

FICTION / CREATIVE NON-FICTION / POETRY / VISUAL ART



**MARIPOSA LITERARY
REVIEW**
Spring 2023

Volume I

Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who participated and assisted in the creation of this year's Mariposa Literary Review journal. Special thanks to our creative and technical contributors.

Literary Design Winner

The Adobe Indesign students are given the challenge of creating individual designs for the issue. The committee may choose one design or combine designs to create the book. One student was selected this year for his creative and colorful design. Congratulations **Christian Vazquez**.

Mariposa Literary Review Committee: Erin Blomstrand, Analicia Buentello, Rod Freeman, Joel Arthur, Jimmy Fike, Alex Pompa, Linda Keyes

A special thank you to the instructor of the Adobe Indesign class, Jim Heinrich.

Awarding Judge Bio

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ARE YOU READY?

Andre Angeles

“There’s nothing here.” he thought wiping his eyes in disbelief. But as much as he rubbed and blinked, he couldn’t see anything. There was literally nothing. A void, vacancy, he wasn’t even sure if he could take a step without falling-- if there was even anything to fall from.

“Are you ready?” The voice growled.

He jumped and turned, a dark figure stood in front of him, wrapped in a black shroud, nearly blending into the darkness around them, only a long bony finger peeking out from under the sleeves provided some comfort in at least knowing where it stood.

“F-for what? Where am I, who are you?” he responded, regaining balance. The continuous darkness made it difficult to orient himself upright, as if lost deep underwater struggling to find his way to the surface.

A chilling sensation washed over him, like an entire winter’s worth of blizzards and snow storms all hitting him at once. The figure did not respond to the question, nor did it have to, he knew where he was.

He stumbled back in complete shock, he attempted to shake himself out of this nightmare. Over and over trying to press his mind on the logistical explanation for this, what was making him dream like this? Was it because of the lack of sleep? Was it some unresolved trauma coming back to haunt him? Why was his brain playing this horrible game with him?

His name was Jeremy. A 32-year-old man who, while unmarried had a girlfriend who he planned to propose to on the day of their tenth anniversary. His family was wealthy, but despite this he had a modest upbringing. When he was in high school, he accidentally killed a dog when he was driving under the influence of alcohol, resulting in him being too anxious to allow himself to drive from that point onward. While he also swore off drinking, he picked up a habit of smoking regularly to help deal with his anxiety. When walking home from his job as a grocery store clerk he would put on headphones to make the walk a bit more pleasant. His apartment was only a few blocks away from his work, so it was an on average a 20-minute walk. Each footstep he took was unintentionally on beat to the music, sometimes he would catch this and intentionally try to stay off beat, just as a means to distract himself from this drab lifestyle he had become contemptibly content with. He had done this so many times that it was routine for him now, eventually being able to let his mind roam elsewhere while his body auto-piloted its way to his apartment building.

It was a warm summer night, and a stray dog had found its way to Jeremy, wanting to be noticed it ran around him and barked to get his attention. Jeremy was in his own little bubble, looking into the light-polluted sky wanting to be anywhere but where he was now, which was currently stopped at a cross-walk, waiting for the red hand to stop flickering and let him go home already. A 2008 Chevy was rolling into the intersection preparing to try and out-speed the yellow light, but seemingly out of the blue, the driver was surprised to find that a dog had pranced its way directly in front of it. The driver quickly swerved to avoid it but ended up hitting the traffic light pole with Jeremy being sandwiched between the two. When the ambulance came, they reported that the entire left side of his ribcage was crushed. His arm was holding on by a few muscles on the shoulder, but worst of all the intensity of the impact had turned his clavicle into an arrow, breaking off its tendons and shooting

through his lungs and directly into his heart.

Jeremy snapped out of his train of thought, and clutched his chest, hyperventilating and knowing for certain that he did not come home that night.

“There’s gotta be a way back. This can’t just be all there is, right?” Jeremy pleaded at the figure, asking that he be given a second chance, that his death was too surprising, too unfair. But the figure said nothing.

It slowly raised its arm, the sleeve rolling back and revealing the entire hand, completely skeletal, the bones milky white. The clothes it wore were tattered at the edges, showing just how old this being could be. Its hand stretched towards Jeremy.

“Are you ready?” it asked again.

“...What is this?” He was confused, he always thought that death was a definite thing, that when your heart stops and your brain ceases activity, you die. So why was it asking if his reply wouldn’t matter?

“No, I’m not 'ready.' I want to go back.” He wanted to see if he could provoke it into reacting in some way. But again, the figure did not respond.

“If you’re just waiting for my answer, then I guess we’ll be here awhile huh?” Jeremy tried his best to make himself comfortable, preparing to wait for something to happen. He wasn’t sure if anything would happen, but it’s better to be here than anywhere else.

For a while they sat in the void, the figure was stiff as a board, undeterred by the cold, still air. Jeremy however was not so happy with his current living arrangements. As the seconds ticked by dread began to set in, the more time had passed the surer he was that his entire life really was taken away in one fell swoop.

“Are you ready?” The figure’s voice broke his meditation.

“No. Stop asking that.” He gnashed his teeth and turned away. He felt the need to storm off in a random direction just to get away from them, but at the same time being annoyed is better than being truly alone.

Maybe It wasn’t because he was dead, maybe it was how he died. After all, he didn’t have anything to do with his own demise. It was simply a stroke of bad luck, really bad luck. Anyone would agree that It’s an unfair way to go, a death that is worthy of a second chance, a chance where he can really go on and do the things that he didn’t have a chance to previously. If he was alive right now, if this was all just a dream, then his whole life would change from that moment on. He looked over his shoulder looking at the figure who remained still as death is.

“What do I have to be ready for?” he thought to himself. “For my life to be judged? For all existence to cease? Death isn’t a fair thing to deal with, it’s sporadic and definite. It doesn’t choose who dies, it just does. Is it cynical to be okay with death? Not like denying it will make you immortal,

but what or who would I want to live for that wouldn't die on me like I have for them?"

Jeremy continued to ponder for a long time. It was hard to tell for how long, could have been a few minutes or it could have been an entire life time. Either way, that same question had rung in his ears once more.

In a calm tone, never malicious, nor gentle, the figure asked, "Are you ready?" Its hand once again outstretched,

Jeremy took a deep breath, turned towards them offering his hand. "I think ...I think I am."

WHEN THE RAVEN CALLS

Rose Sweetalla

Plates and silverware clinked against each other in the sink. Filling it with mildly warm water and soap, she set about cleaning. Plucking a plate from the water she scrubs away at the grime plastered to the off-white porcelain.

"So I was thinking we meet with Rachel and Maxi at Oregano's around 5. Then we start bar hopping, maybe around eight-ish. Early enough to avoid the creeps, but not too late to not get drunk," Danielle prattled on in the background.

She was draped over the sofa in the living room, scrolling aimlessly through her social media. Her chocolate brown irises scanned each post she scrolled past. Occasionally she'd tap the little heart icon on a post from a friend or her most recent stalk.

"Who's the DD tonight?" Cas wondered, grimacing at the scum layered fork she picked up. Disgusting.

"I think it's Maxi's turn to be DD," Danielle answered with a hum.

"Maybe we should call an Uber instead" Cas hissed in pain, jerking her hand out of the dirty sink water. The knife she had picked up dropped back into the sink, disappearing into the suds. Hidden once more.

"Fuck," Cas swore lightly as she held her bleeding hand. She'd picked up the knife by the blade and ended up slicing into her palm. Grabbing a gray towel to wrap the bleeding wound with, Cas went to yell at Danielle to fetch the first aid kit when she heard the peculiar sound.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

It came from the window just above the sink. Sitting on the sill was a raven, feathers darker than night. It tapped on the glass with its beak, almost as if it wanted her attention.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Cas stared at the bird. It was odd. All noise seemed to be drowned out around her. In that moment all she saw was the raven. Red eyes staring into her soul. It almost felt as if it was calling to her. Waiting for her to reach out and touch it.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

And she wanted to. She really did. Her finger itched to reach out and caress the glossy black feathers of the bird. To feel how smooth they actually were. How soft. Surely the bird would let her. It seemed as if that's what it wanted.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Long forgotten was her injury. Her bleeding hand still wrapped in the gray dish towel and cradled

to her chest. Slowly she reached towards the glass with her uninjured hand. The raven let out a caw, almost as if it was encouraging her.

Go on... do it...

She could almost hear it say, its eyes gleaming a mischievous red. The color reflected in her own. A cool wetness seeped from her eye, slowly sliding down her cheek. She barely noticed.

A ringing was starting to grow as she stared longer and longer into the aby-

"CAS!" the shrill scream of her roommate startled her out of whatever trance she was in.

"Hey! I asked you if you were okay?!" Danielle said, now sitting up on the couch and watching her with concerned eyes.

Cas reached up and wiped the wetness from her eye, glancing down at her hand before plunging it into the sink water.

"I.. I... uh... shit my hand... I cut my hand on a knife in the sink," she said, the stinging in her right hand reminded her of the still bleeding injury.

"Shit girl, why didn't you say something! I've been trying to get your attention for the last two minutes," Danielle scolded as she leapt from the couch, her dark curly afro bouncing from the movement. "I'll get the first aid kit, keep pressure on that. "

Cas watched her roommate disappear down the hall, muttering to herself.

She drew in a shaky breath and turned back to the window, looking for the black bird that was perched there.

But the raven was gone. All that was left was the dark stillness of the night.

AN IMMIGRANT'S STORY

Nayeli Castro

July 4, 1996. I remember that day like it was yesterday. That night was the night my life changed forever. That was the day I knew nothing would ever be the same. Sometimes, reminiscing about that day still makes me ecstatic and tremble at the same time. It takes me back and reminds me that your life can change with one wholesome decision you make wanting to better your life situation. To this day I remain humble and try to make the best decisions I can for my family and I. Our story starts here...

I am the second to last child in a household of eight, three brothers and four sisters. Growing up I only had my mother. I also had a father but he was in and out of the picture. My mother would always try to make ends meet with my siblings and I. Whether it be to put food on the table or to even put clothes on our back at times. I remember my mom would always tell us "Un dia vamos a salir de esta mald-ita pobresa hijos se los prometo" which in English translates to "I promise that one of these days I will take us out of this misery". I would always tell my mother "Tranquila madre, todo a su tiempo," "Keep calm mother, everything has its timing." Over the years things started to get more and more difficult. My mother wasn't as young as she was and she was also getting tired of working but she couldn't stop. She still had more kids to provide for. I remember telling her one day, "Me voy ir para el norte ama aver que pasa alla;" "I'm going to take a trip to the north mom, let's see what it has to offer," My mother told me I was crazy and to this day I still might be, but I believe I did what I had to do in order to try and make it out.

Years went by and I met the love of my life, Gloria. At the age of twenty-one and twenty-two we decided it was time to tie the knot and make a life together. Life was great, I was recently married y como me gusta decir "todo enamorado" ("all in love"). My wife and I started our journey of life together and things started off great. We were both working so it was 'easy' one could say because it was just the two of us. With it just being us two we were able to provide more for our home. My wife liked nice things and to this day, she still does, but that's beside the point. Back in those days money was still tight and minimum wage was 20 pesos which here is equivalent to \$1.00 per hour. It was truly nothing, but again we had always tried to make ends meet with both my wife's and my income. With that we were able to save up some money and rent a house gracias a dios ("with the grace of god"). This meant that things again would slowly change. With a house comes more responsibilities, which meant I had to go out and look for a different job that paid more since rent was higher. I was able to get the job but things got more and more expensive. I was no longer able to provide as much and things were getting tough. By this time my wife wasn't working because she had gotten hurt at work and missed so many days they had fired her. She told me she no longer wanted to work and well that meant I had to start putting more work in and more hours in order to get paid more. At this time we had found out as well that my wife was pregnant with our first child. The day we found out was the most exciting day of my life. I knew my child was going to be showered with endless love from every-body, he being the first grandkid from our family.

As our family of two turned into three I had to now work not only for myself but for my child and wife. This meant that our one-bedroom house now had to turn into two bedrooms, which was more rent. Which I couldn't afford, so as a family we had to make ends meet with what we could to still afford living where we were. Unfortunately, this is where our life changes completely. At this time

they had fired me from my job, not because I didn't go or wasn't doing my job but simply because the owners went bankrupt and the owners couldn't pay us anymore. I knew I had to do something in order to change our life situation. At this time I had heard that things were going great on the north side (USA and they were taking people to work in the fields. I was skeptical at first but I knew I had to risk something to provide for my family. That night I sat down with my wife and talked to her about what was going to happen. In that moment she reacted, told me I was crazy, and that she wasn't going to let me leave. I'll admit it: I laughed a little and told her she was crazy for not letting me go but as well understood the circumstances we were in. I can't lie, I was scared to leave my family behind but I knew I had to do more for them and myself.

It was May 4, 1996 when I decided it was time to make the decision and part ways for the first time to better our life. That day I gathered everything I needed for the long journey ahead of me. That night one of my uncles who had already crossed over to the US before told me "ya está listo el coyote al cruzar ahí va estar listo para recogerlo;" "the coyote is ready he will be waiting for you once you cross over." In that moment everything felt so surreal. I was very skeptical because anything could happen. I'll admit I almost chickened out. There was no going back from this. My uncle told me that same night, "Acuerdese hijo sin miedo al éxito y todo es para mejorar la vida" "Remember son, without fear of success, everything is to better your family and your lives." The following day, I woke up to find my wife was already awake. I believe it was 3 in the morning. She explained to me that she could not sleep, so she was up all night. We sat down and had a cup of coffee one last time together in the same household. I reassured her I was going to come back. I was just going to work, make some money and come back. An hour went by and it was go-time; I picked up my backpack kissed my wife and said goodbye and let them know everything was going to be okay. My uncle that morning was waiting for me so he could drop me off to where everyone was so we could start walking. I knew things were destined to be great.

Days after the journey became heavy and long. I was kind of regretting it at this point, but like I had stated previously 'there was no going back,' As we all kept walking (because we traveled in groups) the people in the very front and the very back were in charge of looking out for border patrol. As soon as we would hear something we would scatter and try to hide. I believe this was the second and a half day that we were walking that everything was sailing smoothly. Until... we saw the lights go on one of the trucks and someone yelled, "LA MIGRA!!!!!!!" We tried to scatter like wild chickens but in a blink of an eye we were surrounded by border patrol. At that moment, I felt scared and lost hope of everything. Right then and there I didn't know what to do, but all I could do was put my hands up because I knew it was all downhill from here.

Once I got to the facility, the border patrol right away started searching. From head to toe we were patted down just to make sure we weren't smuggling drugs. That followed with being interviewed and we were asked a lot of questions. Once I got done with my interview they sent me back and told me to wait. I sat there for about six and a half hours waiting to see what was going to happen. I asked around the other families if they knew what was going to

happen but nobody knew. After a couple of hours continuing to wait I heard my name being called.

The border patrol officer instructed me with what was going to happen “Senor, lo vamos a regresar por donde vino” “We are going to return you from where you came.” I was so relieved but still disappointed I could not cross over to the US. I got taken to a bus station where they told me to buy a ticket and get going. I knew I had gotten the easy way out but everything happened so fast I just couldn't take in everything all at the same time. I did indeed buy my bus ticket back home and went on with my day.

I arrived home a day after. My wife and child were so ecstatic to see me but as well knew that something had come up. We sat down for dinner that night and I explained everything that had happened. My wife with tears in her eyes said, “Vez viejo, por eso no quise que fueras uno arriega mucho en cruzar la frontera a pie,” “ You see, this was the main reason I did not want you to go. Bad things could happen and imagine what we would do without you.” I told her she had nothing to worry about anymore because I was home. As days went by I did what I could and got a job at the ladrillera working with cement blocks trying to get money in order to provide for my family. I left my family with money; don't think I just left them to fend for themselves. Bueno, time went by and I was still left with the urge to go back just so I could do more for my family and I. Truthfully, I was not happy just giving my family the bare minimum but it was what I could do for them. We were very limited as to what we could have. Gracias a dios, we always had food on our table and clothes on our back. We could not complain.

