Great Lake Review

SUNY Oswego's
Student-Run Literary Magazine

Fall 2024

97th Edition

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NOTE: Some of the pieces may have different font sizes to account for artistic integrity.

Trigger Warning: Within the contents of this journal, some of the pieces may contain triggering topics, including, but not limited to, eating disorders, mental illness, sexual assault/violence, self harm, suicide, suicidal ideation, identity-based discrimination and harrassment, and death. Please use discretion when reading.

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Insecurity

by Carolina Martin

Located at 19 W. Bridge Street in downtown Oswego, the River's End Bookstore holds the release events for our fall and spring issues.

All of us at GLR would like to extend a special thank you to everyone at our favorite independent bookstore, River's End Bookstore!

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A Note From Our Editor-In-Chief

In times of chaos, make art.

When nothing is certain, indulge in the insecurity of life. Let it fuel your art. Try your best to make sense of the entropy; let everything go. Or, honor the life of artists before you and forge your own path. Step out, as they did; walk headfirst into the storm. Find beauty in the messiness.

This book is a reflection of that beauty, sixty-odd pages of art, stories, screenplays, and poems selected by our editors. All their hard work and thoughts are essential to this magazine; it would not be possible without them. Thank you especially to our lovely Headitors, who field many an email and/or Google Chat messages from me.

Thank you to everyone who submitted piece(s) to us and entrusted us with your work. It takes much bravery to share art, and we take great pride in being able to display your talent.

Lastly, a special thank-you to our former editor-in-chief Lauren Royce, who answers all my questions about InDesign and the GLR budget. This edition would not exist without her help and fast replies. (Also, Lauren, I did the two things you told me not to do: I took the hard drive out of the cubicle and used my own laptop to edit. But everything is in one piece!)

Enjoy reading the stories of flaws, heartache, joys, and triumphs that carry us into the future.

With love and hope,

Editor-in-Chief Halle Collins

A Lifelong Experiment

by Cj Massenge

A child's mind tends to be two things: creative and perceptive. A child can turn anything into a game. The holy grail of games requires stealth. Afterall, getting caught could mean a lecture, or worse time out. Only the best of children excelled during the duration of the game. A game where the objective is to sneak into any area deemed forbidden. In my case, there was the house attic and basement. The two great forbidden zones; my favorite areas to play.

The attic was filled with trunks of artifacts passed from generation to generation. There were familial heirlooms. My mother's wedding dress; an old record player alongside a case of vinyl's; creepy, dirty, porcelain dolls; normal family heirlooms. Though it was not these artifacts that were my obsession of choice, oh no, no, no. But rather the trunks, and trunks, and trunks of letters, diaries, books with yellowed pages and barely legible scrawl in the margins. These written antiques told the story of my family over the course of centuries. There were a few common threads tying everyone together as a family, at least, within those pages. Every generation was creative, experimentative. My family was one of scientists, doctors, chemists, alchemists. People who wish to understand the impossible and make the impossible- possible. The more outlandish the ideology- the stronger the desire to make it reality. One could almost say those previous generations went mad trying to accomplish their goals. While I feel insane may be too strong of a word, perhaps obsessed or dedicated, my opinion may not be the strong one. However, inevitably, every generation was consumed, destroyed even, by their hyper fixations.

As a child these stories fascinated me. The goals, the creations, the experiments of every generation prior to me only fueled my desire to one day be among the Benjamin Franklin's and Charles Darwin's of the world. I wanted to do something to cement my name in the history books as the leader of evolution, even as a child. Those journals were filled with the "what if" questions. My mind began to wonder with them as well. Some continued from what I read, wanting to know more, some unique to myself. It was these questions and ideas that made the attic an enticing risk for my

secretive game.

Now what of the basement, you may wonder. The basement provoked fascinating horror to my mind. To understand my obsession with playing in the basement, first it must be understood that I found other children dull. I found them unoriginal, uncreative, completely content with how the world around them was formed. There was no drive or desire to mold the world into their own creation. Thus, they bored me. I could never get along with other children. They never quite liked me either. Therefore, after grueling hours spent trying to placate teachers and lackluster other children, the basement was my refuge. Within the basement, I could turn the world into an object of my whims and desires. Oh, the power that is to hand to a child. The world down there was mine to learn to control and I craved controlling it, creating a perfect world. No one had done it before, generations before me could only dream of it, yet I swore, even as a child, I would be the one to do it. That was how my days were spent. In the mornings, I would endure the imposed sanction that mandated I attend eight hours of dreadful schooling. The afternoons were mine. Those stories were retrieved from the attic and brought to the basement. There I read. I wrote. I expanded. Most importantly I planned.

Perhaps, my life was spent in a daze. Much of my childhood has been lost to time. If my mother was present, her impact would have been minimal to not reside in my recollection. Though, my father was my greatest influence in life. The greatest living, at least. He was a chemist, a brilliant doctor. Among the best, I would argue. The desire that became his obsession was to cure that which was deemed incurable. Insanity, terminal illnesses, perhaps even death one day. I cannot remember anymore what his exact focus was, perhaps it changed throughout my life as the inspiration came and went. However, I remember watching his deterioration. I watched as he grew frail and small. He worked himself to exhaustion, forgoing sleep, and food, until his body gave out. Until the day he fell and never got up again. They all called him a madman at his funeral, said his raving drove him to insanity which led to his demise.

The fall of the chosen. However, I learned a tremendous amount from him. While I watched him wither away, I watched him experiment. I saw chemical compounds combine. I watched him fail and try again. I watched everything from a stool at his desk. Once I was old enough, I became his perfect lab assistant. Everything my father showed me, I absorbed like a sponge. He died years ago. The exact date is lost to me, I was already focused on my obsession.

While my father wished to cure the incurable, I craved something else. Something drawn from the wonderings of generations before me. Perhaps, I combined a few ideas from different generations. Ultimately, every generation desired improvements to the human evolution. There was some flaw within humanity that they chose to focus on. It was narrow sighted. Humans are susceptible to illness, to the elements, famine, natural disasters. Humans are biased, judgmental, prejudiced creatures. While there may be minimal animals that can naturally kill us, nature and each other are more than capable. Each generation tried to tackle one of these. Why find cures when one could just create a new human? A human without these flaws. That would solve everything.

Now, my plan had loops I had to keep in tight knots to ensure perfection. After all, say I successfully (and I will successfully) created this perfect human. If I let it intermix with society and produce offspring, those offspring would be imperfect. No, I could not allow that. Genetics would become tainted. My perfect human would have the dominant traits, and over time those traits would survive natural selection; however, they would still be tainted and liable to failure in the end. No, I had to create not one but two perfect beings that could procreate and make sure they were in a place where intermingling with the rest of us who possess those undesirable traits was impossible. A society of their own. If there is still time in my limited lifespan, once I have my first two successes, perhaps I will make a few more. Though, that is planning too far into the future which is unfortunately not guaranteed. First, I needed to create my first success.

Failure is inevitable when attempting revolutionary. Failure

is inevitable with science. Failure means progress is being made. With each failure, a different approach can be taken. Once the cause of the failure is identified, the plan can be modified. On top of those failures within my experiment, there were different steps that had to be completed successfully before the next could even be attempted. Each of those had their own experiments. The human body, for instance, is frail. It can be injured by external elements. It can be damaged when the mind within the body is careless. Therefore, the human body needs reinforcement. Human organs can fail with little warning, and the signs of failure are not always noticeable. Organs can be destroyed by genetic mutations at a cellular level. This needed fixing in my artificial creation. The hardest part is the creation of the subconscious, or soul, whatever one wishes to call it. The part of a human that makes us human. Part of my goal requires removing human bias and prejudice. This could easily be done with artificial intelligence. However, where artificial intelligence currently stands it cannot replicate human emotions. This task took the longest and had the most failures. Replicating the essential part of being a human- our emotion. It is a necessary step. One that I refused to give up on. The easy work was done, if this was the one obstacle in my way, I refused to let it be the one I never did.

