



ChannelMarker • Volume 19

# ChannelMarker

Volume 19



**TIDEWATER  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

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ChannelMarker



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Volume 19 • April 2020



**TIDEWATER  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

From here, go anywhere.™



Hope Drew, *Girl in White*. Mixed media, 2019.



## 2020 Reading Panel

Cecilia Petretto, *Norfolk Campus*  
April Campbell, *Portsmouth Campus*  
Sarah Stevenson, *Chesapeake Campus*  
Robert House, *Virginia Beach Campus*  
Michael Tarpey, *Chesapeake Campus*  
Rick Alley, *Chesapeake Campus*

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Special thanks to Heather Boone  
*Visual Arts Center*  
TCC at Old Towne, Portsmouth

**Cover Image:** *Untitled*, Painting by Grace Martin.

This issue of *ChannelMarker* is dedicated to the memory of  
Nita Wood, beloved teacher, mentor, and friend.

*October 13, 1961 - September 3, 2019.*

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Ty-Yanna Hudgins, *Untitled*. Mixed media, 2019.



## Beige

*Krista Nash*

The pink of house insulation-  
The stuff your dad tells you not to breathe too heavily around,  
else the glass will pierce your lungs-  
Becomes beige when it's been burnt.  
It's the same color that my dog's fur was,  
And it still looks soft to touch,  
Even when the edges of it have been melted into pavement.  
I thought it was my dog's fur until I saw it,  
So much of it,  
Scattered around the pavement in small, tan tufts.

It was insulation,  
Because when the house burned down,  
They didn't tell us about the dog.  
When I stood in front of the charred remains,  
The corpse,  
The rotted chassis of a home,  
I entertained the idea that she'd run away before the smoke filled her  
lungs.

It was insulation,  
Because there was just too much of it,  
Too much to fit on any dog her size.  
My mind told me to step on it to see if it crunched.  
I didn't.

See, the shards of glass I was told to never breathe in,  
May have sliced up my shoes.  
They may have worked their ways up the soles and the leather,  
And they may have cut up the skin of my feet.

The pink of house insulation-  
The stuff that's unfamiliar and all-too familiar at times-  
Becomes beige when it's burnt.  
I sometimes think I should burn it myself,  
To see the same color that my dog's fur was,  
To see how soft it looks to the touch.

I don't.  
Because it's insulation.  
I know it's insulation.  
And I'll never, ever make sure.



# House of Glass

*Molly Vivian*

Her eyes moved to the kitchen window of the old lighthouse and took in the gray landscape stretching the 130 miles of deep, cold water to Canada's invisible shore beyond the giant pane of glass. Half-filled boxes were waiting to be finished packing behind her, surrounded by the slippery stacks of her life, roughly sorted into four generations worth of memories. The decommissioned lighthouse had been purchased at auction by her great-grandfather in 1908 for \$958.00 after the copper boom went bust. It had been their family home ever since, though her family had been reduced to one, just a year ago come December. Beyond the window, the temperature hovered in those few degrees between rain and snow, but the clouds blocked the same amount of sun.

"Hey there," came an approach from behind her. She turned from the dismal view and gestured to her neighbor coming through the back door at the pot of coffee brewing next to the sink, the appliance sitting askew on the counter.

"Take your pick," she said, nodding at a section of countertop that held an array of chipped mugs, a set of pans with badly scratched Teflon, and an antique flour sifter—the kind with the handle that turns a curved bail against a screen. Goodwill was scribbled in red Sharpie on a bit of masking tape and was stuck to the counter in front of the pile. "Hell, take it all."

The neighbor took in the mass of rejects and briefly raised his eyebrows before selecting a Green Bay Packers mug with a chip in its rim directly above its trademark green G. "Didja think about just throwing them out? Save yourself a trip?"

"Humph. I'd toss everything and just buy new in Arizona. Thought I'd clear more when the lighthouse sold, but my bank balance makes me think twice about buying a pack of gum."

The neighbor chuckled.

"I won't even clear \$1000 after I pay off the mortgage and Mals' lawyers."

"You could just stay..." he began, renewing the argument he'd taken up the day she told him she was putting it up for sale and moving out west.