Fast forward to about mid-June, we would hear from family and friends that there was an opportunity to get a visa (working permit) in order to cross over and work. I was again very skeptical because of the stories that I would here. I also heard that they were being taken away from a lot of people as well. I remember my wife talking to me about it one afternoon while I was on my break.

“Viejo, y si hacemos un ahorro y sacamos la visa?” I told her that if she really wanted to that it was only going to be me who got the visa. She told me that we should all get it, but I told her no because it was her and my child. I wasn't going to risk anything happening to them. We did what we had to do and got to saving just for my visa. I was again willing to risk everything for my family and give them the life they deserved. I went to what we call ‘El Consulado Mexicano’, which is basically where you would go to get paperwork done for a passport/visa. I waited seven-plus hours just trying to get everything situated and I was there since seven in the morning. It was around 4 o'clock when they had finally called my number and I filled out paperwork, did my fingerprints and went on. They let me know that it would be ready within a week and a half. So I waited, anxiously not knowing the outcome but was hoping for the best.

I went on with my life working everyday that I even forgot that I had to go pick up the visa or see if it was even ready. I took a trip back to the Consulate and there it was waiting for me to get picked up. I was so nervous and ecstatic at the same time, I could just imagine the reaction my wife would have. I got home but I did not tell my wife anything at the time.

She asked me, “y como te fue?” “How did everything go?”

I replied with, "No me dieron nada;" "they didn't give me anything." I could tell she was down in the dumps, but of course I had to control myself by sharing the good news. That same night she put my child to sleep. I told her I needed to talk to her.

"Que paso viejo? No me asustes;" "What happened? don't scare me."

Out of the pocket of my jacket I pulled out my Visa. She looked at me in shock and started crying. Typical of her.

"Ya la hicimos viejo," "We did it! You're able to go now."

We stood up and hugged each other. We knew that this was the only way I was able to do better for not only us but my child as well who was four at the time. Days went by and I talked to my uncle again, the same one that helped me out the first time. I explained what happened and he congratulated me. He later went on saying that whatever I needed he was willing to help out with. I thanked him and went on to tell him that I needed him to get the coyote for me, which again would be waiting for me on the other side (being the US) ready to take me to my sister-in-law's house since they were already over there. He told me how much it would cost and that he would do what he needed to do in order to get over safely. From this point on everything seemed to be moving so fast I was nervous but very faithful this time around.

The day came where it was time for me to head out on my journey once again. This day was July 3, 1996. I remember my uncle dropped me off where he had taken me the first time and all the flashbacks came back but I knew this time around it was going to be different. I pulled out the rosary my wife had given me, and I went on praying and putting my faith in God that everything would be alright. As I continued to walk during the night I didn't know exactly where I was, but I knew I was going in the right direction. I heard random sounds of explosions which scared me because I thought it meant something bad was going to happen. I was wrong, not about the sounds but about something bad happening. I knew I had made it because those sounds were fireworks. I was so confused but I saw that the fireworks were red, white, and blue. My eyes widened and I had also seen the American flag. At that moment I knew I had made it over and was officially in the U.S.

From this point forward it was go-time from here. This is most of what I remember the rest is history. I'm glad that a couple of years after I was able to bring my family along and create life here and try to live out "The American Dream." Thank you to a handy dandy little book I was able to live out the life I wanted for my family and I. This is my story and I hope people are able to see that with faith and God by your side anything is possible along with the help of family members. Never back down and always remain humble; you never know what circumstances come with life.

TO CHALLENGE DEATH

Astrid Orris

A hooded figure stood, chanting in an incomprehensible language. The scent of incense hung in the air as delicately arranged candles burned on the edge of a perilous mountainside cliff. Symbols drawn with rose petals and powdered bone evoked a heavy air that drew in the winds, forming a cyclone. Papers with incantations and rites flew throughout the air in a chaotic flurry as the patterns were lifted off the ground, swirling into a blood-red helix. The hooded figure tossed their own cloak into the helix, and a skeletal hand caught it. A humanoid stack of bones began to form, shrouded by flames and darkness. "Who is calling, and what do you want with Death?" an ethereal voice echoed out.

"I am here to plead with you for the return of a loved one," the person replied. "My name is Matthew, and I seek the return of Annie to my side."

"You seek the return of something you love? Brought back to the mortal coil?" Death asked, a rasp in its voice. "You could just kill yourself and go to them, you're aware."

"I would much rather have her here," Matthew responded.

"Fine, fine, I get it. I was hoping it'd work at least once," Death said, exasperation exuding from its voice. "So, are you aware of what I want? I want a challenge, as my eternal service has rendered my job boring and my time to practice immeasurable." Death snapped with bony fingers, bringing a host of skeletons to its side. "So, what do you want to play?"

Matthew pulled a spotted mat from his backpack, along with a spinner and a page of rules.

"Death, I challenge you to a game of Twister."

"That's a new one," Death said. "Give me the instructions." Death extended its hand, beckoning Matthew to place them within its clutch. It rolled up the paper, shoving it into its own eye socket, shaking its head slightly to get it in further. "Alright... I understand how this works. Very well, Matthew." A column of flames arose from the ground, searing off the cloak from Death and revealing a skeletal body in a tight jumpsuit, leg warmers, and a sweatband with a fiery decal on its skull. "You're on!"

Death summoned a sea of skeletons and carried Matthew to what seemed like a completely different dimension. The only light came from walls of flame that surrounded them, and the ground was composed of flattened bones. Matthew laid down the mat, patting down the edges to make sure it was as smooth as possible. As he did that, tiny phalanges grew from the floor. "They'll help keep it down," Death said casually. Death reached into the wall of flames, grabbing a soul that had been passing by. "You're in charge of spinning this thing," Death said while thrusting the spinner into its formless body. It clanged as it dropped to the floor. "Oh, no body." Death grabbed the soul and a spare skeleton, smashing them together. It then thrust the spinner into the poor soul's hands.

"Are the contestants ready?" the soul creaked in a hollow, tinny voice. Death and Matthew stood on opposite ends of the mat. They both prepared for their battle.

"Best of three," Death established. "If you win, I return Annie to the mortal coil. If you lose, you join her in death. Are these terms fair?" Matthew nodded his head. "Good! Referee, begin

the game!" Flaming letters descended from above the contestants, spelling out "ROUND ONE." The referee spun the wheel.

"Left hand to green," it groaned. Death and Matthew leaned down, placing their hands on different green dots. "Right foot to green," the ref said. The first turns went peaceably, with both contestants on opposite ends of the mat. This was unlikely to last, however, as the ref continued calling out directions. Soon, flesh met bone as Matthew was tangled up with Death itself. Its cold, ashy bones rubbed against Matthew's skin, providing a most unpleasant sensation.

"Left hand to blue," the ref called out. Death moved its hand to a blue sphere just underneath Matthew's body. Matthew looked around as best he could, trying to find a convenient sphere. His arm contorted and twisted as he lifted it from in front of his body to reach all the way to just below his back, as Death had cast his bony grip on the only other sphere within arm's reach. Death cackled as it watched, seemingly having a wonderful time watching Matthew struggle. Matthew found his position, a sort of weird stance resembling a folding chair.

The ref called out again. "Right hand to blue," it said. Matthew took the opportunity to immediately move his arm from what felt like a continent away to beside his body. Death, however, was in an unfortunate position. The only other blue spheres were behind Matthew's pretzel-shaped body, and it could not reach behind him while maintaining balance. Death tried as hard as it could, but thunked to the mat, clattering as bones dislodged and rolled away from each other. The ref rang out, sounding like a bell. "Matthew takes the first round!" it said with jubilee. Matthew himself collapsed to the mat not shortly after.

Death reassembled its bones, seemingly magnetically, pulling towards themselves. "A good showing for the first round," Death said. "Don't get cocky, though. That was only the beginning." Matthew was rubbing down his shoulders, his body sore from the impossible positions he found himself in. "Trust me, Death. I did not expect this to be easy. I'm well aware that to win against you is almost impossible."

"Flattery will get you nowhere... if you win." Death laughed to itself as it rubbed down its own legs. "If you lose, though, I might not condemn you to eternal damnation. Potentially."

"What would you do instead?"

"Condemn you to eternal apathy." Death began loudly laughing to itself as it stepped back onto the mat. "Get ready, boy. I won't lose twice in a row." Matthew got back onto the mat as well. Flaming letters once again descended from the heavens, spelling out "ROUND TWO". Death flapped its hands to dispel them faster. Death beckoned the referee to spin.

As the game began, Death cast shifty glances to its sides. Matthew's eyes, focused as they were on the mat, failed to register Death's odd mannerisms. "Left hand to red," the referee called. As Matthew and Death bent their bodies to match the shape, Matthew began to feel much hotter. He brushed it off, figuring that it was just exertion. "Left foot to blue," the referee said. Matthew swiveled his hips, and to his horror, noticed the wall of fire drawing closer towards the mat.

"What the hell? You're supposed to kill me if I lose, not during the game!" Matthew shouted, but Death pretended to not hear him. The flames licked at Matthew's face, and the heat caused him to be drenched with sweat. The referee spun again, body half covered in fire, although one would never be able to tell from the apathetic tone that was so deeply enriched in its voice.

“Right arm to green,” it said. Death placed its hand down and watched as Matthew struggled. The sweat on his body made getting traction very difficult, and he tumbled to the mat.

“This round’s winner is Death!” the referee exclaimed with a slightly monotone voice. Death stood up with an undeniably smug grin on its face, which was odd, as bones are not known for their expressiveness..

“What’s the matter? You look oh-so nervous,” Death taunted.

“The flames drew in closer, and you know it. Did you do this?” Matthew glared at Death, accusing it of cheating.

“Why, I’d never. I play by the rules, Matthew.” Death took on an innocent expression, despite being unable to emote. “You’re just accusing me because you’re scared of losing, huh? It’s the last round now, I don’t blame you. If I were a mortal, I’d be quaking!”

“You doubt my persistence, Death,” Matthew confidently said.

“Yes, yes, I figured you’d say something like that.” Death clapped his hands, and two chairs of bones erected behind the two of them. “A chance to rest, if you doubt my commitment to making this fair for you.”

“I’ll stay standing, thank you. Go ahead and sit, if you want,” Matthew said. He watched the bony throne recede into the platform he stood on and got to stretching.

“Why do you go through with this?” Death asked. “Time after time, you mortals come to me and ask to be reunited with things long dead. Relatives, friends, disco, anything. Why not just give up?”

“Annie is very precious to me. She was my solid confidant for the last twelve years. I am simply not ready for her to leave my life,” Matthew replied, taking breaths between sentences as he continued to stretch.

Death laughed to itself, amused at what it was about to say. It was barely able to croak out, “What, are you scared of, other dead people knowing you cried during a chick flick marathon?” between muffled chuckles.

“It’s not my fault they were sad movies! Sorry if you can’t see that,” Matthew said. He bounced to an upright position. “I’m ready when you are.”

Death scoffed as it got back onto the mat. Death watched as the flaming letters came down again, but quickly puffed them away with its breath. Matthew also got on the mat.

“Call it, ref!”

The final round began, and Death was on the attack. It used the first turns to rapidly approach Matthew’s position, crawling like a hideous spider, attempting to block off spaces with its skeletal body. “Left hand to blue.” Death had entirely surrounded Matthew by this point, confining him in a cage of bones. Matthew searched for a way out of this confinement, and found an opportunity straight through Death’s body. Turning its offensive against itself, he plunged his hand through Death’s ribcage, anchoring himself on the mat. They locked eyes in this mess of flesh and bones, and Matthew could see the fires of Hell in Death’s glare. Their lips were almost touching with how close they were, and the cold breath of Death’s lifeless exertions chilled Matthew’s body.

“Right hand to red.” Matthew moved his body in a painful, spine-twisting manner as he locked Death into place. Death began to panic, being unable to move with Matthew’s arm so firmly entrenched in its own body. With no way to move, Death spoke out. “I surrender. You’ve won.” Matthew didn’t budge. “You’ve won! Get off me!” Death shouted. Matthew held firm.

“MOVE!

NOW!” Death’s ethereal voice began to give from how hard it was shouting. Matthew stared Death in the eyes, unmoving. Death gasped and croaked as it tried to pull away from Matthew, but its body was trapped by the solid pillar of his arm. It wormed and struggled, trying every possible movement it could conjure with its horrific skeletal body. However, after minutes of exertion, Death sunk to the mat, exhausted and defeated. The referee shouted with joy. Matthew wins the set!” In frustration, Death broke the skeleton with its bare hands.

“You won, boy. You won.” Death started a slow clap, but it could barely contain the seething resentment it felt at being bested. It grabbed the mat, stuffing it inside its own body. “Here’s your dog. Go home.”

Death snapped its fingers, and Matthew woke up on the cliff-side. He looked to his side and saw Annie, his beloved dog. She was a strange mutt of more breeds than any one person could ever identify. Her tongue rolled out the side of her mouth because she was missing teeth. She had tear stains in her white fur by her eyes. Matthew picked her up and sobbed deeply into her fur as she stared blankly at her owner, unaware of all he went through to get her back. “Never leave me again, girl.” Matthew could barely get the words out between his deep sobs.

THE NIGHT STOP AT WILLOUGHBY

Megan Macias

He sat and watched for no start and no end,
The train sped with no remorse,
The night said It would never forgive.

Where dreams are lost,
And confessions bleed so coarse,
He sat and watched for no start and no end.

Willoughby was said to print one's lies
For all to breathe and see with no exact
source,
The night said It would never forgive.

Stepping from the platform promised
Man's secrets no longer hidden in an ancient
dorse,
He sat and watched for no start and no end.

But to say, "I visited Willoughby!" He would
seek,
Until man died to birth new life to a past
strongly endorsed,
The night said It would never forgive.

THE ALTERNATIVE

Susan Anaya

Mark Vega wants to die.

Lying on the bathtub floor, hot water streamed from the shower head, tears streamed from his eyes, and blood streamed from cuts on his wrists. Cries of anguish echoed off the peeling paint and dirty walls. His clothes were drenched, and his shoes were quickly filling with water.

“Why did she have to take the kids?” After another swig from the Jim Beam bottle, he threw it against the wall shattering it, leaving a bottle-size dent in the drywall. If she wanted to leave me, I couldn’t have stopped her, but why the kids?

While waiting for the life to drain from him, he appraised his surroundings. How fitting for me to die in this shithole. My mom didn’t want me, I have no friends, and now my family is gone. He closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep – to dream.

He had been a complete failure at life. His dreams were the only place he could go to escape from the entrapment of this life he had perpetually been forced to suffer.

The thrumming sound of the water hitting his soaked clothing grew fainter and the sting in his wrists faded. He remembered Catherine Bellamy. She was a short, thin girl who sat next to him in American History in the ninth grade. Her shiny blonde hair had always been fascinating to him – he could easily spot her even in the crowded hallways between classes. She was one of the nice ones. He wished that he had married her. She never would have left him and took his children away from him – then again, he never would have cheated on her.

He heard a crash in the living room just as cold blackness enveloped him.

###

“Tell me about these dreams that you have.” Dr. Smith looks up from his notes with his large round eyes that look two times larger behind the thick eyeglasses he wears. His round bald head and short, stocky body gives him the appearance of a gigantic turtle in a suit.

It’s been a month since his wife found him unconscious in the bathtub. Mark has never been to a psychiatrist before and would never have gone at all if he had any choice in the matter. The powers-that-be who ran the Hilton Hill Rehab Hospital hadn’t given him the choice. He liked the place. He had his own room and three meals a day. He hated the weekly group meetings, but the antidepressants that they put him on instilled indifference in him to having to be around others. He felt numb most of the time.

