with me, but I never do. Instead, I lift my blush-colored tulle and lace gown and step into the water. I begin by slowly dipping my toe in the water before going in. I walk farther into the water until it meets my knees. The water is warm but fresh, and I can see small fishes and more stones around me. I let go of the dress fabric and it tumbles into the water. I admire my dress in the mirroring lake. It is a sweetheart neckline decorated in ribbons; the sleeves hug my arms and puff at the sides. I feel as if I have worn it many times; however, each time I feel like it is my first time wearing it.

I walk back to the beach and then to the grass and flowers. In the distance, I see a curved roof garden house with glass windows and walls. Inside is an “m” shaped channel flowing in front of the flowers and foliage. The sound of the water flowing is relaxing and peaceful. The flowers reside near the walls leaving a space in the center. There is a dainty white garden table and chairs, with a fruit bowl and crackers. I look up to see rays of sunshine through the heavy spade-shaped leaves hanging over the garden house. I am alone in this land, but I never feel lonely. The sun is beginning to fade into sunset, so I return to the field and lay in the grass and flowers. Embraced by the wind and the smell of flowers, I hear water splashing in the distance. Nature embraces me with its song.

The atmosphere persuades me to close my eyes. Right when I rest my eyes, I open them to see myself back in bed with the morning sun shining through. I am mesmerized by this delightful dream, and grateful to experience such grace in nature.

The Jaded Living Room

Lomie Blum

The beige, brown, and tan colors of my Bubbe’s living room conquer the space like a sandstorm; suffocates me. The room smells of the seventies, doused in cheap pharmacy perfume, old cigarettes that still reek even though she quit smoking decades ago, and cats even though there hasn’t been a cat in the house for years. In the center of the room, there is a brown and white hospital bed. Though the color scheme matches the room perfectly, it looks very out of place. Adjacent to the bed, there is a wall that is a gallery of memories. There is a row of four framed newspaper articles she once wrote, a photo of her deceased husband who I never met but have instilled a deep knowledge of because of all the stories, and photos of family and friends. There are also paintings from around the world that always scared me when I was little and several Jewish artifacts. My Bubbe’s past life is plastered on a wood-paneled background. Her present life is represented by a rented hospital bed. To the side, inches away from the bed, there is a long coffee table underneath the wall that holds trinkets given to her and more photos of family and friends. There is always the fear she might trip on that table one day, but the photos and random objects of life before make her happy.

My Bubbe’s gigantic metal desk, which is five feet to the right of the hospital bed, has a giant sticker of The University of Texas splattered against it. She is going to be buried in El Paso one day, next to her husband she tells me about. His black and white grin as a young man stares at me before I go to bed. She would often spend her days at that desk working on several different things for her synagogue or for newspaper associations despite being in her eighties. She always insisted on working hard as a distraction from herself. However, today was a rare occasion she was in the other room watching Law and Order: SVU eating chicken wings. I could hear the noise of the TV sneak in from where I was. This episode was on murder, as I could hear the shrieks of a woman with her life about to be taken. I can also hear my Bubbe’s outrageously loud chewing as she gobbles on a piece of chicken.

Behind her desk is a wall of books collected over several decades from great writers like Truman Capote, Erskine Caldwell, and Joanne Greenberg. There are also shelves dedicated to books on the land of Israel and the preservation of Zionism for all eternity. I amble across the grotesque coral rug towards the 80s leather chair, and as I walk I can feel my feet stick to the ground. This gruesome rug has never been clean my entire life. I sit in the chair, and I feel the tight leather caress me. I think

Excerpt from Rastrasz's Choice

Nigeria Jenkins

of all the summers I've spent here while I look at the photos on the table. There is a photo of me and my Bubbe when I was little and she was younger. We are both grinning out of delight. She in her trademark blue pants pulled up over her stomach and I in my tan shorts. I remember that we were going to the Children's Museum that afternoon like we did every summer. We stopped going a couple of years back because I matured out of it, but also because it was getting harder for her to walk.

I sit with the thoughts of my Bubbe, my feet desperately avoiding the coral ground. I remember a call on the phone with her, when she told me "all my friends are dead, Mary Tyler Moore is dead, I am dying." This statement always shocked me. I curl up in the leather chair's awkward embrace like receiving a hug from a creepy uncle. I hear my Bubbe coughing grotesquely loud in the other room. I try to distract myself from the noise, but the hospital bed seems to gawk at me with this hideous and uncomfortable wool blanket that some distant cousin crocheted for her strewn on it. The fear of aging has already taken over me at the tender age of 16. In this room, there seems to be no today, tomorrow, or yesterday but a continual motion until one day it will just end. I always overthink in this space. My eyes then lay on her record collection across the jaded room. The records are placed accordingly by genre with show tunes on the far left and country on the far right which are on mini shelves next to the entrance of the house. My Bubbe was a reporter and music critic a long time ago. She always tells me how she met Johnny Cash and The Beatles but how she hates rock n'roll. Maybe she was always old, even in her youth.