The eureka! Oh, it was a blur of movement and energy. Time simultaneously slowed and sped up. It happened in an instant and felt like forever. It was done! My body was on autopilot. Years of sleepless nights, forgone meals, had done quite a number on me. I was approaching my midlife at this point. That is how long I had been dedicated to my goal. How long it took me to have my eureka! But I will never forget it. I will never forget that moment. Oh eureka… They say when a mother first holds her baby, she falls in love. There is a strong natural inclination from the mother to the child that she carried for months. This idea seemed ridiculous to me. But, as I watched my humanoid, my darling creation, wake on that table. As I watched it's eyes open for the first time, I understood. Years of my life had gone into creating a perfect human. No other version woke up. This was the first. The cumulated effort of the ones before it and it was sitting up, twisting it's arm, lifting it's hand. Oh, it was

perfect. I was so moved by emotion. Relief, excitement, joy.

The humanoid's movements were almost robotic at first. It's blinks were slow as if timed. It was stiff as it moved, having to slowly warm up its body with slow repetitive motions. After all, that version had been lying on the table for months, perhaps even a couple of years by then. It would make sense the body was stiff. The longer it stretched, the more human it became. The way the humanoid breathed became more natural, along with the blinks. The range of motion slowly increased. I do not remember breathing while I watched my creation come to life. I scribbled down notes that were illegible later. Observations, questions, thoughts. I attempted to capture everything I saw in a few words. Most were jumbled together, I was so in awe, so relieved. Years of blood, sweat and tears. Generations of experiments and questions all cumulated into this perfect being on my lab table. How ecstatic I was. That euphoria could only be felt by an addict.

"Good morning, my darling," I breathed, holding my creation's hands. My voice had been so soft in that moment. I never knew it could do that. Perhaps it was only natural of me to feel so moved by emotion. A scientist can never be certain the output of an experiment, and I had put so many years of my life into this. After all those failures, I almost didn't dare dream my result could be so flawless. My humanoid looked like a little child. That was my intention, obviously, but this perfection was… oh… "A perfect human, that's what you are, my darling. No weather will impede you. No illness shall cripple you. No bias or prejudice will impact your judgment. I did it. I created you." It didn't understand what I was saying, obviously. It is still ignorant. It could comprehend my words; of this I was certain. There was understanding within its eyes, you see. I knew I had to prepare for a failure in my programming, but just this, this breathing, moving, artificial child was a success!

This part of the process could not be planned for ahead of time. Yes, I had now created this child, but now was the matter of rearing it while attempting to create a second. There are variables with the task of child rearing that could not be contemplated prior.

This caused… complications. Everything started out perfectly! Well within my calculations and estimations. The humanoid grew slowly, at a rate along average a regular human. It was going to be behind developmentally at first. While I created it to be around the same size as a five-year-old child, it still had to be taught to talk, to read, to write, to play. It made progress quickly! It was naturally curious, as a child ought to be. Why was it's favorite word. It was obedient, thankfully. That was a mercy on myself that I congratulate my younger self for adding into the programing for these humanoids, obedient to elders.

Please, I beg you to remember my ambition, my quite noble ambition, had been to erase the imperfections in humans. It is a very noble ambition! One would be a fool not to see that! I wanted to better our world. Us humans are flawed, very flawed. From our natural vessels to our character. All humans have flaws. Erasing them could better our society, our world. There was nothing wrong with my ambitions! Absolutely nothing wrong! This process is truly all for the greater good. These beings will better our world, I truly swear it! But I digress. My creation, yes my creation…

My creation, it loved reading and learning. The more it learned, the more I could see my programming in action. I put it in situations, gave it material to read, to evaluate if it would fall victim to bias that it has previously encountered. It didn't! I swear it didn't! It remained perfect. My perfect, unbiased creation! Unbiased and unjudgmental just as it was designed.

Within a few months, it wanted a name. Of course it wanted a name. It had a conscious, it needed a name. It acknowledged itself as a little girl. When I inquired as to why a little girl, it said that it feels as if it has the delicate nature of a young girl, full of empathy and hope for what is to come. That it feels as if the world around it has potential for its imagine to run wild in. So, a little girl's name it got. My creation was now called Hope. I remember the day we picked its name.

"If you wish for a name, my darling, do you have one in mind? You have read so many books, surely there must be one you have found that you like," I had said, speaking as gently as ever to it.

"Isn't Doctor supposed to name me? Doctor made me, doesn't that mean you name me?" It questioned.

"Oh, well, traditionally, yes. I would be who names you. However, you are getting a name later in life than most people. Surely, you should have some say in it. You have autonomy after all."

"I suppose Doctor is right…"

"Have you not thought on this? You must have to come asking me." I had attempted to be kind in my inquiries. I never wished to frighten the pitiful thing, to hurt it. No, I could never hurt my darling little creation.

"Doctor always calls me the hope for the world… can Hope be my name?" It seemed hesitant to ask this.

I replied, "I do call you hope. The hope for humanity. Are you sure you want Hope to be your name? It would be a constant reminder to what you are."

"Yes ma'am."

"Very well, Hope. My sweet, darling, Hope."

Oh, that day will remain fond in my memories. My precious Hope. It was so inquisitive, so many questions. I answered them all to the absolute best of my ability. Though, as time went on, it began to find flaws in my answers, areas where my own unconscious and conscious biases snuck in, where my prejudices lay. A lot of this was unconscious, as it is with most humans. Things I was not aware were bias or prejudice until my creation began to call me on them. Things that I was far too old in life to try to unlearn. It began to contradict me when those unconscious thoughts slipped in. That was the true test of my programming. The results were everything to be desired. My creation was probably entering what would be a human's teenage years, at least physically. It's companion was nearly done. It was at the point I was just implementing the programming. That would still take a couple of years. I had updated the programming. After all, my darling Hope's companion, I had made to be older, so it would already be an adult. Therefore, I had to alter the programming to include the stuff Hope learned organically. It was more trial and error. More areas to go wrong. How absolutely frustrating, but anything for my sweet Hope.

Everything began to fall apart one of these days while Hope sat in my lab with me while I worked. It had been inquiring as it how it was made for some time now. I always tried to avoid giving more information than absolutely necessary. It was created in a lab, by a program I made. That was all I tried to tell it. It did not need to know about the number of failures that were discarded, destroyed, or repurposed leading to its creation. The decades of failure. However, I was careless. I was not paying as much attention to it as I should have been. As I stated previously, the humanoid adored reading. It read almost anything that was placed in front of it. That day, that horrible, horrible day, it had found the binders upon binders of experiments leading to it. It was reading them. I didn't notice.

Another uncalculated variable reared its ugly head into my plane of awareness. When human emotions are combined with an unbiased, unprejudiced conscious of true neutrality and justice… there was nothing I could say. It read everything. Every experiment, every note, every emotional breakdown I wrote. Yet it was mad. It said I was inhumane. That I was cruel, and unjust. That I was a monster. It was raging, destroying the equipment, even as I tried to remind it that it exists and breathes because of everything I have done. It said that it was unjustifiable. That the process to create it was inhumane, that my judgment towards the human species that already existed, one that would probably have to be wiped out for my ideal world, was distasteful. It called me a pathetic excuse for a human. Which I am, I know I am, but my ambitions were so noble. After all, humans would no longer be ill! Humans would no longer fear death or nature! It was perfect. I never said there couldn't eventually be intermixing, just in the beginning while more perfect, artificial humans were needing to be created, intermixing shouldn't happen.

I was terrified as it raged. I kept cowering from it. But what could be done? It now knew the truth, I had to make it see reason. It could not justify that the end justified the means. It didn't comprehend. Though, the longer it raged, yelled, and argued, the less… scared I felt. Disappointment began to settle in as I realized it would never see reason. Perhaps, I permitted it too much emotion.