He sighed. “I’m standing next to a lake surrounded by pine trees. The air is clear, and the sun is shining.” He paused. “The seasons change from winter to fall to spring, but it’s always the same lake.” He closed his eyes to re-create the scene in his mind. “There’s a cabin in the trees, with a yellow light inside, and a chimney. There’s white smoke coming out of it.”

“And, as you say, these dreams of yours make you happy. Do you ever feel sad or lonely when you’re having these dreams?”

Facing the doctor, he says, “It’s the only time I feel like I’m worth something, the only time I feel invincible. And I want to live.”

The doctor closed the cover of his notebook and placed it on the table. He leaned forward, speaking softly. “I think I can help you, Mr. Vega. I have a colleague who is doing a study

on consciousness and the dream state. It's purely experimental at this point, and your participation is voluntary, but it would greatly help the medical community and possibly thousands of people in your situation."

Mark sits up, mildly interested.

"And what are the risks? I don't like pain, Dr. Smith."

"I assure you it's completely painless, Mr. Vega, and the risks are minimal."

"I'm listening."

Whispering now, he leans in closer. "Researchers are studying whether or not it's possible to transfer a person's own consciousness permanently into his or her dreams."

Mark sits back on the lounge. "So, what you're saying is that, if this research of yours is successful, I would be able to stay in my dreams permanently?"

"Yes, Mr. Vega." He smiles.

"So then, what happens to my body?"

"There are already more than a hundred volunteers, and they are housed together in a large medical facility on the east side of town. Their physiology and brain activity are closely monitored by top researchers in their fields." He looks at his watch. "It appears that our time is up, Mr. Vega. Why don't you think about it, and we can discuss it in more detail at next week's session." He stood up, smoothing imaginary wrinkles out of his slacks.

"Okay. I will." Mark shakes the doctor's hand. It's cold and clammy.

Dr. Smith followed him to the door. "Oh, and Mr. Vega –"

Already in the hall, Mark stopped and turned to face him.

"Our test subjects are very carefully chosen, and we wouldn't want any outside sources to interfere with this study, so I trust that you will keep it confidential."

He nodded. "Okay. See you next week. Thank you, doctor."

###

That night, the dream came to him again. The snow crunched under his bare feet and the bottoms of his pajamas were damp – he couldn't feel the cold, at least as much as he thought he should. The icy wind created a two-foot snow drift against the wall of the cabin. He stood outside, looking through the window, his breath freezing instantly to the glass. On a recliner next to the fire-place holding a cup of what appeared to be hot chocolate sat the girl from American History. Her legs were wrapped in a blanket and stroking the silky fur of a white cat sleeping on her lap. She was humming softly, and her voice was hypnotic. She was so nice to him back then, and he wants so much to speak to her and tell her what a kind person he thought she was. She looked the same, though now a woman with a few more pounds and fine lines around her kind eyes. He knocked on the window. She looked up, startled, mouthing words he could not hear. She stood up and he walked to the door, but before it opened, the dream ended.

He knew what he needed to do.

###

The next Wednesday, he stood outside the door of Dr. Smith's office and knocked.

“Good morning, Mr. –“

“Okay. I’ll do it.” The words poured out of his mouth before Dr. Smith finished speaking.

The doctor nodded and Mark stepped aside. He took the cell phone out of his pocket, hit a few buttons, and said, “He’s agreed.” He cut off the call, not waiting for a response from the other end.

“I’m glad you’ve decided to participate, Mr. Vega. I mentioned that this procedure is purely experimental. The results of these experiments could mean major breakthroughs in the treatment of suicidal patients. You have done a great service to the medical community, and you should be commended.”

He nodded at the smiling doctor, but he does not feel proud of his contribution to the medical community. He just wanted to get on with it.

A few minutes later, there is a knock at the door. A tall, thin man wearing white scrubs enters the room. Dr. Smith introduces them. “Mr. Vega, this is Dr. Jones. He’s the lead researcher for the University of Arizona’s Dream Project.”

He shook the tall man’s hand and Dr. Jones motions for him to sit down. “I’m sure Dr. Smith has already explained the process to you. I need to tell you that there is one major risk.”

“And what is that?” he asked.

He pauses. “You may never have the opportunity to come back.”

Mark blew out a breath he had been holding. He thought about his childhood and his abusive mother. He thought about his failed marriage and his children he may never see again. He thought about the emotional and psychological pain he had carried with him daily for decades, and his failed suicide attempt.

“Let’s do it.”

“Okay,” Dr. Jones said.

Dr. Smith pulls out a clipboard with a pen attached to a string and hands it to him. “We’ll need you to sign the agreement and authorization with your understanding of the consequences, Mr. Vega.”

He signs it without reading it, and hands it back.

“Okay,” Dr. Jones said. He pulls a card from his pocket. “Here is the address and phone number of my lab. I’ll make the appointment for next Monday to give you time to tie up any loose ends.”

“Thank you.” He shakes his hand. “I’ll be there.”

###

The knock on the window startled her. Pickles jumped from her lap and stretched on the small rug in front of the fireplace and went to the kitchen.

“Who could be out there in this cold? “Who’s there?” she asks nervously.

Mark’s bare feet crunched through the snow on his way to the doorstep.

The door opened. “Can I hel – oh, my gosh! Mark? Is that you?”

She sounded like an angel – the same as he remembered. “Hi, Catherine. It’s been a long time.”

She hugged him enthusiastically and he could smell the chocolate on her breath. She backed away and scanned him up and down. "What are you doing here in your PJs? You must be freezing! Come in and get warm."

He hadn't felt cold, but his skin tingled with the warmth from the fireplace. The room was filled with the homey smell of burning cedar. She wrapped a small blanket around his shoulders and led him to the recliner. She sat on the couch next to him.

"I can't believe it's you," she explained holding his hand, then paused. "Does this mean that you were part of the experiment, too?"

His eyes widened. "You know about that?"

"You mean the Dream Project?"

His mouth dropped. "You too?"

"Yeah. It's been a month since they took me out of the real world. How long have you been here?"

"About three minutes."

"Wow! And this place was your dream?"

"Yeah," he said. "And – you."

Her face softened and her cheeks flushed. "Oh, Mark! That's so sweet."

"What about you? Is this place your dream?"

"Yes. It was for a long time," she said. "It's where my dad used to take me when I was a kid, before he killed himself." Sorrow creased across her brow. "What about you? Have you been here before? You know – when you were back there?"

"No, I don't think I ever have. It's just a place that I've dreamed of since I was young. Until now, I thought it was some random image my imagination created to help me to deal with the ugliness of what my life had become, but now I'm not so sure." Enlightenment brightened his dark features. "Maybe I was always meant to be here."

The cat saunters back into the room and curls up on the arm of the recliner. He strokes the cat's fur, and he begins to purr. "This feels so real." He reaches out and touches Catherine's cheek. His body shuttered. He had forgotten how it felt to be in love – if that's what this was. He expected her to pull away, and when she didn't their eyes met. She looked away shyly.

"So, have you been alone since you got here?"

"Yes. I knew there were others out there, but I've not met any of them – until now. I guess their dreams aren't the same as ours, huh?"

He stroked the cat again, who had fallen asleep next to him. "I hope not."

###

Mark looked at the calendar on the wall – the first day of spring. After the hard winter that had just passed, he was thrilled to see that nothing was falling from the sky except sunshine, warm air, and the expectation of life renewing itself. The lake was still but for a flock of geese returning to their springtime home. He kissed Catherine on the cheek.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he said.

She flipped the pancake in the skillet and turned to him and kissed him on the mouth.

“Ummm - now that’s a good morning!” he said.

Outside, a low growl rumbled in the distance. They heard a rattle coming from one of the pictures in the living room. They both stopped. “What was that?” Catherine said nervously.

Mark pushed aside the thin curtain. On the opposite end of the lake, he saw movement behind the trees. He let the curtain drop. “Might have been a bear, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen one leave the ground like that before!” The room became hotter, and he broke out in a sweat.

Catherine’s eyes widened and a burst of fear engulfed her. “This is supposed to be our dreams. How – Oh, my God! It never occurred to me until now!”

“What?”

“What about our nightmares? Could they be here with us as well? Could they become real to us?”

“I don’t know. It makes sense, though. Just in case, do you happen to have a shot gun in the house somewhere?”

“No. I don’t like guns.”

“Yeah, neither do I, but a gun might come in handy right about now, especially if whatever that was decides to come around the cabin.”

Mark went through the back rooms searching for anything that could be used as a weapon. Catherine went through the attic. They were back in the kitchen in a few minutes.

“Nothing,” Mark said. He opened the drawer and pulled out a chef’s knife. He handed it to Catherine. “Here, take this. It’s better than nothing.” He opened another drawer and pulled out a meat tenderizing mallet and headed to the front door.

“Where are you going?” Catherine whispered.

“I need to make sure nothing is out there.”

The front door burst open with a crash, showering him with shards of wood. He fell back onto the couch, dropping the mallet. The cold wind blew out the fire, scattering ashes from the fireplace through the room. A large bear-like creature stood at the threshold. It had eagle-like wings on its back and claws that looked like they were made from stainless steel – knives. It growled and the sound vibrated the walls. It skulked towards Mark still laying startled on the couch, horrified. Catherine screamed from the kitchen.

Pickles suddenly jumped onto the beast’s muzzle, distracting it. Catherine grabbed Mark by the arm and pulled him into the back of the house and slammed the door. The sounds of furniture being crushed behind them grew louder. Pickles’ cat-like screeching quickly became a loud primal roar, overtaking the sound of the beast’s angry howling.

Mark and Catherine were trapped in the back bedroom. The window that used to be there was now gone and solid brick took its place, and the room was empty. Catherine yelled, “Oh, my God! What’s going on? We’re trapped in here!”

“We need to find a way to end this dream and get back to the real world!”

“But Dr. Jones said we wouldn’t be able to come back!”

“No, he didn’t. He said we may not have the opportunity to come back. He didn’t say it

was impossible. It was a study, an experiment.”

“So, what do you suggest?”

The fight from the living room was now outside the bedroom door. In a second, the door burst open. A white lion and the beast crashed through the plywood door. The beast was covered with blood.

Mark pulled Catherine into the closet and shut the door. They both knew it was just a matter of time before they would be killed in the frenzy. They held each other.

###

Mark woke up in the dark. He tried to stretch his arms, but he was confined to a small box-like structure. It was too hot, and he could not breathe. Panic filled him. “Help!” His voice echoed loud in his ears.

A muffled voice came from nowhere. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah,” said a woman’s voice.

“Help! Somebody help!”

“Oh, dear Lord! It’s coming from number one-oh-two!” said the man.

A loud scraping sound, then Mark saw bright lights.

“What the hell?! He’s awake!” said the woman.

“Oh, my God! Help me!” Catherine’s muted screams echoed across the large white room.



THE PECULIAR STAIRCASE

Annalia Cabrales

"It is said, she was abandoned at a young age. Neglected by the scar on her face. A birthing defect. Amanda Wallis. The name of the woman who tragically disappeared on a set of staircases that lead nowhere. She haunts these very woods looking for another victim. A sacrifice that will bring a humungous storm and wipe out anything and anyone in its path," so said, Jake. With undermining confidence.

Small pieces of ash flew into the air that blew slowly until they hit the ground. The campfire began to grow stronger. Suddenly, Ali giggled. Her face began to grin and she looked directly into Jake's eyes, "You can't be serious? The story of Amanda Wallis did not happen like that. Her abusive mother went crazy and scratched her face, and she ran away from home and never turned back. The reason why the stupid spiral staircase even exists is that somebody build it and never finished what they started." Ali turned to the group, "Come on guys, you think Amanda Wallis is some crazy chick who wants revenge so that she can build a big storm. Jake, at this point you just want to freak Marrisona out because she is scared of everything." Jake laughed.

"Anyways... Ignore the hater. As I was saying. Amanda Wallis had some kind of birthing defect and because of that her mother didn't want her, so she treated her badly. One day... Amanda woke up to her mother screaming and her mother chased her with a knife and scratched her a bit on the face. Amanda ran away into the woods sobbing in tears. When she found these very odd staircases that lead nowhere, it is said that once she reached the top she went into another dimension and never appeared again because she can't find her way back home. So, she is trapped on the other side but you can still hear her crying and you feel this chill like somebody is watching you. Like..... Amanda is there following your very next set of footsteps. And if you're a perfect match in her eyes. You will climb the steps and never appear again."

"I don't think we should be here anymore," said Marrisona.

"Come on it's only a story," said Ali. A big truck with bright headlights appeared. Marrisona stood behind Jake and then suddenly a voice began to grow louder and louder...

"ANY HELP AROUND HERE!", said Oliver.

When Jake wrapped his arms around him, the sweet smell of mango musk appeared. "WOW! Oliver nice scent. You need any help?" Jake began to walk to the back of the truck and pulled out a black duffel bag. It had flashlights, a night vision camera, batteries, rope, and a bunch of snacks and extra water.

After an hour of relaxing and laughing around, Marrisona, Ali, Jake, and Oliver came back to the disappearance of Amanda Wallis. Suddenly out of nowhere a breeze of cold air rushed in, almost blowing out the fire that was beginning to already die out. They all stared at each other realized one thing: Something here is not right. The leaves in the forest began to blow around into the dark. Hitting almost everything in its path. Oliver grabbed his keys and they all ran into the truck while the heavy air blows the rest of the fire out and the tents that had been set up since sunset. Oliver turned on his headlights and one tent flies into a tree deep in the forest and the other tent was barely holding on to the ground by a thread.

"So, what happens now? We can't just leave everything here. That's my dad's tent. He would kill me if I left it. Or even if I put a hole in it. I'm so dead when I get home! He barely let me go

out tonight.”, said Jake. The car stayed quiet and, in the distance, looked like a woman dragging her foot leading a path.

“OH...HELL NO! THERE IS NO WAY I’M GOING OUT THERE!!” said Jake. Oliver quickly grabbed his camera and began to film.

Marrissa quickly muttered into Ali’s shoulder. “I don’t want to be here anymore. I don’t feel good.” The woman in the woods disappears.