I hear a rattle, and I see my Bubbe grasping at her gray walker with a tray attached to it. She announces that she is going to take a nap. She stumbles in, mumbling to herself things like "Oh my." She smiles at me and notices my presence even though she is practically blind. I smile at and admire her. I excuse myself and hug her. As she lays on the hospital bed, ready to go to sleep in the space I spend my summers.

A light breeze swirled through the treetops as the dawn crept on the horizon. The dewy scent of Green Tide was in the air as the southern birds that had left during White Reign returned to the thawing forests, searching for food for their growing families. Within the Ruby scaleguards den lied the sleeping dragons, resting ever so peacefully except for one spry male. Young Raviel was bursting at the seams with excitement because today was a day of utmost importance to him. He shimmied to his paws and with cat-like gracefulness, slinked over the sleeping scaleguards, careful not to tread on anyone's tails, slinking out of the den once free of the layers of sleeping bodies.

Managing to sneak out of the den was easy enough but he had to get past his father and the Dawn patrol, however the camp was still and silent, signifying that the Dawn Patrol had left this early morn and that appeared to be a good sign for right now. Raviel took a sharp breath as he quietly slithered through the camp and out the gorse entrance. Once he left the confines of the camp, he felt like he could finally breathe as relief washed over him in waves which then turned into excitement. Finally, I can see my beloved Zephyr, he thought blissfully as he trotted through the territory with a blissful longing, her sweet, captivating scent on the wind.

Raviel's excitement was replaced by a shivering dread as a horrid screech echoed through the woods like a Griffin screeching as its last breath draws near. He darted through the forest, his heart pumping and thoughts racing. 'Is my beloved in danger, is she in pain, could it be that time, and so soon?' He blindly raced through the overgrowth with his heart pumping a thousand miles a minute. That screeching would more than definitely attract the attention of the Dawn Patrol and if Zephyr were caught in their territory it could spell trouble for both him and her. As he drew closer to the river, the screeching had crescendoed and the scent of the Dawn Patrol had grown in intensity but, something of an unsettling nature hit his nostrils...it was the reek of blood. His heart was in his throat and his stomach dropped as the scent of the viscous liquid hit his nose. 'So strong, could I be too late, Am I too late to rescue her, did the Dawn Patrol kill her already, what am I running for if the former is

We wasted our whole lives for you

Hailey Lupian

true?' Raviel charged through the wooded area quicker than a stampede of angry bison, flattening the plant life underneath his massive dragon paws.

As the river's shore came into view, Raviel burst through the surrounding undergrowth with a blind determination. His eyes darted around the seemingly empty area faster than a deer mouse darts across the forest floor trying to escape sight. The blistering pained screech rang out through the area which heightened Raviel's anxiety. He tilted his snout in the air to find any scents carried on the wind. To his relief the Dawn Patrol had not come through here yet, but Zephyr had. 'Oh, my sweet Zephyr, where are you, what's going on?' He began frantically searching around for his beloved with the screeching rattling the area.

His dread fizzled out and once again, waves of relief washed over him as the screeching was replaced by the chirps of a newborn chick. He rounded the large sunning stones along the riverbed and there she was, licking and nuzzling the small vermilion babe in her forelimbs. He was so small, but he was spry and full of life, their son. 'Oh, my sweet Zephyr, I apologize for not being here by your side while you were in unspeakable amounts of pain, but I am here for you know and I promise to you, and our son, that no matter what happens I shall protect you, whether you are part of the Ruby Brood or not.' Raviel gave Zephyr a gentle lick on the forehead before gazing down lovingly at his newborn son. His heart swelled as the wyrmling's radiant emerald eyes met his. "Welcome to the world Fremod...my son."