"And live with the gossip?" she snorted. "Besides, those buyers from downstate finally put up the earnest money."

"Hey, you know it's not your fault," continuing the thread of his tired argument. "Mals was gonna do what he did, no matter what."

Seven scenic Michigan lighthouses arrayed the circumference of her chipped mug that she now refilled from the fresh pot of coffee. Her own historical lighthouse hadn't made the cut.

Neighbor and Keeper turned to gaze out the kitchen window, both alternated taking gingerly sips with blowing air across the steaming surfaces in their mugs. It was a very large picture window, installed the year she'd inherited the lighthouse for the view of Lake Superior's expanse from the breakfast table. Now a third of the view was blocked by a condo built two years ago, zoning approved by the township board swayed by coffers filled with more dust than revenue.

"I know that," she finally responded, her eyes still looking outward but shifting to focus on his faint reflection in the window, "but I certainly set the stage." It was his turn to humph, but she went on, her eyes moving back to the lake, "I'm tired. I just want a fresh start."

"You love this place. You love this lighthouse. You love this town. You need this lake."

Her gaze moved to the condos and then back to the gray lake, now dotted with whitecaps, the northerly wind picking up just enough to drop the temperature the few degrees needed to favor the inevitable snow. "I'm tired," she repeated, "this place used to comfort me. It was our home. Now..." she trailed off.

His reflection nodded. "It's still your home. This is just another storm. It'll run its course."

She walked over to the sink and carefully poured her remaining coffee down the drain, then turned and threw the chipped cup in the trash. Watching her, the neighbor's eyebrows again lifted briefly. He sipped the last of his coffee, walked over to the sink and rinsed his own blemished mug and, after drying it with a bit of old newspaper from a stack next to a half-filled box, slipped it into the oversized pocket of his winter coat.



# Staying Strangers

*Jenae Fontana*

He is staring at me; I can feel it. I don't even need to look up to know that his sunken, fiery eyes are fixed on me. I can hear the chatter of at least fifty people. Some are here for coffee, others for companionship. I am here for both. He is a college student laughing wholeheartedly with his friends and I am sitting alone. Still, I am content to be in the presence of others who are living their own lives separate from mine.

There is a homeless lady sitting on a bench begging for food, her clothes baggy and torn. Her hair is falling out, and I can see the blistering bald spots on the back of her head. It is not a nice day; it is humid and sticky and the air outside smells like what can only be compared to as hot garbage. My heart aches for her; I fight the urge to look away, but eventually I give in when I am startled by the sound of someone's phone ringing.

I look at him and our eyes meet. I look away and then I look some more. He is sitting down, but I can tell he is tall and wide-shouldered. His legs are muscular, and he wears his socks high and pants short. He looks as if he grew out of those denim-colored jeans years ago but cannot afford to buy a new pair—or maybe he is nostalgic with his clothes; I will never know. His caramel-colored hair drops under his ears and swoops in tiny ringlet curls around his forehead.

I wonder about his life, his friends, his school. He is a stranger, and I would like to keep it that way. If I get up and talk to him and get to know him, I wouldn't like him. I know it. I want to keep this idea of this sweet-faced boy that I have perceived in my mind. I need to keep the mystery alive; I am not interested in anything else. I watch as an older couple walk in and order their drinks. I sit quietly watching as the man pays for their coffee, and the woman focuses her eyes around the room searching for an open seat.

The bench is now vacant, and I am sitting here staring out the window wondering where the homeless lady could have disappeared to. The smell of stale coffee beans left on the counter for too long fills the air. It reminds me to finish off what is left in my cup and grab another cup. I am thankful for another day that I am still alive and breathing. I am thankful that I am inside drinking overpriced drinks rather than sitting outside asking strangers for spare change and hope.





Michaela Bly, *Austin*. Colored pencil and pastel, 2019.



## Those Summer Fridays\*

*Matvei Patrikeyev*

Fridays too I got up late  
and stripped my clothes off in the blazing heat.  
Then with sweaty palms that dripped  
from moisture in the air, turned up  
the air conditioner. My body always thanked me.