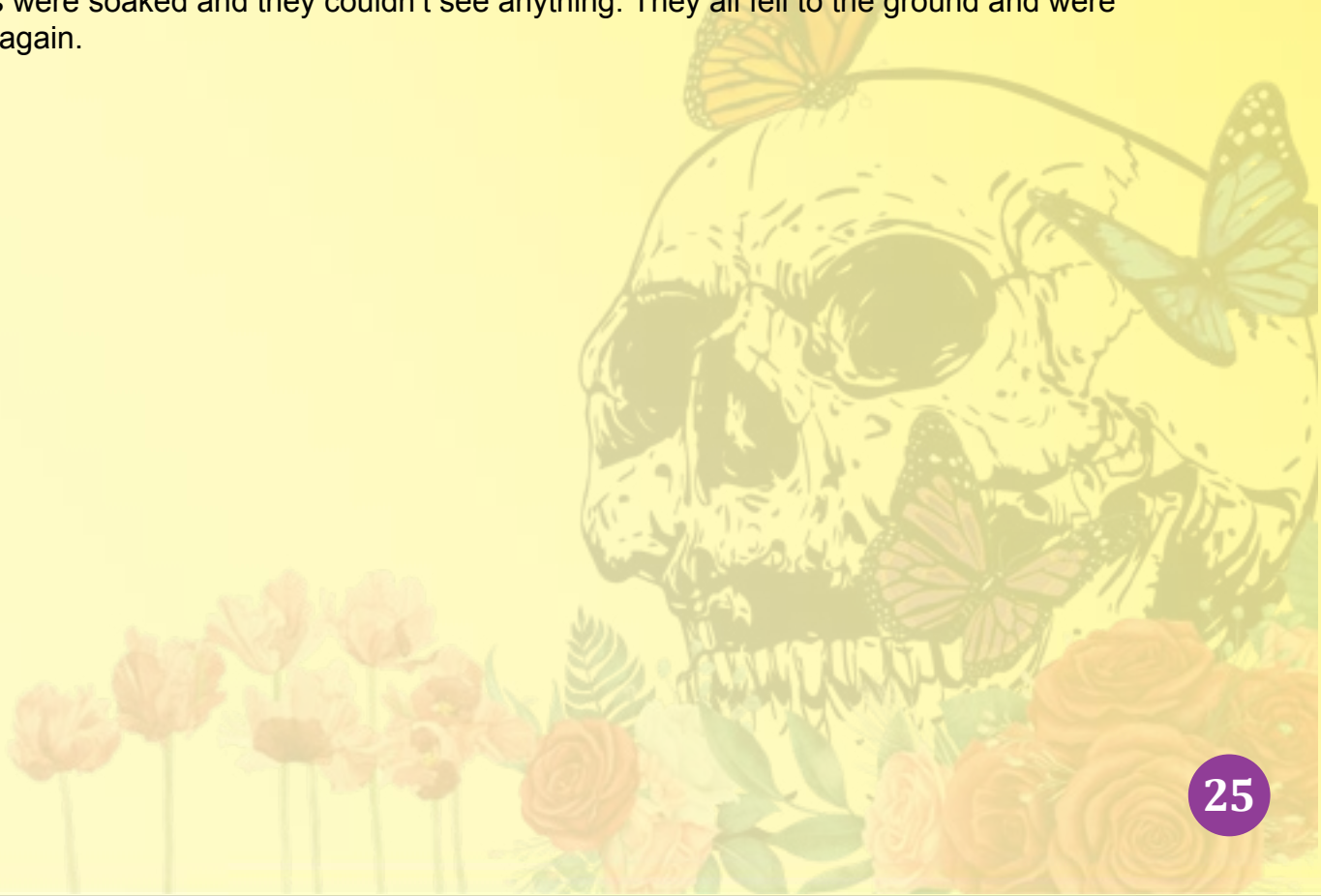
Suddenly Jake looks at Ali, “You still don’t believe me?”

“This is a campsite. This could be anyone,” said Ali taking a big gulp. They all stayed quiet again and waited till the wind calmed down. A couple of hours later Jake and Oliver began talking while Marrissa and Ali fell asleep. The car began to rise high into the air. Marrissa opened the door and jumped out. Once she touched the ground the truck came crashing down. She walked in the same direction as the woman from earlier.

They all screamed, shouting, “Marrissa! What are you doing? Please come back!” They all grabbed a flashlight and tried catching up with her.

“What is she doing?” said Ali.

Deep into the forest, there was no sign of Marrissa, but suddenly they bumped into a tall white spiral staircase. Marrissa is caught standing at the top of the staircase that leads nowhere. Then her eyes glowed bright and she lightly falls back where there is nothing to catch her but the ground. Oliver continued filming, the ground began to shake and a storm began to rumble. The teens quickly went to the other side to check on Marrissa, but she is nowhere to be found. Water droplets began to slowly come down and soon after it started pouring so heavy their clothes were soaked and they couldn’t see anything. They all fell to the ground and were never seen again.



THE PHONE

Ethan Garduno

RING RING.

“Huh? is that a phone?” I ask, struggling to keep my eyes open.

RING RING.

“It is; what is a phone doing ringing in here?” I ask myself while glancing around the pitch-black room, trying to figure out why there is a phone ringing in my room at such a late time. If it weren’t for my parents taking away my phone for my bad grades, I wouldn’t be so worried. Yet I cannot help but feel that something is wrong here. I attempt to get out of bed and turn on the light, but as soon as I hit the switch, I’m back in my bed under the blankets with a phone ringing in the background.

“What the hell wasn’t I just...

RING RING RING RING. My train of thought immediately gets interrupted due to the ringing of this random phone blaring into my ear. As I continue to look around, I still can’t see what is around me, all I can see is blackness; all I can hear is ring-ing.

“Am I still sleeping? Yeah, that’s what this is I’m just dreaming,” I reassure myself and close my eyes and try to change this eerie dream.

RIIIIIINNNNNNGGGGGG.

Destroying my eardrums, this enormous shock wave jolts me out of bed as if a nuclear blast had just entered my head destroying my hearing for a couple of seconds.

“Mom, dad!” I yell hoping someone will come save me from this hell I have woken up in, yet in return I got no response. Already standing up, I attempt to make my way to my bedroom door avoiding the cursed light switch.

“I’m definitely not going to turn on the lights, but since when did my room become so threateningly dark?” I whisper to myself while hugging the wall trying to find the doorknob so I can leave this prison.

JIGGLE JIGGLE

“Ahh there it is, huh? Why is it locked? This door never had a lock before...”

RING RING RING

“Again with that stupid ringing! Where is it coming from and why is my door locked?”

Out of terror and frustration I take a step back and slam my body against the door in an attempt to burst out of this prison from hell. A loud wood-breaking noise pierces my ears as I fall through the door onto the floor. Opening my eyes realizing I made it out of that dark hell I recognize this comfy feeling on my head.

“No, there’s no way. How is this happening? What is happening?” I begin to panic as I notice I am back in my bed under my sheets.

RING RING RING.

“Enough of that stupid ringing!” Annoyed, frightened, and frustrated, I jump out of bed and hunt down this devilish phone. Tracing my hands around all the furniture and objects I can remember and imagine from the many previous nights I have slept in this room I find nothing. Thinking to myself, “If I wait for the ringing to go off, I can track this phone down and bring an end to this miserable night.” Standing in silence nothing but my own breath is filling the room, I hear no crickets, no air conditioner and not even the house settling which is a very common thing due to this house being old. Coming to the realization that I am in this pitch-black room by myself I begin to pan-ic. Spinning back and forth trying to figure out what to do, why I’m here, and how to get out.

“Am I dead”? I ask myself as tears start to drip down my face mixing with the sweat I have been producing from panicking, that tastes full of fear and anger. Then, finally, I hear it, RING RING RING.

Paying attention to the location from where the ring is coming from, I notice its above me. Yet it's not just above me it's also behind me, and to the right of me and the left. “Why is this happening to me I don’t understand,” I scream out loud. As if someone or something would feel bad for me and answer my question.

As the ringing continues, I start to tear apart my room, ripping the mattress off my bed, yanking out the drawers from my dresser, throwing the clothes out of the closet hoping to hear a thud from the ringing phone. Yet there was no phone to be found and the ringing continues to revolve around me as if it's right in my ear but also many miles away. Throwing all the objects that I can carry onto the floor, nothing else is left to move.

I take a deep breath and think to myself, “My window!” I sprint to my window as if I was willing to jump right through it and fall to the ground from the second floor. I check to see if I can pull the locks out and swing it open. I move the curtains away from the window and reach for the locks. Unlocking the first lock my heart starts to race at the sight of freedom.

“I did it I’m finally going to get out of this terrible place.” Filled with excitement I reach for the second lock and look out the window. What I see in the opposite side of the window stops me in my tracks.

Nothing but darkness greets my eyes as if it was expecting my existence. Slowly unlatching the last lock, I push the window open, no breeze, no fresh air, still no noise.

“Even though its midnight I’m usually able to see the street from the lights posted on the sides, I can’t even see the moon light that usually sparkles through the tree, what is happening.

Suddenly one ring fills the room then silence, many seconds later another ring.

“These rings are different from the ones before,” I think to myself, looking around the room. “These rings sound physical as if they are coming from the top of my bed.”

I clumsily make my way to my bed which is torn and spread across my room. I grab my balled-up blanket and whip it to straighten it out, when a sudden thud emerges from my feet; one more ring fills my body from my toes to my ears. I look down to the floor and see this black phone with the screen emitting just enough light to view it.

“This thing looks a century old,” I think to myself. Taking my time to build some courage to pick this phone up, I take a big gulp and a deep breath. Slowly I bend down to pick it up, with my hands grasping it like I would a newborn puppy. With only one big green button, I hover my hand over the phone terrified of who might be on the other side of this screen. Sweat dripping down my face as my thumb reaches for the button, I hit answer. The ringing stops, everything goes silent as it once was before, I put the phone up to my ear and with a cracked, terrified voice I say, “Hello?”

A raspy voice responds, “Who is this? And why do you keep calling me?”

Soaked in terror and frustration I scream into the phone, "I keep calling you? I don't know what's going on or where I am, but this damn phone won't stop blowing my eardrums. It's so dark I can't see anything, and I can't leave this cursed room. Who are you and what do you want." As tears roll down my face thinking I just found my only way out of this forsaken hell, the raspy voice responds, "Oh so you're the next one, hahaha good luck, "Sam" you're going to need it." With nothing else said a click and ring follow the voice ending the call. Terrified with what he meant I drop the phone and run to the switch forgetting what previously had happened I begin to flick the switch up and down jiggle the doorknob to try and get out again.

Yet nothing changed, I break down the door again yet this time I don't fall through it. Looking past the shattered door is a bright white hallway, despite the brightness that is radiating off the walls I could find the source of light.

Looking around this hallway still in the bedroom door I start to realize, "I am dead." This must be the light at the end of the hallway that everyone sees, there was so much for me to do, so much to see, I can't be dead not yet." I turn around and look back at the now lit up room, I can see everything and it's exactly how it was destroyed from my previous out lash. With this light now illuminating the bedroom I can clearly see the phone on the floor in front of the bed. Looking back and forth from the lit hallway to the phone on the floor I decide to grab the phone before I leave. Looking around as I walk to the phone, I take a glance outside the window that was previously nothing but black; there is now a view of a dimmed street. Finally, as I reach the phone I bend down and turn it on. A locked screen appears on the face of this phone.

Curious, I put my pass code into it and the phone unlocks. Immediately I click on the call logs to see what number has been calling me. With the call log empty something catches my eye from outside the window, a tall shadowy man is facing my direction with a phone up to his ear. "Ring Ring Ring," the phone I'm holding begins to display an incoming call, hesitant and slow I answer the phone and lift the phone to my ear.

"Why do you keep calling, what's the point I'm already dead, stop trying to scare me I'm leaving," I yell at the phone as I'm looking at the shadowy figure outside the window.

"Dead? Leaving? Hah, don't be an idiot. Death would be too easy I love to mess with my meals before eating. Fear brings out the flavors of the honest souls," the shadowy man cackles into the phone sending shivers down my spine. I quickly look down at the phone and hang up, ready to run as fast as I can to the hallway I look back outside the window and the figure is gone.

Not wanting to find out where he went, I turn around and head for the hallway, but as I turn around the door returned.

"No NO NOOOO!" I yell as I dart to the door ready to run right through. When suddenly the door swings open. The shadowy figure emerges from the well-lit hallway from before, but it's now also pitch black.

"Stop please just leave me alone, why are you doing this?" Without speaking a word, the shadowy figure lifts his arm and points to me, still slowly walking towards me. He points to the phone that begins to ring. Shaking and dripping with fear I answer the phone and put it to my ear.

Hel...hello?" I say into the phone while watching the figure standing in front of me. The Shadowy figure's other hand lifts a phone to his ear.

“You smell delicious, I think you’ve cooked longed enough,” the shadowy figure responds as a grin reaches ear to ear.

As I let go of the phone I drop to my knees, “Please don’t do this I just want to go home.” I cry into my hands covering my face. Then suddenly light pierces the gaps between my fingers, confused and distraught I look up and notice my room is now lit up. Not from an illuminating hallway but sunlight. Shooting up from the floor to my feet I run out my room down the staircase where my family is sitting on the couch watching TV.

“Mom, Dad what the hell happened, where’d that man go?” I yell past my tears of fright and joy. Looking at the back of their heads, silence begins to fill the room. “Mom? Dad? Why aren’t you talking?” I ask. Slowly their heads begin to turn around and their empty eyes pierce my chest, their mouths slowly open, “Ring Ring Ring”.



HYDROGLYPHIC

Ryan Garner

These waters form a grand library.
Cumulonimbus clouds with hands like the librarian's
cupping calloused fluffy palms around the books,
liquid tomes of discernment, hidden, as hieroglyphs
before showering semiotic wisdom:

Waves, a bully, crush the child's sandcastle.
A dehydrated man crawls toward his death in the desert,
hallucinating one glorious, lifegiving drop of dew,
but a marathon runner splashes a cup in her mouth
spitting some on the ground to avoid cramping;
The rest evaporates, leaving a mark on the asphalt.

A rewarded gardener picks a ripe strawberry with wry grin,
her watering can feeds the next hungry plant
but an unfed tsunami decimates a small village,
crushing schools of children, hospitals of sick,
churches filled with the echoes of the sunken prayerful.

A placid pond is a piggy bank, ripples bend
greedily collecting skipping stones.
Overhead, the crescent moon's fingernail creeps in,
as it thumbs to another page of its lunar journal;
The label reads high tide.

(stanza break)

(stanza break)

A gulping, marooned man is drowned at choppy sea
consumed by it, voracious waves devour him and his life story,
a deep-sea diver recovers a corpse, lungs released from duty.
Elsewhere, a young boy gasps for air as he surfaces
and his swimming instructor proudly smiles.

THE STORYTELLER'S STORY

Natalie Elizondo

Marius and Aurelia grew up in a merchant's town. Sitting at the base of a mountain, the town had a steady flow of people, from the dirt roads that surrounded it as well as the river that split the town into two. Their father had moved them there after their mother died, retiring from his position in the King's army. Taking his fortune and his children, they traveled for eighteen days, by boat, by horse, and by foot, until they reached the merchant town.

Now, Claudius wasn't a normal merchant, he didn't trade in silks or gold, not in tools or weapons. He sold something better. Claudius sold stories. And in a place far away enough from the palace and its storytellers, he was very popular. He had a way with words, taking the audience to a different world with just a few phrases. Every time the man spoke, heads would turn and people would stop to listen, wonderment in their stares as they listened to how he twisted his words, capturing them and leading them back to their imagination. To the merchant town, Claudius was a relief from their daily hassles, and the stories a fine way to end a day, whether they be resting on their journey for a night or staying in the town permanently.

Marius had always thought some of his father's stories were a bit outlandish, such as 'The King that Slaughtered a Demon Empire'. Aurelia, on the other hand, loved her father's stories. Every night, without fail, she would join the audience to listen to the latest story of her father. She joined the others in their wonderment, entranced by her father, watching his hands, listening to the different voices he made.

Tonight would be no different, the two of them would go to listen to their favorite stories by their father, or at least they were going to. Marius had barely arrived to listen when Aurelia was up in his face, demanding to know where a snack he had promised to bring was. A simple little thing, Marius forgot between his classes and chores, but Aurelia threw a fit about broken promises.

Marius accused Aurelia of being childish, to which she accused him of having a stick stuck up his ass. All of this, in front of their father's audience, their shouting echoing through the streets.

Marius was already angry enough with his sister, but it was nothing to the pain when his father leveled him with a disappointed glare. He wasn't given a chance to defend himself before his sister told on him, and he fled to his room before anyone could stop him.

He didn't bother with a light, laying in his bed in the darkness as he glared at the ceiling. He wasn't going to apologize for what he said, even if his father didn't approve. Claudius often didn't approve of him and his actions and favored Aurelia over him most of the time. He knew what would happen next, his father would come home to comfort Aurelia and scold him for not being more mature when talking to his sister. Then, in a few weeks, the cycle would repeat again. The argument might change, but most of it would be similar.

"Marius," he jumped at his father's voice and looked over to see him standing in the doorway with a slight frown. Claudius stood there, waiting for an invitation to come in, and Marius looked back up to the ceiling to ignore him. "Do you want to tell me what happened tonight?"

Marius said nothing, pretty set on ignoring his father until the actual scolding started when his father took a few steps toward the bed.