Winter had come to the seaside town. All of the townsfolk were fine with the winter weather, except for the old man who lived in the lighthouse who despised the cold. No one knew how he started living in the lighthouse, it was just a known fact among the townsfolk. Just like it was a known fact that many years before, he was a world-renowned captain. But the old captain hadn't aged well. His skin was as white as the snow and salt that covered the shores, he kept a watch over. His eyes were bloodshot and red as his scarf he wore. His skin wrinkled like he had soaked in the sea his whole life. No one really knew why he looked the way he did, but they had theories. The oldest citizens of the town thought he cried himself to sleep every night because he was lonely and had no family. The middle-aged folk thought his years of being a captain at sea drove him mad with cabin fever. The children thought he was some sort of ghost of the sea. But legend said the real reason is that every night he pays for the crimes he committed at sea.

The old captain never spoke with anyone when he went into town. He'd go every morning with the same red scarf that hung from his neck, the cold cutting through his clothes, chilling his bones. Most of the time he was found muttering to himself about some woman he once knew, and he knew that the townsfolk whispered about him any chance they got. The old captain knew of the rumors that blew around with the cold salty sea wind. In response to the cold whispers, the old captain pulled his hat down and his scarf up to protect him from the cold and whispers that he so despised. He just trudged through it all and made his way back to the old lighthouse he called home. He had more deadly problems to deal with than a few gossiping townsfolk.

No one knew what the old man did by himself in the old lighthouse, but they knew that he never left unless he had to. When he did leave, he looked worse each time he went into town.

The nights got colder than the day. The waves crashed more, and the winds showed no mercy. But at the lighthouse, there were many paranormal sounds that only the old resident could hear.

The sun had set, and the old captain laid in bed waiting for their arrival. Soon the wind and chills arrived at the old man's home. He shivered as he

wrapped himself tighter in his covers. Then the doors and cabinets opened and slammed, startling the old captain awake. Sharp nails dragging across the wooden floors marked their arrival at the old lighthouse. Then anything not nailed to the floor flew around the room. At the foot of his bed the spirits rose, one by one to face their victim. They hissed their chant and it caused the old captain to shudder.

“You loved me once, Sylvester. I wasted my whole life for you!”

Each voice was a high pitch shrill that fell onto the old captain’s ears. The old captain grew weary of the spirits’ nightly visits.

“Every night. Every night, you come and haunt me! You come and throw my things! You come and never let me sleep. I have had enough of this. What is it you want?” The old captain yelled.

The women’s voices became one shrill booming voice. “What you have taken from us, Sylvester, can never be replaced!”

As the spirits of the women grew in anger, the room grew chillier.

“I have taken nothing from you spirits. It is not my fault you naive women lead your lives with foolishness.” The old captain’s voice was harsh and unforgiving.

The room grew even colder, causing the floors to shrink and crack. The floors started to pop making the captain wince in pain due to the loud pops of the wood.

“You are a selfish man, Sylvester! You have no love in your heart. You have taken our lives, filled them with empty promises, hopes, and dreams. We shall now take yours!” The women yelled as they surrounded the bed.

Sharp teeth bared and nails sharp they started to encircle the old captain. The old captain’s face filled with fear. His body trembled from the extreme cold.

“Wait!” he yelled.

Surprisingly, this stopped the spirits from coming any closer. The old captain had to think fast.

“You beautiful ladies don’t want to do this,” he said in the sweetest voice

he could muster. “You ladies are good women with good hearts, you don’t want to do this. I mean, killing a helpless and defenseless old man is not in your ladies’ kind-hearted nature.”

The old man could only hope that his plea has touched the restless souls of the women. The oldest spirit and Sylvester’s first “love” spoke.

“Very well, Sylvester. You have convinced us. You have until tomorrow night to protect yourself.” Her voice was soft but stern.

The old captain nodded, understanding. Luckily, he knew exactly where to go. Then the sun rose in the east and the spirits of the women went back to their restless slumber, till the next night when they would rise again. The old man rose from his bed and got his scarf and made his way to church. He was ready to seek holy help. He banged on the church doors.

“Sylvester? I’m surprised to see you, my son. What can I do for you?”

“Father, it’s the lighthouse! It is possessed by angry spirits. I can’t sleep anymore, Father you must help me!” The old captain looked insane begging the pastor for help with spirits. And maybe he was, but the old captain knew this was his last chance.

The pastor’s face was understanding and he put a hand on the old man’s shoulder. “I will help you, my son. I shall meet you tonight.”

The old captain calmed at the holy man’s touch. “Thank you, father. Thank you,” the old man whispers. Relieved he heads back to the lighthouse to prepare for the pastor’s arrival.

The pastor arrived just before sundown. He was armed with nothing but a cross and some holy water, but the pastor felt in his bones a mix of shivers of the spirits and the cold salty sea air. He knew the old man was outmatched and there was nothing he could do. But he had a holy duty to do. He then knocked on the old lighthouse door.