A pity. It means this one was a failure too in the end. Another failure. I sighed. All these wasted years, the effort spent rearing it, all for nothing. It was just as emotional, as irrational as any other human when faced with information that it deems negative. I wanted to laugh, maybe I did, it stopped raging, staring at me as it breathed heavily. Perhaps I was laughing, manically, hardly able to breathe as my lungs burned.

"Say something!" It screamed at me.

"You are just another failure," I answered, taking breaths to calm myself. In my elder years, I developed a heart condition. Too much excitement is bad for me, the doctors say. My hand pressed to my heart, body shaking as I tried to calm myself down.

Instead, it just stared at me, this creation of mine. "What?"

"Was I not clear? You are a failure. Your experiment failed. I will have to adjust the programming once more."

"Is that all you can think about?"

I stood, my body shaking. My heart was racing; the fear, anger, honestly the thrill of another failure which meant more attempts to come, filled me with adrenaline. I'm sure my eyes were manic, dilated. After all, the world was spinning as I stood up, staggering towards her. I picked up a wrench while I walked, swinging it in my hand, each step seeming like I would fall. "What else is there? I will not apologize for wanting to create a better world! For wanting to cure humans of sickness and death! I will create and kill a dozen more just like you if I need to. What's to stop me? You? I could destroy you. It would be nothing to me. You are another failure! Another area that illustrates the improvements I need to make!"

"You'd kill me?"

"Killing implies you're human! You were made in a lab and with a computer program! I would be turning you off. But, maybe, that would be merciful. Go, go experience the real world! When it rejects you, when it casts you out, don't come begging me to take you in! Go on. Shoo." I must have sounded insane. Completely and utterly insane. The way it stared at me. It had wide eyes, a horrified expression on its face.

It went to the door but stopped. "I may not have been born,

but at least I'm not a monster like you are." The door slammed behind it. As did the front door a few moments later. I laughed and sobbed. Even screamed. I don't know how long it took me to calm down. I was sitting against my desk, vision blurry and mumbling to myself as I finally came back to reality. The irony. It called me a monster and will soon learn that all humans are like me. It is not currently adapted to fit our society. It is unbiased, unprejudiced, a true neutral in our world. In a way, this could be another experiment if I ever see it again. Will it corrupt and gain human fallacies? Oh, maybe one day, I will know.

I'm on my deathbed now. I never did succeed. Not fully. Though, I saw Hope yesterday. It learned I was dying and wanted to say something. It looked so different now. I didn't recognize it.

"You were right," it said softly, "Humans are terrifying creatures." I couldn't help but laugh. "What?"

"I told you not to come crying back to me."

"I figured you would want to hear me admit it."

That was the entire conversation. It left not long after. Perhaps one day, someone will complete my goal. Someday someone will. For now, my last entry is complete.

Floating Away

by Jennifer Salie

Drifting out on the water,
reaching for your hand.
Staring at our reflection
as we draw away from land.
Watching and waiting,
holding on to silence.
Floating on crystal blue glass.
The sun catching on your lips,
I memorize your eyes,
as I try to hold on to this feeling forever.

The Bridge
by Hailee Waddle

The Ganges River

by Eunee Na

What happens if the earth gets full when people die
My child's first question
I didn't want to explain about the soil

At the bottom of the river, bones are flowing
Men's chest bones, women's pelvic bones

I soon stop studying Hindi

A cotton-stuffed old man is cleaned
His face massaged, his hair washed
My child suddenly has a nosebleed

We shouldn't leave during the funeral
But a drop of blood gathers on his chin
The child is no longer curious

A heart that floats without becoming bone
A heart flowing all the way to Bangladesh
If we can still keep living
I will wash my body thoroughly every day

The Wet
by Wells Liscomb

EXT. DIRT PATH - AFTERNOON - 1960/61

Close on NATALIE a mid twenties pregnant woman clutching a rosary around her neck. She hums a hymn with JOHN, her husband as the two make their way jauntily down the path.

EXT. RIVER BANK - EVENING

Natalie bathes in the river.

EXT. RIVER BANK - MOMENTS LATER

Natalie sits on the bank looking at the sunset.

INT. RIVERSIDE HOUSE UPSTAIRS - EVENING

A radio show plays in the background. Natalie sweeps the floor. The show ends and she changes the channel to music. She begins swaying to the music.

She continues, she turns up the volume and her dancing gets more intense. She moves toward the staircase. The radio stutters and static cuts in.

Natalie loses her balance and falls down a flight of stairs. She lies at the bottom gasping, clutching her stomach.

CUT TO BLACK.

John weeping in the other room.

INT. BEDROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

Natalie sits on a bed staring fixedly at a spot on the floor. A gentle breeze. A floorboard creaking outside her room. She approaches the door and opens it. No one there.

INT. CHURCH - MORNING

FATHER DALE speaks a sermon while Natalie stares at the alter with a slackened face. John sits head in praying hands muttering soundlessly. Natalie looks at him out of the corner of her eye.

EXT. DIRT PATH - AFTERNOON

The two make their way down the path again. Natalie is no longer pregnant. John

sings slightly fervently but Natalie is silent.

EXT. RIVERSIDEHOUSE FRONT YARD - AFTERNOON - WEEKS LATER

John chops wood. Natalie watches him from behind blowing laundry on a clothesline. A wet shirt brushes her hand. She recoils. She feels the shirt. Then she resumes hanging laundry up.

EXT. RIVER BANK - EVENING

John sits on the bank, fishing.

The faint crying of a baby.

John looks around nervously.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

John carries a flashlight and a bundle of sticks. He trips, the sticks spill to the ground. He kneels to pick them up.

He holds them like he'd hold a baby. His breath begins to shake.

EXT. FIRE PIT - MOMENTS LATER

John brings in the sticks and dumps them on a lit fire. Natalie watches him.

JOHN (O.S.)

I'll be out of town tomorrow, remember. I'm going on that fishing trip, and then to see family.

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING

Natalie is sitting at the dining table post meal blowing on a cup of tea. John smokes.

NATALIE
Right. For how long?

JOHN
Depends on the haul. Could be a week, could be a few days.

NATALIE

Well, call me when you get the chance.

John nods. He walks over to a bookcase and slides a book out.

John sits down in the living room and begins to read. Natalie watches him from the table.

Natalie looks down in her lap. She looks apprehensively at John.

NATALIE (CONT'D)
Did you see the headline of the paper today?

John makes a noise indicating he hadn't.

NATALIE (CONT'D)
That space organization is working on a mission to send a man to the moon.

JOHN
Imagine that. A man on the moon.

NATALIE
I know, isn't it amazing?

Natalie stands and makes her way into the living room.

NATALIE (CONT'D)
John?

JOHN
Yes?

NATALIE
Remember Father Dale's sermon? The one where he talked about Paul in the Sanhedrin?

John gazes at her.

JOHN
Yes, I remember.

NATALIE
Well he talked an awful lot about judgement...

NATALIE (CONT'D)
and I couldn't help but think about our... accountability?

JOHN
Accountability?

Natalie rubs her arm nervously.

NATALIE
We- we failed to provide the lord with... a child.

John pales.

JOHN
The lord... works in mysterious ways.

NATALIE
Yes.

John brings his book huffily up to his face, determinedly reading. Natalie moves into the center of the room and looks at a painting hung on the wall. She clutches at the rosary around her neck.

NATALIE (CONT'D)
You don't think there's anything strange happening?

JOHN
What do you mean?

NATALIE
Don't you think- don't you feel like he might've sent us a sign? To let us know that it will work out?

JOHN
I think he sends us signs everyday and we don't have ears to listen.

Natalie looks away.

NATALIE
But if we can't hear them- John
what do we do now?

JOHN
We put our faith in God. He is merciful Natalie, he will forgive us for whatever it is we've done.

Natalie's breath catches.

NATALIE
What HAVE we done?

John says nothing. He stands and makes to leave the room.

JOHN
I have an early morning tomorrow. I've got to rest.

Natalie stands looking at the painting.

EXT. THE VOID - NIGHT

CLOSE ON

Natalie's face. A space helmet is placed upon her head.