“Marius,” his father sighed as he sat down on the bed, it dipping under his weight, “There is a story I would like to tell you,”

Marius groaned, rolling over to his other side, his back now to his father, “I don’t want to hear another story.”

“I know, I know. But I think you’d like this one.” His father spoke with a weight in his voice, and Marius started to feel bad for ignoring him earlier. “I know you’ll like this one.” His father corrected himself and took a deep breath. “But it’s a bit of a long one, you’ll have to forgive me.”

Marius didn’t say anything, just lying there, and his father cleared his throat. “Not too long ago, there once was a man named Claudius…”

Claudius wasn’t a strong man; he was the son of a teacher and a merchant in a wealthy city just North of the palace city. Not wealthy, but not poor, they lived a decent life with two children. Claudius had his own sister, just two years younger than him, Serena. They lived an easy life, with no problems to be found within their family, and they were given an education, with high expectations placed on them.

Now, Serena and Claudius were as close as two siblings could be. They told each other all their secrets, told each other their wishes and dreams, there could be no secret between them. When their parents started looking for potential wives for Claudius, Serena was the one to go out and meet them, know who they were and then tell Claudius about them. And when Serena was offered courtships, Claudius was the one who helped her decide if she wanted to consider her potential partners or turn them away.

One thing that the two siblings shared was their love of stories. Their father would bring tales from the lands that he traveled to, and their mother would tell them stories from her days as a scholar. Some by word of mouth, others written in old books. Their favorite was a tale of a hero who avenged their family by taking down an evil demon king, before going out to spend the rest of their life out at sea, exploring new lands and finding new people. Together, they fantasized about their family going on adventures, finding new lands, defeating evil, and dying of heroic deaths.

Of course, they knew that they were just dreams, and they settled into calm lives with nothing but the occasional complaint. Unknowing to them, that one-day things would change.

The year that Claudius turned of age, a disease spread through the city. It was deadly and effective, an innocent merchant bringing it in from a faraway land, it would start with a cough and less than a week later, would bring death to one’s door. Powerful and quick, it took out almost half the city before a cure was brought in from the same faraway land.

The cure was expensive, worth more than what gold could buy, and scared nobles quickly offered everything in their power to get it, even if they didn't have the illness. The merchant that had the cure, once upon a time being broke and humble, quickly became greedy, and demanded as much as he could from those noble families, taking their properties, their daughters of marrying age, family heirlooms, and more. He took all that they had for just a single dose of the cure.

Of course, no one could stop him. No one else knew the path to get the cure, so the merchant was the only one who could hire people and keep them in his power. He grew rich and owned most of the city's wealth when Claudius's father caught the illness.

They had nowhere near enough wealth to pay for what the merchant wanted for the cure. But, Serena had the beauty of a goddess and went to the merchant to plead for the cure for the sake of their father, whose illness had spread faster than the others. Within a day, the cure had been delivered to their family, but no one would ever see Serena again.

While their father got better from the illness, their mother went mad with grief. Almost losing her husband and then losing her daughter, she became a shell of herself, haunting their home with her cries for her daughter to return home. Their father, after recovering from the illness, realized the price of his survival and was unable to continue living with himself. It is unknown if he abandoned his family or his life.

Now, Claudius had already been enraged by his sister being taken away, and while he wasn't the strongest with a blade, he did have enough brains to come up with a plan for revenge. He waited, and his patience was tested, but four months after his sister's disappearance, the illness had slowly started to disappear from the city, and the cure was no longer needed so badly. He made his way in the dead of night, his motivation only heightened from the stillness of the city he had known his whole life being so still, so quiet. It haunted him, truly, the weight of all the deaths throughout the city had changed so much, so quickly. The weight of what he was planning would lift something from the city, he knew.

He made his way to the merchant's home. Oversized, the garden had fewer plants and more statues of the merchant himself, as well as ones clearly taken from other homes. There were no guards that stopped him, already drunk on stolen wine and mumbling pathetically against the wall. Seeing this only furthered Claudius' resolve, determined to get revenge for his sister and the many others who had died because of the merchant.

He had entered the mansion with no fanfare, his steps echoing in the empty corridors as he made his way to the master's suite. Candles were knocked over by his carelessness, lighting tapestries up in burning flames as he passed through doors. Even he wasn't sure if he ignored it on purpose or not.

He stopped for a moment in front of a large painting, of whom he had to assume was the merchant. It looked like a picture done for royalty, with gold flakes, smooth paint strokes,

and a golden frame, it glistened from the fire down the hall. Claudius had never met the merchant before, but the man in the frame stood tall and overly proud, arrogance in the pose caught by the artists. He wondered for a moment where in the world would one find a canvas of this size- there couldn't have been enough fabric in the world to make it so large. He picked up a candle and pressed it into the canvas and watched in numb satisfaction as the painting went up in flames. It would be a shame to waste all the fabric, but at least it wouldn't have to continue on with the life it held now.

As Claudius continued on his journey, he could feel the heat of the flames behind him, the smell of ash burning his nose, and the screams of guards, yelling to stop the flames and save their master. He moved quicker and found himself in front of a large door, with large golden accents, and a golden doorknob.

He kicked the door open. It slammed against the wall with a loud thump, awakening the man in the bed. Claudius entered the overly decorated room with a sword in hand, prepared to strike the merchant down.

"Who the hell are you!" the merchant was short, hunched over even as he tried to stand straight. He might have been handsome if his actions weren't known by Claudius.

"You took my sister from me," Claudius ignored his question and raised his sword up to the man, "So now, I'll take your life."

"And so, Claudius stabbed the man in the heart, and having no family to hold him there any longer, he freed the city from the merchant's clutch and left, traveling South and joining the king's army. Eventually, he could become a general, be married, and have two children, much like his own parents. But he never did find his sister, nor would he ever."

Marius didn't say anything for a long while, waiting to see if his father was done with his story, "So he gave up."

"The Claudius of the story gave up on finding his sister, yes. He had to take care of other things and could no longer live in the past. He still lives with the guilt, even as he tries to pass the bond he once shared with his sister onto his children." Marius almost rolled his eyes with the tone his father took on, obviously looking at him expectedly, even without Marius having to check. They both waited for the other to speak, but Marius had less practice and broke the silence first.

"Did you really burn down a mansion?"

"Oh, yes. As well as a church and a bit of a school before the fire went completely out. But that's not the point I want you to take away from this."

"I know that," Marius turned back over and looked at his father, "I'll talk to Aurelia in the morning, and apologize."

His father smiled down at him, clearly pleased that Marius didn't need to be told to do so, "I'm glad. Siblings don't always have to get along, Marius, just treasure them while you can."

SPACE

Alaina Nagy

Sometimes I get the feeling there is much more to life than what we think we know. How silly is it to assume that we know of physics and how the planet was born? Or how humans evolved, how the pyramids were built and how deep the ocean is...To think we are here for a real reason...To think we know anything at all is hilarious. Lou caught herself spiraling in her thoughts again, then snapped into reality.

“Hey, are you going to get gas? Or are you just going to take up space?” shouted the miserable gas station attendant walking towards her car. Too busy in her own world, Lou thought it best to act like she doesn't see him. “Hello... Can you go tweak out somewhere else, please? Seriously, you've been sitting at this pump for over an hour now,” yelled the attendant through the palms of his hands cupping his mouth. His hands looked like they hadn't been washed all day with dirt and grime under his fingernails. He wanted to go back to being alone in his little pod. A place of solitude where no one can bother him or annoy him or stress him out. Where he could watch videos on his phone and wait for his shift to be over. But there is a stranger taking that freedom from him. I just want to be left alone, he thought to himself.

After waiting for a response, he began to stride towards the loiterer. He tried to get her attention once again, from a safe distance. “And I've been watching you the whole time, you've hardly moved an inch,” said the attendant. He stared intently into the foggy windows of the car. Lou only moved to light another cigarette. No response from the stranger. Only a blank, unbroken gaze straight ahead. Curious to see what caught Lou's interest, the attendant took a look in the direction Lou was fixed on and there was just an empty parking lot. This pissed him off even more, but only because he was creeped out. He'd rather be left alone at the station like usual, than have a weirdo stick around and well... be weird. “I'll deadass call someone to tow your piece of junk outta here, with you in it,” he said with a bit more frustration. Getting closer to Lou's car, the attendant finally caught a proper glimpse of Lou. He noticed that the pale person loitering was dressed in all black wearing sunglasses at night.

I wonder why he's so mad. It's not like I'm doing anything bad. Actually, I'm doing him good by being here, right? So why is he being an ass? I bet they hardly get any business at this time of the night. Most sane people are usually in their homes snuggled up in bed by this time. That's the world we live in. If you don't stick to the routine, you're instantly suspicious. Maybe I am the weird one, but anything is better than being home... stuck inside the box that is my room. Lou justified herself.

“Don't fuckin' test me, I know you can hear me,” he said followed by a long silence. He cautiously walked up to her driver window which looked like it's never been washed. He stepped in a wad of gum on the ground which ticked him off even more. While wiping his shoe on the pavement, he pounded on the glass to get her attention which had been locked on the scene of the gas station straight ahead of her since the start of his tantrum. Never once did she look at him, even while he was threatening her. Her head stayed in the clouds. Then he stopped pounding and she noticed. He couldn't see much of Lou but knew that this person is most definitely on drugs or something. Either way, the stranger is a threat. He angrily walked away from her car and turned towards his little room that probably has a phone to call the po-

lice inside.

“Tsk,” Lou suddenly had a change of heart and decided to break out of her daze. She reached for the volume and twisted the knob, then for the window. In a circular motion she cranked the foggy slab of glass down just enough to see about eye level. This stopped the guy in his tracks. A bit of satisfaction washed over the attendant as he smirks towards the cracked window. He felt sorta like he won the argument. The attendant felt like he had accomplished something of value today. As Lou turned her attention towards the strange man outside her car, she removed her sunglasses and met his eyes.

“Finally acknowledging my existence, huh?” snarked the attendant. He was trying to hide the surprise in his face from realizing Lou is a girl, and quite a beautiful one. He noted instantly, her silky black hair that hardly reaches beyond the nape of her neck but falls down the sides of her temples. The type of hair that says “I’m in a band” or “I’m a lesbian,” or maybe just the type of hair for someone who flips it to one side one day and the other the next, nevertheless pretty hair. He also noticed her slender face with sunken coffee-colored eyes and long natural eyelashes. For a good minute after cracking her window, she looked up at him with curiosity.

Damn she’s kind of...so pretty, thought the attendant who couldn't come up with a better adjective. And I was... so mean to her. What is she doing here alone at night? Suddenly, he’s less angry. He felt as if she was staring into his soul and sort of making herself at home. Her coffee-colored eyes entranced him while also filling him with a sense of sorrow. She seemed so lonely. He strided closer to her window once again. From what he could see, her right shoulder peaked out of the baggy pullover sweatshirt she wore, the size a grown man would usually wear. It was a dainty shoulder with a girly collar bone to accompany it. Yet she didn’t wear a necklace to accentuate, more like a chain. A thick silver chain-linked necklet with a black rose charm at the bottom was worn by the girl who earlier looked like a drugged-out dude...and who now looks like a very sad girl. Her car suits her too. Tan leather interior with pretty deep scratches engraved. Most likely from years of wear and tear. The fabric on the ceiling was torn up and peeling but looked kinda cool to him. Wooden trim across the dashboard definitely aged the car, not to mention the roughed up burgundy exterior paint which was sexier driven by a twenty-ish year-old girl and not a creepy sixty year-old man. To him, the car is not much of a stretch from his own when it comes to quality, but at least it’s clean. Suddenly he felt the need to clean out his car. She finally broke her silence.

“Isn’t that what we’re all doing?” spoke Lou, looking at anything else but him. The snacks on the shelf behind him looked pretty delicious, cookies, chips, Chex-mix and shelled sunflower seeds. She awaited his response as she could practically see the cogs turning in his empty head.

“What do you mean?” asked the confused attendant. Her words didn’t make sense in context with the last thing he said to her. He racked his brain to understand what she meant. The attendant couldn’t understand why she was there, let alone making conversation with him.

“Aren’t we all just taking up space?” said Lou. She looked directly at him as she spoke. She had a deeply rooted sadness in her eyes while asking that question. They both paused to

ponder the question. The attendant started to review his current day-to-day life in his head. Search through piles of junk in the car for the brightly colored vest that is supposed to be worn for every shift. A few minutes pass until it is located. Then put it on despite the various mystery stains. Comb fingers through hair and drive to the gas station. Work 9-10 hour night shifts at the gas station and talk to no one of value. Pull up starving to some sort of fast-food drive through... anything that is convenient. Return to his shitty apartment shared with his 3 roommates, two of whom never leave their nest of a bedroom and the other who never comes home. Pass out with cereal or pizza or ramen in hand and try not to spill it, then sleep the day away. Maybe he will occasionally do his laundry. Then repeat...and if he has time in between, maybe he'll play some video games in the dark, and even pack a bowl using the light of the t.v screen and smoke the whole thing alone. But that's only if he has enough energy. Damn, I guess she's right, he thought to himself.

"I don't care about this conversation, you can leave now," denied the attendant despite obviously caring about the conversation. Lying through his teeth, he knew he wanted to hear what Lou had to say. Though short, it's the only real conversation he's had in a long time. The only time someone has actually given him the time of day that's not buying packs of cigarettes or ten dollars on pump two.

"Think about it this way," said Lou. She pulled out her carton of Marlboro Menthol Golds and plucked a stick out with her mouth. She lit the other end with a flip lighter and inhaled till she needed air. She rolled the window all the way down, exhaled the smoke and continued her thought. "Here I am, taking up the same space that you were once taking up all alone. Now here we both are, enjoying it together," said Lou. "Isn't it kind of strange how the world works? Don't you see how we created this moment together?"

She's gotta be on drugs, thought the attendant. He couldn't help but smile...she said she's enjoying talking to him, although that is most definitely not what she said. He leaned in closer to her car with his hand planted on the roof.

"And what if I just see this moment as a random stranger parked in my station not getting gas?" he asked. The attendant was entertaining her strange perspective on the world, sort of mocking her silly questions.. "What if this conversation means nothing at all and it is just two people who are bored at night with nothing better to do. What if we are just simply two people in a gas station... one of them was loitering and the other had to do something about it?"

"Well then, it looks like you have some spiritual healing to do," said Lou. "If that's how you see it, then that's your loss." She was bored with this conversation now. You can tell he's the type of guy who has never experienced the euphoria of making passionate love, or lighting a candle after cleaning the whole house, or just driving nowhere with no destination during the still of the night. According to Lou, his response lacks perspective. He's a non-interesting person. He's stuck in the matrix. He probably doesn't ever have an original thought cross his mind. If he can't think outside the box then it's a waste of a conversation to her. She will not be understood by just anyone, they have to be a deep thinker. Disappointed, Lou tucked the stray hair blocking her eye and stored it away behind her ear, ashed her cigarette and began to roll up her window. Lou smokes cigarettes, specifically Marlboro Menthol Golds (nothing else). It started because she wanted to

look cool but turned into an addiction and because of that... she now looks cool. Her right hand was steady on the gearstick, full of motivation to leave.

Despite wanting to leave, a thought flashed through her head that she would just be doing the same thing at home. Staring into the wall drowning in her own thoughts until she falls asleep. Then she would wake up again around 3-5 in the evening. She hits the front porch for her first smoke of the day. She will look at her fingernails while she does this or across the street at the neighbors house. If she's lucky... she will be visited by her favorite cat whom she will have a one-on-one conversation with. Then she has a toasted bagel... usually with cream cheese but if she's feeling healthy she will add avocado and even sliced tomato. The rest of her daylight is spent convincing herself to apply for a job and usually the persuasion doesn't work. If she is successful, that one task consumes most of her energy. She will take a nap out of a mixture of exhaustion and boredom. Then she will visit her usual favorite place which is the park by her house but occasionally it is the gas station. Either way... at some point after the sun goes down when she is fully awake, she leaves to escape the suffocating box that is her house. After having a good ponder in a different setting, she will return back to her room to ponder for the rest of the night. Maybe she'll listen to punk rock music or maybe she won't. She will fall asleep in her thoughts and then repeat another pointless day of pure nothingness. The two are more similar than they think.