I'd sleep and feel the warmth beaming, penetrating.  
When the house got cool, I'd exult,  
and hastily would disrobe,  
embracing the ventilation system of that house,

taking the A/C for granted,  
which had driven out the heat  
and peeled my clothes off as well.  
What did I know, what did I know?  
Of the A/C's beautiful engineering?

\*Parody: "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden



# The Funny Funeral

*Luke Hodges*

Who says we can't laugh at a funeral? I am positive that I am not the only one who has always dreaded going to funerals. Let's face it, funerals are always so sad and depressing. Perhaps it is the soft sobbing of mourners, or maybe it is the weird astringent smell from the embalming fluids that cause this mood. Funerals are especially difficult for me. I am expected to be quiet and whisper, to not make any sudden distracting movements, and to not show any signs of happiness or enjoyment. However, last year I attended a funeral that completely changed my perspective. I found that funerals do not have to be a dark and despairing time of mourning but a time of laughter and celebration.

In April of last year, my grandpa, Wendall Hodges, unexpectedly passed away. He was a pastor for over forty years. He was short, bald, loud, and hysterical. He would light up any room with his boisterous personality. Everyone loved him, and it showed in the number of people who overcrowded the funeral home. My dad, who is very much like my grandpa, officiated the ceremony. My dad opened in prayer, and I believe that everyone assumed this funeral was going to be the typical somber experience that everyone had grown to expect.

After a few songs, my nine-year-old little brother, Jonah walked up to the podium. He was dressed in a fancy little suit, carrying a huge black binder. Standing on his tiptoes, he grabbed the microphone and asked, "Can anyone see me?" All that we saw was his little spiked hair and his blue eyes peeking over the podium. The crowd hesitantly laughed as though they were unsure if it was appropriate to do so. He then slowly and methodically began to speak.

He began by saying, "My grandpa loved me so much, he would give me five dollars," as he pulled a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and held it high above the podium. He then said loudly, "Just to shut up!" At that point, the crowd did not hold back their laughter. He continued, "Whenever my brothers and I would act up or fight, my grandpa would say, 'Hey kid, I'll give you five dollars if you stop.'" After a brief pause, he said, "I have to be honest, sometimes I would act up just to get some

cash." At this point, everyone was laughing hysterically. But Jonah did not stop there. He went on to say, "I always had money thanks to grandpa." Glancing down at the casket, he said, "I don't know where I'm going to get my money now." There was not a dry eye in the chapel, not from tears of sadness, but tears of laughter. After Jonah spoke, other people, including myself, felt comfortable coming forward and sharing many hilarious stories about my grandpa.

My grandpa's funeral was certainly not the typical funeral I had expected. It was a time to celebrate his life. I was relieved to learn that not all funerals have to be doom and gloom. Numerous people have told me that my grandpa's funeral was the best they have ever attended. I suppose they felt the same as I did. I find it fitting that a man who brought so much joy to so many people would end his life continuing to bring joy and laughter, even at his own funeral.



# File No. 1

*Dominic Pistritto*

NAME: ██████ Wilmington

CODENAME: ██████████

AGE: 246 (Assumed)

ETHNICITY: White

BORN: ██████ 4, ██████ (Assumed)

THREAT LEVEL: 6

ABILITIES: ██████████ hand to hand combat, holographic projections, military tactician, ventriloquism and ██████████.

HISTORY: On the date of ██████ 4, ██████ the nation was declared independent from other nations becoming the United States of America. However, ██████ ██████ was secretly paranoid that other nations would attempt to infiltrate the newborn country and eliminate it before it would flourish. Adams met with numerous scientists and discussed all means of every possible future that could be avoided. The scientists that ██████ collaborated with came to the specific answer known as ██████████ ██████. The number represented the amount of threats that could be wiped out in less than 30 minutes. ██████████ ██████████, ██████████ ██████████, ██████████ ██████████ found the answer to the protection of the U.S. With the discovery of a ██████████ ██████ in the ██████████ ██████████ an unconscious ██████████ that lost its memory was found. After finding that the great organism was a ██████████ ██████████ convinced the being it was human and responded by morphing into a ██████████ ██████████ ██████████ pleased with the event had used this to solidify the new project under secrecy. After a few dozen assignments, ██████████ began to experience vivid dreams of another ██████████ ██████████ and across the known ██████████. After many years of self-discovery, ██████████ discovered that ██████████ had

been lied to for too long. In retaliation, █████ attempted to free █████ of █████ existence and attempted suicide by shooting █████ in the chest. █████ body sunk at the bottom of the █████ River and was never found.