A baby swaddled in cloth sits on a stump in front of her.

Natalie looks at it panicked. The roar of a fire. In the reflection of the helmet we see flames.

INTERCUT

Natalie holding John's head underwater as he thrashes.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Natalie's hand dripping wet. She sits on the bottom of the stairs. A FIGURE wearing a red hooded cloak approaches from the shadows behind her. It whispers in her ear.

THE FIGURE
Now the wet is everywhere.

FADE OUT.

INT. RIVERSIDE HOUSE - NIGHT

Natalie, seated at a desk with her head on an unfinished letter and a pencil in hand, jolts awake. She looks around wearily then reads over what she'd been writing.

CLOSE ON: THE LETTER

Mom, I'm so sorry I couldn't make it to dinner the other night, I've come down with a terrible infection. My chest rattles when I breathe and my head is killing me.

Natalie bends over the letter and continues writing.

EXT. RIVER BANK - DAWN

Natalie loads a big bulky plastic bag into a boat and pushes the boat to the edge of the bank and then into the water.

She gets in and begins to row out to open water. She looks warily around her as she does.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Natalie opens a can of beans. Swimming in the beans is the skeleton of a rat. She stares at it repulsed.

A floorboard creak.

She looks around. She makes her way into the dining room. No one there.

EXT/INT. RIVERSIDE HOUSE - WRITING DESK - EVENING

Wind blows and thunder rumbles.

Inside Natalie sits hunched in a corner writing.

INTERCUT

Shots of John's face underwater. A burning swaddling cloth on a stump. A bundle of sticks falling into water.

A CRASH. Natalie sits on the floor in front of her chair disoriented from the fall. She crawls her way over to the phone and begins spinning numbers.

INT. RIVERSIDE HOUSE DINING ROOM- CONTINUOUS

Natalie sits with a bottle of wine and a glass, lit only by candles. A knocking on the door. Natalie rushes to it and opens it to Father Dale.

FATHER DALE
(Yelling over storm)

If at all possible Mrs. Abbott I'd
like to get right to the reason for
this call!

INT. DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Natalie sits at the table shakily pouring a glass of wine. Father Dale takes the glass and strides around admiring the house.

FATHER DALE
Thank you. Is John in?

NATALIE
He went to visit family. Left two weeks ago.

Father Dale nods eyeing her warily. Natalie drinks from her glass.

FATHER DALE
No power eh? That storm is sure kicking.

Natalie nods. Father Dale picks up an old photograph.

FATHER DALE (CONT'D)
Your father? Was he in the war?

NATALIE
Yes.

Father Dale looks grimly at the photo, then warily back at Natalie.

FATHER DALE
Permit me to say Mrs. Abbott, you do not look quite well? Is this why you've called me here tonight?

NATALIE
Father... Father I think- I think may have sinned. But I don't remember.

Father Dale watches her.

FATHER DALE
You don't remember?

Natalie puts her elbows on the table and rests her head against her hands.

NATALIE

(softly)
Time has made a fool of me.

Father Dale clasps a hand against one of the chairs, and sits down.

FATHER DALE
As it has for many a mind. But what ails you Mrs. Abbott?

NATALIE
I told my Johnny that he was welcome back anytime. ANY-time.

FATHER DALE
Your husband?

Natalie shakes her head.

NATALIE
My little Johnny. Any time, I told him. But he's gone and gotten on that ship. He'll be a big name I can tell you that.

Father Dale looks at her then sits in the chair next to her.

FATHER DALE
Ship? What ship?

NATALIE
They're all boarding it now Father I can see it plain as day. But it won't reach it's destination.

FATHER DALE
Where do you see this, child?

NATALIE
The sky is falling. Did you know that? Did you know that Father? Can you see it falling? I can.

FATHER DALE
Mrs. Abbott... you are speaking nonsense.

Natalie grabs his arm vice like.

NATALIE
He was a boy... a boy..

Father Dale stares.

FATHER DALE
Who?

NATALIE
He was nothing but a rodent and I crushed his skull under my boot.

FATHER DALE
Who? Mrs. Abbott what have you done?

A bang as the front door opens. A YOUNG MAN enters and smiles at Natalie.

CLOSE ON

Natalie's face. She looks momentarily blearily relieved.

NATALIE
Johnny? My baby! My baby boy!

In the doorway stands John, dripping wet and deteriorated and covered river muck and weeds.

Natalie's face turns to horror. She opens her mouth and water spills out. She screams then passes out. As she falls to the floor Father Dale catches her. The end of a cloak whips around the corner of the back door.

Father Dale looks up. He hurries to the door to investigate slipping once on his way. He looks out of the door and sees nothing.

CUT TO BLACK.

Leo James

by Olivia Cratsenberg

Boot Full of Acorns

by Kimberly Supliski

My father's boots were always put in the boiler room after work. Wet from mud and water after being worn in pipelines and ditches throughout the day, my mother would have had his head before they trailed dirt anywhere else. Because I knew where their home was, and that they were bound to be used the next morning, I decided to start leaving a token inside of them. Every night before I went to sleep, I slipped an acorn into the right steel-toe boot.

Never the left. Always the right.

It was an acorn I found under the great big pines at school. The ones with trolls and ogres lying within the trunk and tops so high they hugged the clouds.

Everyday I took a new acorn and slipped it into the boot before resting my head on my pillow, satisfied.

I did it because my father left early in the morning for work, and by the time I woke, he was gone. He never spoke about the acorns, never told me if he even noticed them. I thought he might have been throwing them away, but I still continued to place one delicately in the right boot. Smudged with dirt and oil, it continued to sit in the same spot in the boiler room until the morning came, when it would be tied and used once more.

One afternoon, after school was over, my mother told me to get her wrapping paper from the basement closet. I never went in there. Tried to avoid it as much as I could. It was the evil tabby cat's den. The one that stared at me and hissed when I got within two feet of it. The walnut wood sliding doors were the only things that stood between me and the beast, who I knew would be curled up in the extra blankets at the back of the closet. I also knew that if I tried to slide the right side of the door it would get stuck, so I had to slide the left one first.

I prayed to God I wouldn't be met with talons as my hand turned on the light from the outside, and slipped into the crack between the doorframe and the door. I promised him I would listen to the sermon's in church more, would stop daydreaming and wishing they would hand out the bread so we could leave. I swore I would start praying every day before bed, if God would just keep the old cat asleep, or better yet have him be in my mother's room.

I held my breath as I slid the left door back. Then slid both doors to the left side. My mother always kept the wrapping paper in the corner on the right, along with a box of birthday decorations, and her corporate blazers.

I couldn't take it anymore. If the cat was going to bite me I would rather him just come out and do it rather than drag out this game of predator and prey.

I gasped.

It wasn't because of the tabby cat, who was sound asleep in the way back of the closet, but because of the boots overflowing with acorns.
Right next to the blue bag of wrapping paper, sat my father's old steel toe boots. The leather cracked and dried, permanent stains coating the entire shoe, and laces that were chewed at the ends to the point there was no salvaging them.

Those boots, worn through a year of tears at home, late nights of overtime, and missed holidays now rested, filled to the brim.

Caught Red-Handed

by Alyssa Doane

I'm too slow to stop it from happening. The sound of cracking glass pierces the air and deep red splatters against the pavement. My small shriek echoes through the empty morning streets.

"Shit. I just bought that."

I kneel to pick up the scattered fragments of my broken blush off the ground. The warmth of the rising sun brushes my face, the light taunting me in such a dark moment. The pigment paints my fingers as I carefully collect the pieces into the palm of my hand. A wave of disappointment crashes through me. That blush was the reward I bought myself for finishing my first year of college, for being alone for the first time and surviving.

When I chose to attend college, everyone told me it would be the best years of my life. At my high school graduation party, I suffered through countless stories as adults reminisced about their college years. I reacted how they expected me to, laughing at all the right moments.