The gas station attendant realized that being witty is not her cup of tea and he needs to take her questions seriously. She might actually be a bit more interesting than he originally thought. Mostly, he just wants to hear more of her odd questions, it passes the time.

"Wait! What are you doing here so late?" asked the attendant. He doesn't actually care what she's doing, more so just trying to stall. What am I doing? Earlier, I wanted her to leave and I was practically screaming at her so why am I stopping her now, he thought to himself. This question stopped Lou in her tracks and kept the car parked.

"I needed gas," said Lou. The attendant laughed out loud. He started to find her energy absolutely charming.

"Very funny," he paused and looked at her ghostly face. "So what's the real reason?" "Hmm," mumbled Lou. She thought for a moment about this. Why am I here? After considering her extremely unfulfilled life she came up with an answer. "I guess, I just wanted a place to take up space."

The silent chill in the air blew through the knotted long but thin black hair of the gas station attendant. What a strange response... but it makes sense. This person is intoxicating, he thought. After every word that escaped her lips, he couldn't help but want more. What is she thinking about? Why does she wear sunglasses at night? Why won't she answer any of my questions clearly? All these thoughts flooded his head at the sound of her voice. He couldn't believe that only a few minutes ago, he was threatened by her. Now she is the most intriguing thing that has happened to him in all of his shifts at the station... and maybe even his whole life. He didn't know how to respond to her, especially because it was kind of a somber reason to be there. The sadness she exuded is something he wanted to fix or just learn more about.

"Will you come again?" he asked. Lou remained unbothered. However, she did find it strange

that the guy who was screaming at her moments ago is suddenly so curious about her. She wondered what changed his mind. Was it because he realized I'm a girl, or possibly because I'm just a convenient way to pass his shift? Lou caught herself actually interested in someone. She has a habit of finding most things to be very unappealing. That is just how she is, not shy.. just bored. She does not see the purpose in many things, making her very nihilistic but also appreciative of the present moment. She sees the bigger picture which is that we all die in the end, which can be both a good and bad trait. This doesn't mean that she can't see the beauty in things, it's actually quite the opposite. Lou sees most things with a golden light surrounding it, but not strangers. They are irrelevant to her life unless they somehow peak her interest.

But this guy is different, she found herself curious as to why he is giving her attention and what type of person he is considering he can go from hating her to interested in no time. He was someone who actually made her question herself and consider something she hasn't considered before. He made her think. Maybe there was more to their meeting. Maybe he's not all that boring after all. Lou knew the answer to his question.

"Why do you need to know," she asked, prolonging the interaction.

"So that I can look forward to our next moment together," said the gas station attendant. Lou was shocked by this statement. There has never been a being (that wasn't a cat) who genuinely piqued her interest. His response caught her off guard to the point that she almost didn't know what to say which is unusual for her. Lou was taken aback by how upfront he was but at the same time...a bit happy.

"I'm sure one day, I'll actually need gas," said Lou. Satisfied with the time she spent, she shifted gears and drove away.

Watching her car disappear without a trace, tears began effortlessly streaming down the attendant's cheeks but his tears were not from what she said. The tears were because the gas station was empty now.

BIRDS SING WHILE SITTERS PREACH

Jahziel Holland

Sounds of people sing as the aisles breeze
Cars rev their engines before barreling down the street
Creeks across the floor swept the city
The cracks in the ground there were o' so plenty

The sky was so blue
Always wondering what it's like to breathe from a Mountain View
People fund major money into factories
But little so they know that the earth is dying in a catastrophe
Little bow could not sleep even a wink

News reporters reporting on deforestation
The entire world is pass the point of no escaping
The world and life is scared in a panic
Nor do they listen they keep upping the antics

The echoes of the birds screech has gone extinct
Many of the people drag society to greed and mislead
But to practice the forms of a poet
Society needs to be devoted

Bystanders working day and night to buy standards
And the leaders of the countries just throw temper tantrums
While most just buy weapons to protect ours
The community just pushes led and rains showers

Systems of intelligence
Or AI for the workers who are irrelevant
Robots and destruction with no structure in the city
Technology is the causing of plenty
And the funding started all off a penny

Cars, Engines, and television
All blinded by the materials that catch our attention
On this Earth the countries are causing so much tension
And we just shut up and listen

Society is stuck in a loop
Wondering who got the most cars, or the most views
People is todays world value greed



And cry on bended knee

The old heads say practice what we preach and preach what we practice
But that saying is so old fashioned
Everybody is protesting protests
Birds sing while sitters preach #2
Most people stare at it and think it grotesque

Rivers are drying up and the ocean is dying
But the population just keeps multiplying
Big corporations never incorporate proper funding
But just put more into their own bundling

Corporates causing people to take precaution
Most people don't even listen and don't know what it's costing
Trees shredded like paper by hand
Most people need to speak up and take a stand

People sit back and watch music their entertainment
While corporations are testing citizens like subjects as their taming
Staring at the world from a poster view
Looking at the world from a different eye that how I'm supposed to view

People read books to educate their vocabulary
But don't educate their minds on political matters it's scary
Trash on the earth living like there is no plastic dispersed
Throwing trash in the ocean is more like a perk
Most people creep through the shadows watch as they lurk

While all the people jam out to music
The world is dying ain't that amusing
The world isn't coasting it's just cruising
Killing trees to make paper
Factories have the upper hand construction is doing them a favor

Factories not using coal to help keep the earth alive
While staring at the mountains I'm terrified
People are stuck like their paralyzed
Ink placed on paper and placed in a book
Looking at the forest how do the trees look

Save the Earth please I beg and I plead
Save the Earth please or leave it up to thee



June
Maelyn Ortiz

ANOTHER YEAR OLDER

Cloe Berzoza

The first thing Charlotte noticed when she woke up was how light she felt. She was rested and immensely calm, but also weary from sleep. Last night was the first time Charlotte ever drank alcohol, an array of cheap wine coolers and spiked fruit punch, so she expected to have a raging headache but instead she felt rejuvenated.

She kicked her legs from under her blanket and squealed.

This is what being sixteen must feel like!

Sixteen. Charlotte couldn't even recall all the times she imagined what her sixteenth birthday would be like. Since she was little, she pictured herself dressed in a fluffy pink gown being served a slice of her Mama's special cheesecake while all her closest friends sat around her, they would be singing and smiling while she blew out her candles. She would finally be a little more like a woman and a little less like a girl. And, most importantly, she was going to be able to get her driver's license.

"Oh!" Charlotte stood up and rushed to her window, "maybe Mama got me a car!"

She peered out her window and pressed her face up to the glass. Her fingers brushed against the dusty windowsill as she leaned forward but she saw nothing outside, not even her mom's car.

Charlotte felt a twinge of annoyance, The least Mama could do was make sure to be home when I woke up on my special day!

Charlotte huffed on her way to the bathroom and turned on the lights. She started analyzing herself in the mirror when she suddenly gagged, there was a thick stench in the air. I must have vomited before going to bed, Charlotte thought and sniffed at the shirt she was wearing, it must have gotten all over me too.

Last night, Charlotte's best friend, Rachel, convinced her to sneak out to a party the Carson twins were throwing. The two reckless boys were small town royalty because they invited any and every teenager they knew over to their house whenever their parents were out of town.

Charlotte knew her mom would be upset if she discovered Charlotte snuck out to a party, but the young girl was growing restless without doing any of her own partaking of teenage rebellion.

Rachel was a dangerous kind of fun that Charlotte always admired. Rachel was always sneaking out with boys late at night and stealing beer from the local mini mart. She would always ask Charlotte to tag long, but Charlotte was always too scared to say yes.

But last night was different. Around nine pm Rachel called Charlotte.

"Hey Char!" Rachel giggled, her voice a little slurred, "Come out with me to a kickback at the Carson's!"

Charlotte was already getting ready for bed; her hair was up, and her pajamas were on. She sat down on her bed and began to fiddle with her blanket nervously. She wanted to go but knew it was a bad idea.

Charlotte's voice was soft so she wouldn't wake her mom, "Um, I don't know Rach-"

"Aw! Come on, Char! You only turn sixteen once, let's celebrate!"

She isn't wrong, Charlotte had thought, and I want to go. I want to do something!

Charlotte abruptly stood up in her room and let out a long, yet quiet, sigh and whisper-shouted, "Fine! Just promise my Mama won't find out!"

Rachel hiccupped and gasped at the same time, "Wait, are you being serious?"

Charlotte began frantically searching through her wardrobe, looking for something to wear, "Yes! If I don't do anything the night before my birthday, then when will I ever! I- I really want to do something and, well, I never do anything!"

Rachel hummed in agreement, "You do make your mama's job easy, that I can say!" Charlotte felt a ping of guilt at the mention of her mother, but ignored it, "You'll come get me though, right?"

Rachel giggled again, "Sure thing, Char! Me and our ride, Bobby from Biology, will be at your house in half an hour with the headlights off. Be ready, Birthday Girl!"

And then the line went dead.

Charlotte really couldn't recall much of what happened throughout the night, she remembered jumping out her window and getting into Bobby's old beat-up minivan. She recalled drinking, dancing, and talking to a bunch of random people she didn't even know.

The clearest part of her memory was, oddly enough, when she was already drunk and laughing with Rachel while they both sat in the backseat of James Carson's car, who must have driven them home. The car windows were down, and Charlotte took off her seatbelt and dangled the upper half of her body out the window, Rachel laughed and held onto Charlotte's legs as James sped up. Charlotte's hair was flying wild, and her arms reached up to the sky and she giddily thought, I could die right now, and I wouldn't even care.

Charlotte wasn't sure how she managed to get back to her room, but something about her morning appearance made her think it must have been messy.

Charlotte chuckled at her reflection in the mirror, "What happened to me?"

Her knees and hands were covered in dirt, she figured she must have taken a few falls before successfully climbing back up through her window. Even her nails were caked with mud! She was wearing the same pajamas that she had on before she went out with Rachel, but they had new muddy fingerprint stains on them.

Oddly enough, Charlotte's makeup looked pristine. It was applied a bit heavier than she remembered, but it looked flawless. Her under eyes were bright, her acne was covered, her lips were painted pink, and her lashes were coated with thick mascara. Even her hair still looked great! Her blonde curls were bouncy and still stiff from hairspray. She looked like she was given a professional makeover! In fact, her hair and makeup looked so good that Charlotte decided to avoid ruining either in the shower.

She turned on her shower to its hottest setting and began to get undressed. Charlotte peeked at herself in the mirror and gasped at what she saw. Across her chest and shoulders there were purple and black bruises. She ran her fingers across the largest black bruise that was in the center of her chest, but it was numb.

What happened to me?

All Charlotte could do was blankly stare at herself. Her whole body went cold with an odd feel-

ing. She dug in her mind to think what could have possibly made her look this way. Maybe when I was climbing up to my window, I took a much harder fall than I thought... Charlotte figured, but even she wasn't completely convinced by this. Maybe I could message Rachel and ask.

Charlotte then began to look around for her phone, she looked on her nightstand and in her bed. Then she looked at all the places in her room where she would usually charge it but still came up short.

Charlotte shook her head, more confused than ever, and stepped in front of her bathroom mirror again, but this time she pointedly ignored all her bruises and said aloud, "Shower. I need to shower."

She figured her shower would calm her down and hopefully jog her memory. What happened to me? Charlotte asked herself that question over and over while she scrubbed her body in the shower. Her eyes were shut so she could prevent looking at her bruises, she refused to acknowledge them any further.

Soon, Charlotte felt herself slipping into methodically washing herself. Her nerves calmed down a bit but the stench in the air was growing stronger. There must be some vomit in my hair too, that's why I smell it so much. Charlotte decided. A bit dismayed, she reached for her shampoo but realized it wasn't there, after a quick glance of the tub she had to settle on using her mom's shampoo instead. I bet Mama used the last of mine.

Charlotte lathered her hands up with the shampoo and started washing her hair, she cringed as she felt the perfect curls lose their shape and become damp. Soon, Charlotte pulled away from her hair to reach for some conditioner, but her hands didn't come back empty.

Charlotte silently gaped, completely stunned, as she saw a clump of her hair in her hand. However, Charlotte didn't have much time to dwell on her hair loss because she found herself gagging again. The weird smell just wouldn't go away, it smelt like something Charlotte had never smelled before, grotesquely rotten with a hint of sweetness. Like if you tried to light a candle in a room full of rotting meat. And the smell was mixing with the steam, filling the room, and suffocating her lungs.

It became too much for Charlotte to handle, she opened her eyes, quickly turned off the water, and ripped the shower curtain to the side as she clambered out. She fell to her knees in front of the toilet and began retching.

At first, nothing came out. But then, like a dam had been released, Charlotte began violently puking up black vomit. Just when Charlotte thought she would stop puking, she got a whiff of the smell and then began puking again.

Once she stopped again, she hastily grabbed a towel and covered her nose. Her eyes widened as she looked in the bowl of the toilet. The black vomit was thick and chunky, and some of the smaller chunks were moving.

Are those... bugs?

Charlotte shrieked as some of the bugs- flies to be exact- began to crawl up the sides of the toilet bowl.

Charlotte gagged again, this time from disgust, and tightly wound herself up in the towel while holding her breath. Her early feeling of rejuvenation was no longer, as she stood up, she suddenly felt weak, and tears stung her eyes as began to stumble out of her bathroom. On her way out, she took a final peak at herself in the mirror and her reflection was now far more revolting; her hair had fallen out in patches, some of the black vomit remained dribbling down her chin, her bruises seemed to look more violent than before, and her face, now that the makeup had mostly washed off, was pale and gray.

As she desperately made her way out the door and downstairs, her shaking hands clung on to the banister. Then, there was the sound of a car pulling up out front. Charlotte's mom was home.

"Mama!" Charlotte cried, as she reached the bottom of the stairs, "Mama, I need help!"

A stream of light entered the house as the front door opened, Charlotte's mom stepped through, she was holding a bouquet of flowers and wearing a knee length black dress. She gasped at the sight of Charlotte.

"Mama, I don't feel good," Charlotte said, her voice quivering.

Charlotte's mother stepped forward and gaped at Charlotte.

There was a long pause where all the two did was stare at each other.

"Mama, please," Charlotte cried, as she began to sag to the floor.

"Oh, Charlotte!" her mother said, she discarded her flowers and then she fell to the floor alongside Charlotte, tightly hugging her daughter on the way down.

Tears began to stream down Charlotte's face, and she cried into her mom's shoulder, "Mama, I'm so sorry! I snuck out last night and now I keep vomit-"

Her mom shushed her and began to cradle her head, "It's all right now."

She's not mad? Charlotte wondered, dazed.

The two stayed embracing until Charlotte stopped crying.

Charlotte's mom pulled back, wiped her own tears, and grasped Charlotte by the shoulders, "C'mon. I made a cake."

Charlotte shook her head, "But, Mama, somethings wrong-"

She shushed her again, "Nothing's wrong, Char."

This silenced Charlotte and confused her even more, what's going on?

Her mom helped Charlotte walk over to the kitchen and sat her down at the table. Charlotte felt out of place, she was still only in her towel, and it was way too early for cake.

Charlotte's mom pulled out the cake from the fridge, like always it was her special cheese-cake, and placed it in front of Charlotte. She began to stick in candles and light them. Charlotte watched, her body rigid.

Something is wrong.