“Father, thank you for coming. I’m looking forward to sleeping tonight,” The old man said with a breath of relief.

“Of course, my son. Let’s get started, shall we?” the pastor hid the doubt in his voice well.

The holy man sat in a chair next to the old man's bed and prayed. As soon as the sun set the room grew colder and things started to fly around the old man's room. The shrill voices came back. "You loved me once Sylvester, I wasted my whole life for you!"

The pastor held up the cross over his head and yelled at the shrill voice. "You shall leave this pure man be! You must go to rest, you are not welcome here!" the pastor yelled as he threw holy water.

The spirits took the forms of the many young women. Then they began to laugh collectively. Cold and empty. It sent shivers down the men's spines.

The oldest of the group piped up. "Dear pastor, you honestly can not tell us he is a pure man worth your protection. He has spent his years of voyaging wooing each and every one of us. He promised us lives at sea and that he would return. We wasted our entire lives as single maidens waiting for his return. No family to mourn our deaths, we died alone and heartbroken."

The pastor's eyes grew wide and he turned to the old man. "Is this true, my son?"

The old man peeked from under the covers he took shelter in. "Father, it's not my fault that they were foolish women waiting for true love. I didn't love any of you! I loved the feeling of being wanted, and having them all throw themselves at my feet like I was a wealthy king."

The holy man lowered his head and his voice grew dark and cold. "I'm sorry, my son, but I can not help you." The pastor made his way out of the old lighthouse. Before he closed the door he said to the many women. "Dear ladies, do what you have to do to get the peaceful rest you deserve." With that, the pastor closed and locked the door behind him.

No one knows what the spirits did to the old captain, all they know is that he was found one morning, hung by his very own scarf. Legend says you can still spot the old captain on the shores he once walked on.

The Yellow Monster

Sophia Lenigk

Every weekday morning, I stood by the road on the top of a gentle hill and waited for the school bus to take me from one unfamiliar place to the next. I was ten years old, left to live in Germany with my grandparents, and attending school; even though I could not speak more than a few words of Deutsch. With my cousin's aid, the first step for me in getting through each uncertain day was to face the bus. It was a bright yellow and common-place vehicle, yet, in the beginning, a spike of dread often accompanied its appearance.

In the early mornings, when the mist was still lifting off the hills and wide patches of farmland, my cousin and I walked together up the hill toward the point where the bus would pick us up. The point was unmarked, simply a patch of flattened grass beside a lonely, paved road. We waited across from a field where cows grazed, raising their heads occasionally to "moo" into the still, chilly air. The gentle breeze made the long blades of grass along the edge of the fence rub together with a soft, shushing sound. A few silent minutes passed before I caught my first glimpse of the bus: as yellow as the color a child would use to draw the sun, driving up the road toward us. Like a grandparent winded from the efforts of the climb, it slowed as it crested the hill and stopped with a shudder that I felt within me too. I took a step back away from the bus and the empty windows that stared back at me.

Up close, the yellow of the bus was not shiny and spotless but splattered with countless specks of dust and dirt that formed a thin layer across its surface. There were two sets of doors on the side of the bus, one in the middle and one toward the front, and the glass panes were smudged with fingerprints. The bus looked worn from many journeys, and it crossed my mind once that it would not be so bad if it ceased to run and let me skip the trip just for one day.

But with a soft creak and thump, the narrow doors swung back on its hinges and folded away to the sides. Now, the entrance to the monster's insides was open. The tall, rectangular mouth gaped, waiting for me to walk naively into it so the bus could swallow me whole. There would be no way out, just like there had been no way to avoid being left behind in Germany.

I had no choice but to approach and climb up after my cousin. I put my first foot down on the metal step and grasped the cold metal rail that led up the side. There were two steps, and then I emerged into the front of the bus. Only a few people occupied the rows of seats, their heads bent towards the screens of their phones. No one paid attention as I boarded. My shoes squeaked softly against the ridged flooring as I followed closely behind my cousin; she sought a seat and swung herself down. I sat beside her and took a deep breath. From up inside the bus, looking out the large windows, I suddenly felt larger.

I rode the bus every school day until it was time for me to leave the country I had just begun to know. I had started out dreading the approach of the bus and the place it would take me: a school full of people I did not know, a language I did not understand, and countless potential mistakes to be made. As the weeks passed, however, boarding the bus became less and less daunting. The bus always traveled the same route, but along the way, I was changing. My fear of the unknown was shrinking every day, until I could walk into the yellow monster, and not be afraid.



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