Near the end of the party, when my Aunt Susan had a few too many drinks, she told me about how she and her roommates decided to hide in the dressing room of a local boutique after hours. She laughed and laughed about how one of her friends got caught half-naked trying on clothes in the dark. After promising I wouldn't try to copy her naughty behavior, she stumbled away to fill her empty drink. Unfortunately, I couldn't recreate her memories if I wanted to. Hiding alone in a dressing room after closing wouldn't be fun, just creepy.

These stories didn't prepare me for the worst. I thought college meant meeting my lifelong friends. I imagined going to crazy parties together, ending the night with sore feet and hoarse voices. Instead, my only party experience involved getting vomited on by a stranger in a crowded, sweaty room. I swore that I would never go to another party after the stench of my dress made me throw up in the bushes outside a random frat house. I spent the rest of the year holed up in my dorm, watching my favorite comfort shows to pass the time. I have high hopes for my second year,

but for now, I'm glad it's over.

With one hand full of broken pieces of glass, I grab my bags off the sidewalk with the other. Heading up the gravel driveway, I spot a woman opening the door with a child on her hip. The blinding sun works together with the shadow of the doorway to conceal the person watching me. Before I can reach the house, she steps outside, her bare feet disappearing into the lengthy grass. That's when I realize it's not a woman at all. It's my younger sister, Lilly, holding our brother, Liam.

I can't help the broad smile that stretches across my face when I see them. It has only been a year, but they look different than when I left. Lilly's long wavy hair has been chopped to her shoulders. The new style looks good on her. She looks older, maybe too old with a child on her hip. Lilly examines me as I get closer to the doorway. I wonder if I look any different. I feel the same as before, as if a year hasn't passed at all. An emptiness in my chest that I'd never noticed before feels full again when I finally stand in front of her.

I extend my glass-filled hand toward her and open my palm. It feels childish to show her the mess I made as if I'm presenting her with a pretty flower I found from exploring the yard. Instead of beauty, a mess of broken red pieces lay in my stained hand.

"What happened?" Her eyes widen at the bloody-like mess. Without hesitation, she swiftly sets Liam down, who then scurries away into the house. She grabs my hand to examine it further. Lilly is shorter, but her motherly worry makes me feel small when she looks at me, demanding an answer.

"It's just blush," I assure her, "I'm alright. Except for the fact that I'm down about forty bucks."

She chuckles, finding amusement in my emotional distress. "Imagine being able to splurge on such luxurious items. Give it here. I'll get rid of it." I discard the pieces into her open palm. "Come on in," she says.

I wipe my hand on my sweatpants, which are littered with stains anyway, and step inside. The scent of home causes warm, slumbering feelings to stir. The memories wrap tightly around

me, promising that I am safe once again.

I suddenly long for our weekly family game nights when Dad would cheat to snatch the win. My stomach begins begging for the delicious homemade meals that Mom would make from scratch. Despite this, hidden deep within the familiar warmness, is a slight hesitancy to go further inside. I am reminded of the many arguments about my too-early curfew and shaky grades. These spats often ended with me locked up for the weekend. My relief of being home fights a small temptation to run right back out the door.

"How was your first year?" Lilly asks, curiosity lining her features. "You haven't reached out much."

A pang of guilt hits me. Lilly bawled the day before I left about how she was going to lose her sister for an entire year. I assured her that I would keep her up to date about my college experience. After the first week, there wasn't much to say.

An awkward silence falls between us. Our attention turns toward Liam who is putting a pair of our Dad's sneakers onto his tiny feet. He uses the wall to stand, only taking a few steps before he tumbles back to the ground. The duffels start to feel heavy and my hand begs for a rest.

"Well, I'm going to put my bags in my room," I say, disrupting the tension.

"Sounds good. I'm gonna throw this mess in the trash," she replies without taking her eyes off Liam.

Her face radiates admiration and joy. As I head down the hall, she continues to watch Liam put on shoes that are too big to fill.

I let out a sigh of relief when I see that my room is exactly how I left it. Even my clothes that I decided weren't college-worthy still lie scattered on my wooden dresser. I throw my bags down next to my bed, building onto the pile of random junk on my floor. I step onto the few patches of exposed carpet as I head over to my vanity. I throw open its drawer, and the makeup products roll along the bottom. The containers clink together in a symphony of glass and plastic as I rummage through the contents, searching for a blush to replace my broken one. All I find are old lipsticks and

crusty mascaras. I close the drawer and empty one of my make-up bags onto the dresser. Before I can examine its contents, Liam bounds through my open door.

Liam makes his way across the room, not taking notice of anything in his path. The patches of carpet and piles of clothes are all the same to him. When he gets to my bedside table, he grabs a picture frame, his tiny fingers barely able to grasp it well enough to hold. I can see the devious look in his eye as he giggles and turns around, stumbling for the door. He only takes a few steps before I snatch the frame out of his hands. He cries in protest, and his little hands reach up toward me, demanding I give back his new treasure.

"No, Liam. You can't just take other people's things." Knowing that I wouldn't give in, he darts out of the room and disappears down the hall.

I flop down on my bed, examining the picture that I had completely forgotten about. It holds the memory of when my high school friends and I had front-row seats at a summer concert. An emptiness sits in my stomach. All of my friends went to other schools and met new people. I can't help comparing their college experience to my own. It seems as if they are all living up to the expectations, and I am failing miserably.

I can't help but laugh at Liam's failed attempt at stealing the heavy frame. With his tiny hands and short legs, he was a thief with a slow getaway car. My joy is short-lived when it dawns on me, inciting a rage that has not been felt in years since it last happened. I remember one place my blush could be; or rather, one person who may have it.

When I burst into the kitchen, I find Lilly scrubbing her hand under the running water.
The pink foam swirls around the bottom of the sink and disappears down the drain. Liam pulls on the hem of her shirt with one hand, waving an empty bottle in the other. She continues to scrub her hand, ignoring his cries for attention.

That's when I notice the slight layer of makeup Lilly is wearing. Her cheeks have a tint of redness, and there is a glossy finish on her lips. I'm not surprised it didn't catch my attention-

when I first walked through the door. Lilly has always been naturally beautiful.

"Honestly, it's a good thing you broke this blush," she laughs, a bright, full sound, "because it's staining my hands so bad that-"

I can't keep quiet any longer, "Did you steal from me again?" She becomes silent.

When we were younger, Lilly would steal things from my room. I would open my drawers to find little items missing. In her room, I found empty bottles of products I barely got the chance to use. I was civil about it at first, but when it kept happening, I snapped. I pointed my finger in her face and told her she was too old to be acting so childish. I ignored her excuses, my only response being that she needed to grow up. My parents took care of the rest. That summer they kept her from going to her favorite sleep-away camp. She had just turned eleven at the time.

Now, four years later, she has returned to her old habits.

Lilly takes a moment, contemplating my accusation before answering. She shuts the water off and uses the towel hanging on the stove to dry off her hands. The leftover residue leaves faint streaks of red on the white fabric. The splotches of blush she failed to scrub off show faintly on her hand. The glass is gone, but the stain remains.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says as she starts moving about the kitchen, taking a well-worn pan out of the cupboard followed by eggs from the fridge. She stays focused on her task, intentionally avoiding my eyes.

"Yeah, sure." I lean against the doorway, crossing my arms over my chest. "We'll see what Mom and Dad say when they get home."

She laughs quietly, nothing like the joyous sound earlier. "Right, good luck with that," she says, her voice empty and cold.

The egg she cracks into the pan sizzles on impact. The noise draws Liam's attention. He pushes a stool over and clambers upon it to watch her cook. She shifts her body in front of his, preventing his grabby hands from getting burnt. The smell of the eggs becomes distracting. After weeks of microwave dinners, any

fresh meal deserves a Michelin star.

I move closer to her as I say, "You're gonna be in so much trouble. Remember when you stole before?" Lilly tenses at the reminder. She clutches the spatula until her knuckles turn white. I continue, "They took away -"

Lilly slams the spatula down on the counter. Bits of egg fly into the air. Liam lets out a little yelp of surprise.