Her mom began to sing happy birthday, but all Charlotte could do was wonder why she didn't care about all the bruises on Charlotte's chest, there was no way she hadn't seen them by now. Or why she didn't ask why Charlotte smelt so bad. Or why she didn't bring up Charlotte's patchy hair. Or

why she wasn't mad that Charlotte snuck out.

This is wrong.

Her mom finished singing and sniffled, "I never thought this day would come."
I feel wrong.

Charlotte forced herself to smile and blew out the candles. She couldn't help but notice that the cake had seventeen candles.

FALL

Anh Tran

Long before it established itself as a great superpower, the nation of Ryuo was a relatively small island nation that remained isolated for a long time. After a long civil war & a failed attempt to expand through the main continent of Axionia, Ryuo closed off its borders from the world, marking the beginning of a mostly peaceful era. This era of relative peace ended a few centuries later when the nation known as the Star Union convinced Ryuo to open its borders.

Realizing that every aspect of the nation was very outdated, the current leaders of Ryuo sought to bring about a great change to adapt to the new world around them. What followed would take the world by storm. Within a few decades, Ryuo went through a complete overhaul of the nation at breakneck speeds: everything from the government system to the military force.

Having now completely adapted to the new world, the nation of Ryuo sought to expand its influence even long after its first failed attempt. It wouldn't be long before Ryuo would start a war with the Tao Dynasty. What followed next was the nation of Ryuo establishing itself as the dominant Axionian superpower: having crushed the Tao Dynasty in its first war against a foreign power. This establishment also gave a new name to the nation of Ryuo, the Blood Sun Empire.

During the next couple of decades, the Empire would gather an impressive string of victories from having fought in a few wars. The Blood Sun Empire had humiliated the Polar Motherland, aided in putting down a massive Tao Dynasty rebellion, and participated in the First Global War as an ally to the Jacks Kingdom; an alliance that they later severed. Little did the Blood Sun Empire know of its fate when it participated in the Second Global War.

...

The operation had been a success; the enemy was caught off-guard by an unexpected attack from both the sea & sky. The entire aerial war fleet of the Star Union is now nothing more than several corpses sitting within their ruined airfields & beneath the water. The attack severely crippled any military power around the western territory of the Star Union. This should set a clear example of what would happen to those who interfere with the expansion of the Blood Sun Empire.

Within the central tower of the Kuzuryu Sky Fortress, a small celebration occurred for the success of the operation. Among those who were now passing drinks around, one man sat alone in his office. He is a man well-respected & known by his peers. His office is decorated with several trophies & souvenirs received from the many wars he fought in. This man was Grand Overseer Tozen, the hero of the Blood Sun Empire.

Something had been lingering in the back of Tozen's head. It was a constant feeling that had plagued his mind since the Empire's military forces returned from overseas. Tozen couldn't tell what it was, but from what he understood, the feeling told him that something was wrong & it will occur in the coming years.

"Is everything alright Grand Overseer?" Tozen had been so deep in thought that he didn't notice a soldier entering his office. The soldier was armed with a high-tech XM-17 energy rifle & K184 beam sword. He carried a cold bottle of fermented rice wine in his hand.

"Everything is fine soldier, I'm just thinking about something."

"Alright then, drink?" The soldier says as he offers the Grand Overseer the bottle.

"I take it off your hands, you may leave now." After dismissing the soldier, Tozen opens the

bottle using a K461 beam knife & takes a sip from the bottle. The crystal-cold beverage left a pleasant taste as it went past his tongue. Perhaps he'll bush off those thoughts for now.

...

A few months passed with not much of importance happening. So far, the Blood Sun Empire has been successful in pushing through & conquering Axionian territories belonging to the Tao Dynasty & the Sickie Regime. A few minor missteps & victories have occurred overseas in the Empire's war against the Star Union. Overall, everything has been going smoothly in the Empire's expansion campaign.

Grand Overseer Tozen was currently overseeing every operation around the Empire's domain. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary so far, but that was until a strange event occurred out on the sea. An alert temporarily appeared on the digital map. It briefly showed up some few hundred miles away from the mainland before disappearing a split second after it appeared. Tozen then tried contacting the boat stationed there.

"Pickett Ship Enshi, is anything wrong?" Nothing but silence on the other end. "Enshi, what is your status? Can you hear me?" The ship still didn't respond. Tozen was about to contact the admiral, but his face pales when he suddenly hears several booms off in the distance. He looks through his observation screen to see many blue explosions coming from the capital city. Several Star Union bombers soared above the clouds, dropping their bombs onto various important war factories & naval yards.

Tozen then scrambled his forces to help defend the city and destroy the bombers. As the bombers began leaving the city, two squadrons of Zero-X fighters & Raiden interceptors took off to chase after them. Out of the fifteen bombers that attacked the capital, about seven of them managed to escape.

Unbelievable, how did the Star Union deploy their bombers this close to the mainland? How was it even possible that they even got close enough to deploy their bombers? It was then that Tozen contacted the admiral stationed in that part of the sea for answers.

"Admiral Nikoshi, can you care to explain how enemy forces managed to slip past you?" Tozen said in a very stern voice.

"Sir, nothing alerted me of their presence until after a Pickett ship went silent. It was just a small misstep, sir," Nikoshi replied with a noticeable shame in his voice. Tozen calmed himself before speaking again.

"Be that as it may, the fact of the matter is that the Star Union managed to land a successful attack on Ryuto. Both the Navy & Airforce have been dishonored because of this 'small misstep' & I have high expectations that you will do everything in your power to correct this. Is that understood?"

"It will be done, Grand Overseer. You can count on me."

"I have faith that you will fix this, my friend. Besides, I don't need to explain to you how our Emperor feels about seeing the enemy flying overhead. That is why I'm lending you some of the Empire's most powerful assets to aid you in our eastward expansion. Use them well." The call ends.

A few days later, Tozen contacted a General stationed in the Tao Dynasty's territory. "General Saito, what is your progress on hunting down the bombers that attacked Ryuto."

"About that sir, the bombers managed to crash land near our territory & we managed to capture & imprison several surviving bomber crews. However, a few had escaped our grasp due to aid from the Tao Dynasty & the Sickle Regime." Tozen's one left eye twitched the moment he heard the report. He paused a bit before looking at a few files he had lying on his desk, each one featuring a biohazard symbol.

"If that's the case. General Saito, you have full permission to test out our newest weapons against our enemies in the west."

"Very well, Grand Overseer." The call ends as Tozen looks westward with a relatively calm but tense look in his eye.

"They will pay greatly for having aided the Star Union."

Little did the Empire know of the catastrophe that would occur very soon.

...

A loud bang rings out within the central tower of the Kuzuryu Sky Fortress. Within Tozen's office, the Grand Overseer had slammed his fist into the metal desk, shattering it to pieces. Things have taken a complete turn for the worst. Around a year ago, the Star Union's military power was severely crippled to the point where it would've taken a few years to restore it. So how was it that, despite having attacked the Star Union time & time, they managed to somehow restore their military power to full strength within the span of only a year? Tozen's one eye burned with unrelenting & unbearable fury as he brushed off the feeling of several metal shards digging into his fingers.

The decisive battle that was supposed to turn the tides in the Blood Sun Empire's favor had resulted in utter failure to an unimaginable degree. The Empire had lost several powerful ships & aerial warships alike during the Battle of Midpoint Isle. Among those lost vessels was the entire Genryu Strike Fleet, a group of seven great Kijin class carriers that once ruled skies & blocked out the sun. The seven terrors of the sky are now nothing more than seven massive corpses lying on the ocean floor.

A vast graveyard now existed beneath the waters some distance away from Midpoint Isle. Admiral Nikoshi's grave now lay within that graveyard, having gone down with the flagship along with those who were unlucky enough to escape in time. The battle had also left the Grand Overseer with a grim realization; it was possible that the Star Union was listening in on their plans to capture Midpoint. It would only make sense as the timing of the attack was far too perfect to be a mere coincidence.

The Blood Sun Empire had lost its momentum & was now stuck on the defense. The Empire's expansion campaign in the west had also been halted, having made no further advancement into the territories of the Tao Dynasty or the Sickle Regime. At this point, the only thing the Empire could hope for is a miracle.

...

The following years have not been kind to the Blood Sun Empire; the stop to the expansion campaign allowed their enemies to push back & slowly advance towards the Empire's mainland

territories. Their allies over in the continent of Proxus were not doing any better. The Roma Dominion had collapsed into a civil conflict that saw the winning side joining the enemy. The Black Eagle Imperium currently has the combined forces of the Star Union, Jacks Kingdom, Iris Republic, and Sickle Regime at their doorstep.

Every available military official was contacted to attend a small digital meeting to discuss the current situation. All of them came to the conclusion that they would have to change their overall strategy; to make every advancement that their enemies made very costly. As the months passed by, the number of casualties would steadily increase for the advancing enemy forces. Aside from the Tao Dynasty, it didn't seem to deter the Sickle Regime or Star Union from getting closer to the Empire's mainland.

A soldier entered Tozen's office to deliver some new reports. As the soldier was about to leave, Tozen stopped him when he noticed something unusual.

"Soldier, what is wrong with your weapons?" Tozen asked with a slight intensity in his voice.

"These were all they could provide me with Grand Overseer." The soldier replied when asked about his weapons, both of which were long outdated weapons in the form of a bullet-based assault rifle & a carbon steel sword. Tozen then dismissed the soldier but stopped him a second time upon hearing him mutter something.

"Hold on, what did you just say?" Tozen said with more intensity to his voice.

"N-Nothing sir, j-just talking to m-myself," the soldier responded.

"Really? Because it sounded like you were saying something unpatriotic," Tozen replied with increasing aggression. As the soldier began fumbling with his words, Tozen immediately rushed to the soldier within a second & slammed him against the wall. The soldier looked in terror at the sight of the horrific portal to hell within the Grand Overseer's one eye. Tozen put his beam sword a millimeter away from the soldier's neck before speaking again with unrelenting fury, "The Emperor has no use for cowards that willingly surrender to the enemy. Should anyone catch you uttering this again, I'll have your mutilated body strapped onto a rocket & sent to our enemies."

The Grand Overseer released his grip on the unfortunate soldier, who immediately fled. Tozen went back to his new desk & sat down in his chair. Only one thought would occur within the Grand Overseer's mind. This war will have to end soon and if our enemies want to reach the mainland that badly, then they will spill several million gallons of blood to get here.

...

Well, this was it. Both of the Blood Sun Empire's allies have fallen, leaving Ryuo as the last standing superpower within their alliance. Despite the Empire's best efforts to drive away its enemies, the Star Union's military forces managed to make it some distance away from Ryuto, the capital city. This was a battle that the Empire would have to win to force the enemy back out & attempt a negotiation. The Empire's available ground and air forces stood within the city to prepare for the upcoming attack. The Kuzuryu Sky Fortress and some of the remaining strongest aerial ships the Empire had got into position as they got ready to deploy their aircraft.

Once it became noon, the battle commenced with the Empire gaining an advantage. Within seconds the skies were swarming with various aircraft & explosions from both sides. The Empire's military force within the city witnessed the battle some distance away. As the Union's ground forces approached the city, the Empire's artillery bombarded them with repeated hailstorms of cluster munitions. With each passing hour, the Empire's early advantages began to wane, and some of the Union's ground forces made it into the city. While that happened, the Sky Fortress suffered from constant attacks from the Union's aircraft & aerial war fleet.

By the third hour, about a quarter of the city was occupied by Union ground forces. Even worse, the Empire had lost several aerial warships & was down to a mere three. The Sky Fortress was now suffering from intense damage to its hull. With the situation growing dire, Tozen did his best to find a way to regain the advantage but ultimately couldn't find a way to surpass the Star Union's forces. Eventually, it became clear that the end was inevitable.

As the sun began to set, the Blood Sun Empire's forces were in shambles. Tozen looked out, with a sorrowful eye, to see Ryuto in flames. The Empire had lost its remaining aerial warships & its ground forces were reduced to several small pockets still fighting in Ryuto. The Kuzuryu Sky Fortress wasn't doing any better as several massive holes were present on the exterior & its weapons were damaged beyond repair.

How did it ever get to this? Tozen gave his final order to move the Sky Fortress away from the city. As the Grand Overseer contemplated how it all went wrong, a missile collided with the central tower, engulfing Tozen in flames. When the Sky Fortress finally crashed into the ground, the end of Blood Sun Empire had been marked.

...

Along time has passed since the Second Global War's end. Ryuo is thriving from an economic boom, the first miracle that the nation had in a long time. Located some distance way from the Ryuto capital city is the old corpse of the Kuzuryu Sky Fortress. In front of it is a statue of a one-eyed man dressed in a custom-made field uniform, built not long after the war ended. A plaque on the statue's base reads:

Grand Overseer Tozen, the hero of the Blood Sun Empire.

THE GIFTS

Keala Olayan

It was 5:30 am and Jack wanted answers. The sun was barely up. There was a small pinkish orange blur lining the horizon, and the rest of the sky was a beautiful, dark blue. The lake reflected those colors, they danced with every leaf that fell. Jack was a bit nervous to meet Amy for the first time. The whole town talked about her like she was some kind of ghost that lived among them. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves, taking in that pink line as the sun was coming into view. He couldn't even hear birds chirping. Instead, he heard crickets as they continued to hum. The leaves fluttered in the wind; you could hear the branches swaying in the ever-gentle breeze. He continued his walk toward the one lonely bench that sat on that weird island that sits in the middle of the lake. There she was sitting on that bench. A black fuzzy jacket and her hair was wild like, all these different colors in her hair, decorated with colorful feathers, charms, and strings. Wondering why people said she was a ghost. She sat so still like a perfect wax statue. The grass continued to squish beneath his feet until he met the deck that links to the island. The old, splintered wood made a loud "creek " sound beneath his feet. She turned around as if awoken by the sound of the old wooden dock. She gave him a gentle smile. Then went back to whatever she was doing. When Jack had finally met her on the island, he saw that she was playing with a magnificent soft glowing fish. It had the same glow as the moon. She was so focused on this thing, her eyes reflected its glow, her hands moving around as if they were the very water on which the fish depended. He stood there watching her as the sun rose. Every bit of light that the sky took on gave the fish more life.

"Hello, You're My Right?" he asked the mysterious girl. She just smiled and shrugged, never really looking away from her fish. "The nun at Hollow's Church said you would be here."

She stopped playing with the fish clasping it in her hands. She turned and looked at him. She looked him up and down, she stared at him for a while. Her eyes were a strange color, they were a bit yellow or amber, he hadn't really noticed before, but they also had a bit of a glow to them, but more like they were reflecting some of the yellow light. She pulled him down on the bench beside her. And showed him her blue fish. It was a bit like a coy fish, but its fins were a bit more fabric-like. It had no eyes and yet it greeted him by swimming around his face through the air, then back to her, so her hands could continue to be its water.

"So," she said, "you want to know more about the gifts?"

"Yes. I don't understand mine. Other people can play with light, control things with their minds, or calm people's stress..."

"I know what the gifts are," She interrupted. She had a bit of a sour attitude. "Everyone does. What makes yours different?"

"Well, I can't do anything, I can't calm people, I can't conjure things with my mind. All I do is feel empty inside".

"You don't know what your gift is?"

"No, my so-called gift is that I can't feel pain, but it feels more like a curse."

"Why does that feel like a curse? There are so many people in this world who wish for your gift."

"I have to set an alarm every day to make sure I eat because I can't feel hunger, I can't empathize with anyone's pain, because I have never felt it. I could be bleeding out, and I would never notice."

"Are you asking me to take your gift away?"

"I don't know."

"Well before you ask, I cannot take your gift away. The almighty gave you that gift, it is as constant as the mana that flows through your body."

"Then why is everyone in town saying you can take gifts away?"

"Those are just silly ghost stories, my mom spread them around to keep people away from us. Don't believe everything you hear."