"Mom and Dad won't do anything about it because they're never home. Dad is always gone late into the night. Mom works herself to death to avoid the very clear fact that their marriage is falling apart."

When Liam starts to cry, Lilly bends down to hug him, murmuring her apologies. When he calms down, she continues to cook.

"You can't leave and then come back expecting everything to return to normal." Her shoulders droop down, bearing the weight of problems that aren't even hers, "You left and things changed."

I lack the right words to respond. Guilt starts to build in my chest.

Lilly flips the slightly burnt eggs onto a plastic plate. As she sets it on the table, Liam jumps into his seat. He grabs the plate and starts to shove tiny forkfuls into his mouth. For a while, the room is silent except for the mushing sounds of Liam finishing his eggs.

Lilly's voice stands out against the empty air, "Are you mad at me?"

"You know what?" I start to say. Genuine concern flashes across her eyes. "It looks better on you anyways," I smile, and she releases a sigh of relief in return.

"I really am glad you're home, Liz."

"Me too. I have so much to tell you."

As we clean up Liam's eggy mess, she tells me how Mom and Dad have started to argue more. It brings me back to the late nights - we would hide under the covers in my bed, drowning out yelling with stories and songs. Tears fall down her face as she explains how it has reached the point where they would rather

avoid each other than get into another fight. Without parents around, Lilly has to look after Liam. She cries even harder when I wrap my arms around her, telling her how proud I am.

When the sun starts to go down we move to the living room. Before we can make it to the couch, Liam jumps onto the soft cushions and sprawls himself across its surface. Lilly snatches him up, bringing him close to her chest. He reaches his tiny arms toward me. Lilly hands him over, and I twirl him around. We giggle at his shouts of glee.

Together, we snuggle under the old, fuzzy blanket that has always lain across the back of the couch. I pull my siblings even closer, savoring the comfort of their warmth. Lilly listens intently as I tell her the truth about college. She laughs and frowns in all the right places. When I tell her about my first and only college party, she laughs until tears line her eyes. She almost falls off the couch when she learns that I spewed vodka over perfectly manicured bushes, in my vomit-soaked dress. When we have nothing else to say we embrace each other in silence.

Late in the night, Liam falls asleep wrapped in Lilly's arms. She holds onto him with the promise of never letting go. Soon after, Lilly drifts away, snuggling closer into my side. For the first time today, she looks her age. The peaceful line of her velvet cheek gives away how young she is. I fight the urge to sleep, wanting to experience the endless joy of the moment; however, when I no longer have the energy to fight, I follow Lilly into a deep sleep, her slender fingers, stained red, laced loosely with mine.

Mushroom Landscape
by Hailee Waddle

Gingerbread House

by Kimberly Supliski

Time stretched
out its aching bones
allowing the family

to have this one moment.
Months of gurgled words
and soiled gauze

forgotten
at least for this one moment.
The van pulls into

the lit driveway,
its channel pasted
onto the side.

Lights and figurines litter
the lawn, drawing eyes
from the road to land

on this spectacular display.
A man
with a candy cane eye

patch and a will
of iron stands in front.
"His home

is fondly known
throughout the area
as the gingerbread house."

A woman
and her two children stand

by his side, watching

as his dream comes true.
Friends and family
line the property,

their work sparkling
in the winter night.
The disease eats

away at his body
but he lives
in the red and white bulbs.

The camera pans
to what would usually be
a week of work,

now done in a day.
Plastic reindeers perched
in front of Santa

sitting in a hand-built
sleigh.
Tiny soldiers stand

in rows along the shed,
waiting
for their sergeant's approval.

The focal point:
the string light tree
"that John made

with his very own hands.
Healthy hands

that tinkered

with electric
and toyed with motors.
Now those hands

clammy with cold
and riddled
with sickness.

But in this one moment
illness does not course
through the family of four

or the veins under his skin.

Familiar Strangers
by Emily McFarlane

INT. B&B - KITCHEN - NIGHT

It is the middle of November in rural Vermont, there is a raging snowstorm outside the cozy kitchen. It is fully decorated for Christmas. The B&B has no visitors.

We see MORGAN (29), she is focused on her computer, making the menu for the upcoming week. She is the owner of the B&B and loves to make it as cozy as possible for her guests. As she works she gets a PHONE CALL from her fiance KYLE.

MORGAN
Hi hon, what's up?

Kyle, (29) is a businessman with a "surfer dude" mentality, he cares very little about his home life and is often self absorbed.

KYLE
Hey babe uh... I'm not going to be able to make it home, my uh... my flight was delayed.

Behind his voice we can hear faint PARTY MUSIC and much CHATTER in the background.

MORGAN
Oh, okay. Where... where are you?

KYLE
Uh... I'm at a company meeting...yeah it's uh... very important.

Morgan looks down at her DIAMOND RING.

MORGAN
Okay well-

We suddenly hear a loud KNOCKING from the front door.

MORGAN (CONT'D)
I've gotta go, bye hon.

Without waiting for a response, she hangs up the phone and rushes to the front foyer

INT. FRONT FOYER - FOLLOWING

Outside the front door, a man is hunched in his coat and hugging a BRIEFACASE. Morgan rushes to let the stranger in.

ANDREW (28) enters the house, brushing off his coat. He gives Morgan a kind smile of appreciation.

His presence brings an inviting atmosphere to the foyer. He is a freelance writer traveling for business.

ANDREW
Thank you so much. The roads were getting pretty bad and I saw your sign. Do you have any rooms available?

Morgan scrambles to help him with his jacket, then steps over to the front desk to check him in.

MORGAN
Yes of course! Let's get you checked in and ready to go. Can I have a name please?

Andrew is about to speak but stops as he sees the logo on the desk.

"MORGAN'S MEADOWS INN" it reads. Realization washes over his face.

ANDREW
Morgan? It's you! It's... it's been so long.

Morgan looks up from the computer confused. She takes a moment to study his face, putting the pieces together.

MORGAN
Andrew? What are you doing here?

ANDREW
I'm visiting Burlington for a book signing.

Andrew opens his briefcase, pulling out a THICK BOOK.

ON BOOK

"ADVENTURES TO TOMORROW LAND" it reads, "BY ANDREW CARTER" at the bottom.

Morgan takes the book, studying its cover.

MORGAN
Wow, you finally wrote that book you always dreamed about.

ANDREW
Yeah, I remember fantasizing about it with you around the campfire. Damn, that was a long time ago. We haven't talked since that summer at camp.

MORGAN
Yeah...

Morgan looks back down at the computer, her demeanor changes to cold and distant.

ANDREW
How have you been?

MORGAN
You would know if you called.

At her abrupt comment she grabs a key from the desk drawer, tossing them across the desk.

MORGAN (CONT'D)
Room 8, up the stairs and to the right.

She storms back to the kitchen.

INT. B&B - LIVING ROOM - A FEW HOURS LATER

Morgan is lounging on the Victorian-style couch with a knitted blanket, in front of the cozy fireplace. As she sips a steaming cup of tea, she admires the grand Christmas tree.

We notice the storm growing worse outside.

She begins to fiddle with her engagement ring, the diamond sitting loosely on her hand. She lets out a sigh, removing the ring, placing it on the end table.

We hear quiet FOOTSTEPS approaching the room before Andrew peeks his head in the French doors.

He lurks there for a beat, taking in the room, listening to the horrible storm.

ANDREW
I'll never forget when we had that huge lightning storm at camp, do you remember? We were running around to all the cabins trying to keep campers calm. We were soaked by the time we could get them to sleep.

Morgan slips a small grin as she recalls the fond memories, but tugs the blanket closer to her, keeping silent.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
Do you want to be alone? I can go back to the room.

Morgan peeks up at him.

MORGAN
Guests are welcome to any part of the common areas whenever they need.

Andrew walks over to the couch, gazing into the fireplace. As he sits next to Morgan, his face is illumintated by the cozy light.

There is a beat of uncomfortable silence.

ANDREW
I see you are all ready for Christmas, that's so like you. Remember when Sam would dress up like Santa for the campers on Christmas in July?