He just sat there sulking. He couldn't believe he had gone through all the trouble of seeking her out, walking up and walking through the cold, for her to tell her that she can't help him.

"Hey, don't worry, I can't get rid of your gift, but I can teach you how to use it."

"What?"

"Well, my gift is a manipulation of auras, that glowing fish was a part of my aura. When I was a little girl I had the glowing aura of a ghost, it would change colors according to my mood but for the most part, it stayed white. Everyone thought I was a ghost. I learned how to control it. Now you can't see my aura unless you look closely because of this charm bracelet. And years of meditation. Now after practicing I can turn my aura into things like that fish I was playing with earlier. I can also see other people's auras. I know their emotions, and whether they are good people. The gifts are closely tied to who we are as a person. It can come out to deal with passed trauma, a forever unanswered question, or an odd wish. Other times it is determined by what we call fate. However, the strength of your gift is tied to your aura."

"So how strong is my gift?"

"It's a bit overwhelming honestly. You really just need to learn how to use it"

"So, you are saying that I can train, and learn how to feel pain?"

"no. but you can learn remorse, and how to empathize, or at least fake it."

She grabbed his hand and stared at him. Her wide amber eyes studied every little piece of him. Staring into his soul. He fidgeted a little, trying to get a bit more comfortable. That woke her from the weird staring trance she was in.

As she let go of his hands, she told him "You can't feel pain, but you can take other people's pain upon you."

"How do you know that?"

"I can kind of read gifts. It doesn't work every time, my mentor disappeared a couple months before she could fully teach me."

Jack wanted to ask Amy who her mentor was. Why has she disappeared? How could Amy teach him if her training was never complete. But Amy was really the only person in the three thousand miles that really knew anything about the gifts. She looked so sad, when she mentioned her mentor, like she was on the brink of tears. So he decided to drop it.

After that Jack would meet Amy in the woods and they would train. Every day. For the most

part, they would meditate. Amy said it was how you learn to understand your gift: you need to silence yourself so it can speak to you. Jack thought that she was the most insane chick he had ever met. But he didn't have a better option. He kept trying, but it wasn't working.

"This isn't working!" Jack yelled
"give it time"

"How much more time? All I do is sit here listening to the sounds of the forest. And nothing happens."

He sat down as she opened her eyes from her meditating session. She looked him up and down.

"I've never seen you frustrated before," she said as she slowly got up, to go sit next to him by the log.

"Yeah, well we have been at this for like two weeks and nothing is happening."

"I never said it was going to be easy."

"I know but are you sure this is how you do it?"

"It worked for me."

"Yeah, but I am not you."

"That's true. Let's try something else." She took off her charm bracelet and took his hands in hers. "Close your eyes, listen to your heartbeat, try to imagine the blood pumping through your veins ...

Now listen to the forest, hear the extension of that rhythmic heartbeat in the world around you. Do you feel it? The flow of mana."

"Not really."

"Try harder. Everything that walks this earth is a part of it. We are like its hands, that do the work she cannot."

He closed his eyes and pictured this world that she was talking about. It took a few minutes, but he started to feel it, the breeze of the wind was like the flow of the blood in his body if that made any sense. "I can feel it," he said.

"Okay now open your eyes."

He opened his eyes, and when he did colors dancing, everything had a bit of a flow to it. He could see what he was feeling when the earth was alive.

"Do you see it?"

"Yes, I see it."

"This flow that you see, this feeling you feel, this is what you need to draw from to enhance your abilities. Does that make sense".

"I think so,"

"Okay, I'm going to let go of your hands now. You won't be able to see the mana, but you will always be able to feel it because that mana is the same mana that is coursing through your veins."

She let go of her hands and the entire picture faded away, it was gone.

"Do you still see it?" she asked

"Nope."

“But do you feel it?”

He thought about it for a second; did he feel it? He felt the same, his body was intact, he couldn't feel pain still, but he did feel a part of something bigger, though he had always felt that way, he just didn't understand it as he did now.

“Okay, let's try something.” She pulled a knife out of her pocket.

“What are you doing?”

“You are going to try and take upon you my pain,” she said as she cut her hand. A small cut, but he could tell by her face and the wince on her face that it hurt. “Grab my hand,” she said.

“Okay, now picture the mana flowing through my body, do you see it?” He nodded. “Great, now imagine it flowing to you.” He did, and as he did there was a weird vibration in his hand. He let go of her hand, the mark was still on her hand but there was a purple version on his hand. It faded away after a few seconds.

“Did it work?”

“Do you still feel the pain?”

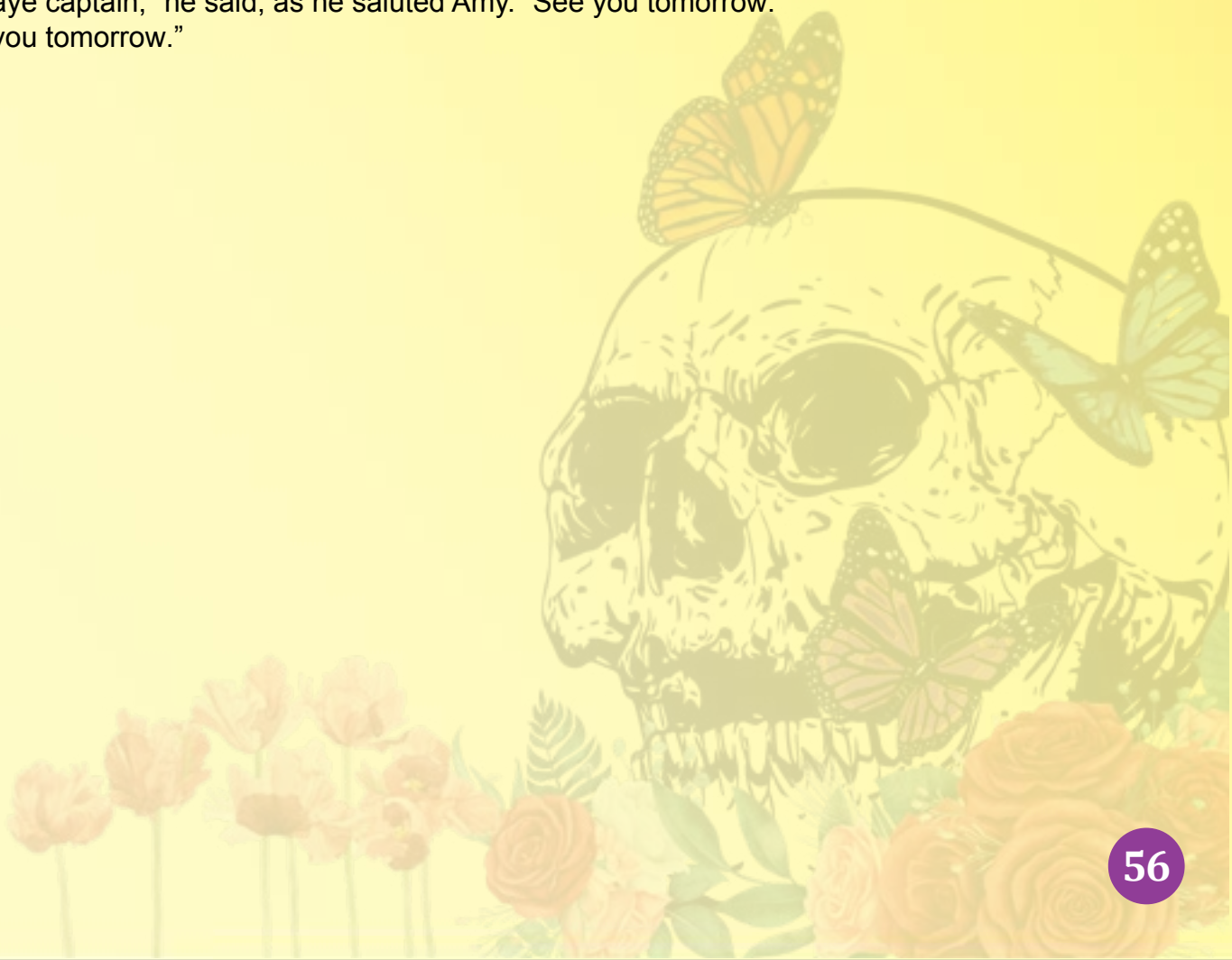
“I do, but I lessened a little bit, while that purple mark was on your hand.”

“Wait it?”

“Yes, it did. But you should probably keep working on it until you have mastered it. Let's call it a day for now.”

“Aye-aye captain,” he said, as he saluted Amy. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”



WHERE THE NIGHTMARES GO

Brandon Salazar

Darkness ruled the skies above the city. Upon surveying the area, you'll see towering walls made of dirt and rock surrounding it. However, upon looking past the uneven terrain, you'd realize you were below ground level. This city was in a crater. Despite its impractical location, the city was fully functional. Electricity flowed through the power lines, providing light to neon signs advertising their respective shops. Running water, housing, skyscrapers with countless offices, and even stocked-up grocery stores were all present within the city. All that was missing were the people.

Upon waking up in the middle of the street one night, a boy found himself in an area he didn't recognize. He was seventeen, maybe eighteen years of age. His figure was slim but in great shape, which caused him confusion since he didn't know how he got that way. His outfit consisted of a plain white sweater and white pants. His clothing included almost armor-like padding as if it was some heavy-duty variation of fencing gear. The more he tried to remember what led him here, he came to a realization. He didn't have any memories at all.

Weeks had gone by at this point, and he now found himself cautiously tiptoeing into a grocery store, making sure no nightmares followed him. "Nightmares," was the name he gave the residents of the city he'd been trapped in. These nightmares were not human by any means and could only be described as terrifyingly unnatural. Their appearance varied between a mix of being recognizable and uncanny. Categorizing them would be pointless; not one looked the same.

The boy took one arm from under his backpack strap, making it slide down his other arm. Pinching the zipper, he opened the bag and proceeded to grab a tv dinner pack from the freezer in front of him. While scrounging through various items, he couldn't shake the sensation of being stalked. Other than his breathing, only the soft constant buzz from the lights could be heard. The more he focused on this buzz, the more he felt chills spreading across his back. As he was placing the meal in his bag, the sound of clanging cans made him let out a yelp. He hurriedly dropped his bag, nearly losing his balance in the process, and sped walked to the shelves.

Reaching for his homemade holster, he grabbed his kitchen knife. Running away was not an option. It would be far too dangerous to go out in the open after so much noise was made. "What do I do?" the boy whispered under his breath as his heart began to shrink in his chest.

Tap tap tap tap tap...

Normal-ish-sounding footsteps?

"Could it be... is another person in here with me?" His eyes opened as a smile infected his face. His chills turned into a fire burning deep within himself. Up until now, he fully believed he was the only human in this broken world. Burning sensations burdened his chest. "Do I say something? What if it's a nightmare? What if it isn't?"

The boy loudly sighed. Take the bait...

Slam!

The backdoor! I've got to follow them! He broke into a sprint, running past several lanes

and self-checkout stations. Upon reaching the door, he impatiently knocked, saying, "Is anyone th- "
Crack!

He launched himself away as a medieval-style halberd shot through the closed door with immense strength, nearly impaling his stomach. "AUGH!" yelled the boy, as he hit the floor. Wham! The same door was kicked off its hinges. Getting shot through the air with great speed, it crashed into a shelf filled with cleaning supplies.

A tall figure darted out from the door frame; he wore the armor of a knight. What was originally sup-posed to be iron armor was now reduced to a ghost of its past. The armor was plagued with scratch-es, marks, and dirt. This was no royal knight by any means.

Upon seeing this, the boy placed both his hands on the floor, slid his knee under his chest, and shakily stood up. This was a sight to see, to say the least. Of all the various nightmares he'd seen up until now, never had one resembled a human figure. The one time he finally witnessed a somewhat normal living being, it was wearing a full set of medieval armor.

"Are you... human?" the boy asked.

The knight didn't respond with words; instead, he raised his halberd and lunged toward the boy. Whether it was on purpose or just a reflex, the boy turned his back to shield himself. He realized almost instantly, however, that this was a stupid move. If he had opted to jump to the left, he very well could've dodged.

Time seemed to have slowed down as the halberd inched towards his body. And just like that, I'm going to die, aren't I? He knew he had no chance of surviving this attack. The pure strength of this brute's swing would surely cut him in two.

Thud.

The room went silent.

...

Huh?

He turned around to see a ghostly figure between him and the knight. With just its bare hand, the creature caught the halberd's axe blade. This nightmare had no legs or visible head. Looking at the nightmare from behind, it was just a floating blob with arms. The knight stood frozen. After three seconds or so, he let go of his halberd with one hand while gently tugging it away with the other. His hostility had left him. In response to this, the nightmare let go of the halberd and faded away as fast as it came.

"You have your own fright?" asked the knight.

"What?" replied the boy.

He was reasonably confused. Moments away from being severed in half, a nightmare saved his life and faded away. This wasn't exactly an everyday occurrence.

"That thing that just saved your life," the knight began pointing to the nightmare's last position. "That was a fright, and if that was a fright, it's safe to assume you are human, correct?"

"You couldn't tell at first glance?" the boy angrily replied. "What even is a 'fright?'"

The knight carefully leaned his weapon on the wall and placed his back against the door-

frame. Slowly, he dropped himself and sat down. He let out a long sigh and removed his helmet. Under his helmet was a black flame.

"It's not often you see humans in this place," the knight said as he pointed to his lack of a face. "As you can see, I am no human. I am a fright."

He's definitely not a normal nightmare. This one speaks. That's new.

"When a human enters this world, which is a rare occurrence, a fright will attach itself to him or her. Once a fright attaches to you, it will benefit you in some way. On the other hand, a fright brings its own drawback as well. These two attributes do not have to be balanced."

"Is that so?" The boy began scratching the back of his head with a concerned look, trying to disguise his true emotion. "I have a fairly important question for you, then."

"What do you ask?"

"You said frights attach themselves to humans. Does that mean you are attached to one, by chance?" the boy questioned. The knight hesitated for a moment.

...

"Yes, I am attached to a human."

Pressure built up behind the boy's eyes as tears almost broke free. "Guess I'm not the only one here after all."

"Her name is Mia. She is much younger than you, maybe nine years old."

"Nine? What's a nine-year-old doing here?"

The knight fitted his helmet back on. "I was hoping you could answer that," He reached for his halberd leaning against the wall. "How did you find your way here?"

The boy's body tensed. "Sorry, but I have no clue why I'm here." His face turned expression-less as his eyes peered off elsewhere. "I don't have any memories. Not one." He continued, "I just woke up in the middle of the street, and that was it."

"Hmm," the knight stood up. "Mia has all her memories as far as I'm aware." He began to look out the store's windows. "Human, I have no right to ask, but can you help me?"

The boy squinted his eyes and tilted his head. "With?"

"Just yesterday, Mia was taken from me. I know exactly where she is, but I will need help to save her. Since you have your own fright, you can be of great use in the battle to come."

"Hold on, if you know where she is, why are you here?" asked the boy.

The knight enthusiastically responded, "To bring her some food for when I save her, of course!"

"And you attacked me for what reason?"

"I thought you were an odd-looking creature."

...

"Wow."

"So, can I expect you to lend a hand?" The knight began to point at the boy's kitchen knife. "I can equip you with a much better weapon than that knife."

The boy looked down to see that he'd had his knife in his hand the whole time. How did I not stab myself when I fell? "Sure, I'll help you out."

The knight cleared his throat, "Question. Are you a warrior of sorts? I can't help but notice your strange armor."

"Even if I was, I have no clue."

"Oh, that's right." The knight turned his attention from the windows back to the boy and walked toward him. He slapped his hand on the boy's shoulder, causing him to wince. "So, my friend, shall we head off?"

"Ahem," the boy slapped his hand on the knight's forearm. "Let's go."





HAUNTED

McKenna Callahan







MARIPOSA

LITERARY REVIEW

Spring 2023



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