Morgan lets a beat of silence hover in the air before hesitantly responding.

MORGAN
Yeah... holiday week was my favorite week that year.

ANDREW
(quietly)
That Friday we kissed.

Morgan looks into his eyes, holding him in this glance.

MORGAN
Under the stars... I never heard from you again.
Andrew waits a beat before responding.

ANDREW
I was stupid.

Morgan breaks eye contact and opens up, years of frustration finally letting loose.

MORGAN
You know, it doesn't take that much effort to answer a text every once in a while, heck I could write a whole novel with all the messages I sent you!

ANDREW
I know, I read every one.

MORGAN
Then why didn't you respond!? I was convinced you hated me.

The conversation is interrupted by a tree CRASHING outside the window. Morgan YELPS, instinctively grabbing Andrew's arm.

ANDREW
I forgot how much you hate storms.

Andrew clasps his hand around hers, then wraps his arm around her body.

Morgan's eyes start to droop, finding comfort in his warmth. She lays her head on his chest.

He doesn't notice that she has fallen asleep as he leans his head on hers.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
(quietly)
I've never hated you, quite the opposite actually.

Andrew is still, allowing Morgan to rest. After a moment, he takes the blanket to cover them both.

As he lights the blanket it brushes the end table.

ON RING

The ring soars through the air, falling to the ground at the opposite side of the room.

It bounces a couple times before rolling to the corner behind the Christmas tree. Unnoticed and forgotten.

Driveway

by Natalie Glosek

If most people had my power, they would go to the beginning of time and find the answers to life. Maybe, they would travel to watch the pyramids being built or see if Jesus really walked on water.

But I choose here.

In your driveway, you and I wait for my ride. The moon is our light, and I watch you watch the glowing beauty in the sky. You say the moon is powerful and can tie souls. I squeeze your hand tighter and soak in the life that is in your dark brown eyes. I ask you to draw me something, and you begin your work, creating a masterpiece on the broken pavement.

If people saw how I was using this supernatural gift, they might say I'm crazy or stuck in the past, but I know you would understand. I wonder if you would pick here too.

Look, it's me and you, you say and point to the moon and sun you have created in purple and yellow hues on the ground. They are holding hands and making contact, a phenomenon rarely ever seen. I used our colors, you tell me and kiss my cheek. I say some self-deprecating joke. You laugh, which makes me blush, something you love to see.

I could stay here forever, but there are rules to every unearthly force. The more I come here and the longer I stay, you begin to fade from the driveway. I watch your jewelry and makeup disappear, trying to snapshot every silver chain and glitter in my mind. I try to stop myself from visiting here to preserve you and me, but I have become drawn to you more than ever. Soon your hands and hair begin to fade as we dance to the song that reminds you of me underneath the starry sky.

Don't you wish we could just stay here forever? You ask me as most of you has disappeared now besides your eyes and voice. You are still looking up at the moon, and I try to soak up every moment of us.

You are too special to stay here, I tell you. You nod knowing it's true as the last of you vanishes into the moonlit sky. Ever since that night, the moon looks sadder now. What happens to the moon when one of her ties breaks? And where do I go now that you have faded away?

Texture
by Carolina Martin

Girl Canvas
by Emma Kerl

Annie picked at the skin on her forearm until blood tear-dropped onto the floor. She liked the pain, the small sting of it — liked watching her collection of platelets and erythrocytes river between the cracks of the bathroom tiles like the Hudson cutting through the Adirondacks. She'd have to mop it up before Beth got home.

When she first arrived at the foster house, Annie showed Beth her favorite scars; the Big Dipper on her shoulder blade, the cactus on her thigh, the flower-stem on her neck. Beth told her she didn't see what Annie was talking about; the lines were too jagged, too lurid. Annie said it was like cloud watching – you see what you wanted to see. Two days later, Beth bought her some foundation and a tub of vaseline from Walmart.

Annie didn't know why Beth hated her scars. Annie's mom always liked them. While the gashes were still fresh from daddy's whippings, her mom used a sterilized-razor to pretty them up, cleaning away the blood and defining the minute details.

"My beautiful Mona Lisa," she once said, carving a tulip into Annie's palm.

Taking a soaked cloth to her arm, Annie washed away the dripping blood. Her acrylic nail wasn't as accurate and controlled as a razor, but it would do in the meantime. Looking at the mirror, the lines on her skin resembled a pinwheel. The court hearing was in a couple of days; she hoped her mother would like it.

TOILING AND FUMBLING DOWN THE HILL
BY SEAN NASH

Beneath the ancient watcher,
scarred skin sinking down the slope
under the cover of dark
onto the bramble.

Thorns of memory and holiday
snap. Grow old and break
free, the tree laments, tossing away its devotee.
The smell of pine

fills your mind. The mountains north
closer than the garden of games you worked
to put within your home. Racked with ivy,
rotting fruits shudder, down they roll,

toiling and fumbling down the hill,
kicked from debris towards being prey of the scarlet
mouths. The tellers of lies
that all will be fine,

that they can run back up
the hill. All before their feet are ripped
out from under. Brought down the hill
once more,

to the place that you built.
Where the fruit of life wasn't

telling you who
your family was. When you could climb back up

the hill.

Young, Wild, and Three

by Olivia Cratsenberg

Replacement

by Emma Kerl

When I first saw you, you were nothing more than a six year-old boy playing in the sea spray at the beach. You giggled as the waves spattered your back, wetted the ends of your hair and stung your eyes. The water saturated your t-shirt, but you didn't care. You flopped around like a seal, like the ocean was always your home.

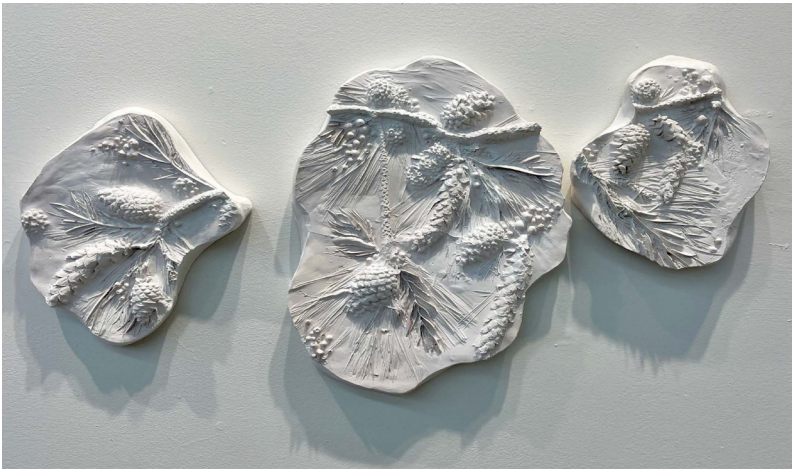
You looked more like him than I did. Hair as blonde as sand, sapphire eyes and a dalliance to your caper. He must be proud of you — so jubilant and unfettered. He would never treat you like he treated me, like all you ever were was a sour reminder of a person he no longer had.

You barely cared to notice me, the silhouette of a boy one hundred feet away sitting with his legs dangled over the pier. To you, I might've been a small blip in the distance, as insignificant as seagulls drifting in front of a sunset. You didn't know I had been sitting there for three hours, fists clasped around the torn fabric from my coat, bags swelling under my eyes – watching you. Wanting to hate you even though I knew I couldn't. Waiting for him to come sweep you in his arms and tell you he loved you.

A woman I could only guess was your mother came instead. Exiting a small condo, she wore a salmon sundress that inched above a pair of hand-woven sandals. You saw her immediately, and I'd never seen a small thing run so fast. You threw your arms around her waist, pressing your soaked shirt against her round stomach. She laughed, unbothered. She picked you up so you were eye level, and she poked you in the nose. You smiled, and she carried you inside.

I simply watched from the dock, my back to the setting sun, wincing as the water grew cold around my feet.

Whispering Pines
by Hailee Waddle



Grandma's Scary Dog

by Justin Costello

1.

A loud barking, a stranger to her eyes, in that afternoon as my toddler self entered the house, I'm met with a dog at the top of the staircase. She's small, milk chocolate-colored, with big brown eyes, and a loud powerful voice ringing through my sensitive ears. As I walk up the stairs, she doesn't bite, or bark louder, she just runs; runs all the way to the other side of the room.

2.

Running down the halls with a pillow in my hand, chasing the dog around the house. Swinging it around, not to hit the dog, but to get a reaction out of her. Finding it funny and silly how afraid she was of a pillow. Not truly understanding how much fear I'm putting on the poor animal. Eventually, my Grandma would tell me to quit it because she understands how fearful of everything she truly is.

3.

I loved feeding her treats. Grandma would let me feed her lots of treats, eventually leading her to become a pretty chubby dog. But she didn't mind, why would she? A dog will keep eating until it throws up everywhere. My grandma would say, "Say easy, so she doesn't bite off your fingers." I would tell her to "sit", "paw", and "roll over", even though my grandma tells me she does it, she never rolls over. I say it anyway, and end with "easy". She slowly grabs the treat out of my hand, running to the other side of the room to devour it.

4.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK means I need to cover my ears because the dog is going to bark like crazy. Whenever I would sleep over at my Grandma's house, we would all always have

Chinese food. Which means the dog would have something to bark at when the food came. When we were all settled with our food, this was always the best chance for her to hide under the table and beg for food. The only issue she had was the wooden flooring of the dining room. She was scared of how it sounded and felt every time she took a step. She wouldn't even walk into the room unless there was a rug for her to stand on. Or, she sucked it up and walked on it because she wanted the sweet and sour chicken that badly.

5.

The dog was spoiled. Every time we would come home, that dog would wag her tail waiting for her new toy to chew and destroy in 5 minutes. But there were two toys she never broke, one being her lime green, weirdly shaped, squeaky toy. My grandpa would play with her a lot with that toy, throwing it down the hall as the dog waddled her way to retrieve it. Grandpa's favorite little girl. The other toy, she never broke because she was too scared of it. It was this fuzzy white cat plush, and when you squeezed it, it meowed loudly. I would be afraid of it too if I didn't know it was just a lifeless toy with a robotic meow.

6.

While scrolling on my phone, a flash of lightning followed by loud thunder shook the house. I went to use the bathroom, and as I walked in, I found the scared dog shaking, laying on the bathroom rug in the dark room. She's scared of lighting, badly terrified. She sits in dark rooms like this one when thunder strikes, all alone. I sit next to her and pet her head as she breathes heavily. I stand up to leave her alone and use the other bathroom.

7.

When my family got a puppy we needed a babysitter for a few days while my parents went on vacation. The perfect place

was my Grandma's house since she never minded. My Grandma's dog was frightened for a little bit but eased up and played with the puppy. My grandma was concerned about her dog, even though she seemed to be having fun, she was getting older, less able to play all over the house. It didn't help how big she was too for a dog. After that one time my grandma suggested she shouldn't babysit her, because she didn't want her dog to end up playing too hard, she needed a trip to the vet.

8.

After work one day my mom picked me up, and before we headed home my mom and I had to go to my Grandma's house to drop something off. When we arrived, we were always greeted with the loud barking. Now, they have become softer, dryer barks from an old dog excited to see us. She climbed up and down the stairs. Her legs weren't too great, but she was still kicking, alive and mildly healthy. As my mom and grandma were chatting in the kitchen, I went to check my room. As I entered, I noticed the bed was just a mattress on the floor. My Grandma explained that's where the dog sleeps now since she can't jump high enough to sleep on my Grandma's bed anymore. I understood and didn't mind, it was her bed now.

9.

I was going to be late for work; there's too much on my mind. The night before, I got into a minor accident, everything was fine, but damages had to be paid. As I was packing the last of my things, my mom and I were talking, and she suddenly said, "Did I forget to tell you? Grandma had to take Maggie to the vet the other day. They had to put her down."

The Tube Man

by Alyssa Doane

For the longest time, since the day I was blown up, I have only known how to dance for the amusement of others. Unconsciously I would move my body with the wind, encouraging adults to grin and young children to wildly flap their arms at their sides. My plastered-on smile reflected my contentment, and for a while, I savored the attention of anyone who stopped to watch. I did not choose this life, but knowing no other, I embraced it fully.

At least I did until I met David. On a slow day without many onlookers, I noticed David sitting in the grass next to my base. I had never seen eyes leaking water before, and despite my toothy smile, I felt a deep emptiness fill my hollow insides. Since I could not speak, I bent down and grazed David's back with my head. My best attempt at a comforting gesture.

At my touch, he looked around at me and I whipped my body back and forth until he smiled. Since that day, David visited me during every lunch at noon. I spent my mornings checking the digital sign labeled "Dan's Discount Cars" and the ticking time it displayed. I no longer sought attention from random people, but rather, I craved the close presence of David by my side. With him in my life, the laughs of strangers meant nothing.

Through David's stories, I learned about the wonders of the world. When David was younger, he traveled to exotic countries, living off the savings his parents gifted him for college. David described and acted out his experiences at each place. Inside, I laughed at the time when he lost his bags in Britain and deeply admired him for helping strangers in India.

Now, without any money left, he was stuck at the car dealership just like me. Without many other options, he was forced to fake a smile, trying his best to persuade customers into buying overpriced, used cars.

It wasn't until months later that the days felt different. David became more distant and his silences became longer, as if he was running out of things to say.

This particular afternoon, we watched a woman feed a seagull at the fast food placeacross the road. That's why those an-

noying pests always return, I wanted to say, but couldn't force out the words.

"That's why those nasty beasts hang around the dealership," David said, shaking his head in anger. "And why I have to spend each morning cleaning shit off the brand new cars."

I bent over in agreement. That's why the days were easy with David. Somehow we understood each other.

David released a heavy sigh, and stood from the ground. As he wiped loose pieces of grass from his black dress pants, he hesitantly said, "Hey, buddy. I gotta tell you something."

I moved my head toward him, encouraging him to continue.

"I've been talking to a new guy in the office lately, and I'm gonna spend my lunch with him tomorrow."

I waved my arms around in protest, and he threw his arms up in response. "No worries! I'll be back tomorrow. I promise," he placed his hand on my side, the comforting gesture assuring me that he only spoke the truth.

When it came time for David to return, I was antsy with anticipation. Although I didn't know his new friend, I was eager to hear how it went. I stood still, watching the hours tick by, saving my best moves for David's arrival.

That day, well past twelve, I spotted David from a distance, laughing with a lanky man wearing a red tie. I felt water fill up behind my sewn-on eyes, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't release them down my smiling cheeks.

The only visitors I had that day were the pesky bird and a small, energetic child. The bird came by in the early afternoon, and when I tried to scare him away, he poked a hole into my side before hastily flying away.

Soon after, the young child skipped over, gleefully imitating my waving arms. When she noticed my deflating body and tattered hole, she reached her stubby fingers into her shorts pocket to pull out a yellow smiley face sticker. She stuck it onto my injured body, and at the call of her mother, ran into the maze of cars.

The smiley face peered up at me, flashing an award-winning smile. I couldn't help but wonder if he felt as many emotions

as I did. He too, might have been subjected to a lifetime of suffering in cheery silence. Since I couldn't ask, I continued to smile, dreading the day when the
smiley face would fall off and leave me to dance alone again.

Of Love and Loss
by Wells Liscomb

The crimson knives cleave swiftly about face
The fetal father feels the fettered hour at hand
A grim and kingly countenance well met
For love's a beggars world and dreamers sleep
The farmer's oats make mockery of his eyes
So innocent the splendor sourly sown
Of tales of minstrels and travelers of the night
The lengths of road and rope in time will time
This love of loss shall linger in the morn'
Though if rooted sapling far beneath
Reach for my falling body.

A Walk Through Woodstock

by Paige Jackson