Centuries later in 1945, █████ body was found by two marines who were shocked to see that █████ body was still intact and had not decomposed. █████ was later reanimated and questioned. After an astronomical amount of conditions made, █████ redeemed as “█████ Wilmington” continued █████ mission as the assassin that █████ had already been with modern weapons and backup. Once Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed, █████ went into hiding and became one with the public, attempting to live a normal life with regular human attributes. In 2019, a bomb was detonated by an unknown assassin that targeted █████ █████ has been rediscovered and quarantined with extensive medical treatment. No age is visible. Full physical recovery estimation is about six weeks given enhanced body.

CURRENT LOCATION: Classified, Level 8

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Stephen Nakatani, *Keeper of Secrets*. Clay, 2019.



## The Tainted Trickster - A fable

*Matthew Tyler*

Felix lay down on a log, tail shaking, as he was unable to move due to pain. The fox, which had once been a typical trickster, was unable to be that anymore. Felix's body, gaunt from being unable to eat and his eyes, tired from being unable to rest, were putting onlooking animals at unease.

A squirrel chattered at Felix: "What's wrong? Out of tricks?" and laughed. The fox had no response. "Let's take back all that fox took from us!"

Following the suggestion, the animals pushed Felix off the log and took all the things Felix had taken from them by past pranks from the inside of it. The forest creatures dispersed and left Felix on the ground, alone.

Hours passed, and as night fell, Felix had managed to move himself to a soft patch of grass. William, a wolf who was nearby, took notice. "Felix, what's wrong?"

Felix sighed. "I don't know. My body hurts, and I don't have an appetite. I'm nearing my time, and I pushed everyone away with my tricks in the past. I can feel it."

William shook his head. "Not all help. I will stay."

Felix managed a small smile. "Thank you."

As dawn approached the next day, Felix's time had ended. The animals that had once jumped for the chance of payback at Felix pretended to hold sad expressions on their faces.

William, who had stayed true to his word and remained with Felix, turned to the other animals. "Get lost. You shoved Felix to the ground despite his pain and took everything he had left. You don't deserve to be here!"





Ellen Bible, *Green Man*. Clay, 2019.



# The Street Smells Like Syrup

*Dorothy Shytle*

The city bustles

sharply.

quickly.

loudly.

But all I can hear is your laughter

And all I can see is your smile

And in a crowd of thousands, it is only us



## Keep your friends close . . . but not that close

*Elleizabeth Palmer*

I was 18 years old. I thought I could do it at first. I had a job and I was going to school. My mom was even going to help me out a little. It wasn't too long after I left my home that I realized I was not ready for children, A.K.A, my college roommate. That's right, my high school bestie and I finally graduated and were ready for the real world, or so we thought.

We did everything together. She and I were in the same chorus classes, we did drama, and we both played leads in our high school production of *The Little Mermaid*. We stayed at home after graduation and came to TCC so we continued to see each other a lot. She and I always had the best times together at parties, sleepovers, concerts. One day, after 14 successful sleepovers in a row, we had the bright idea to move out.

The idea became a reality about a week later. I was desperate to move out at the time because I was tired of being parented. This place was a steal, \$400 a month split between the two of us. Two rooms, one bathroom. I figured it's better than any college dorm would have been. We shared this huge room and left the other room for studying or hanging out when people came over. For the first two weeks, it was awesome. After school and work, we would eat like crap, play Xbox, and just hang out like we always had.

Little did I know, it was about to get nasty. I started waking up to a new smell every day. "Hey girl, did you take the trash out?"

"Yeah I did," she would say.

THEN HOW COME I FOUND A FULL TRASH BAG HANGING IN MY CLOSET??

"Did you take the dishes downstairs?" I would ask.

"Yeah I did when I got home," she would say.

THEN WHY DID I FIND STACKS OF DIRTY PLATES IN MY SOCK DRAWER??

"Did you eat the last of my Oreos?"

"Noooooooooooo..."

AND THE NEXT DAY I FOUND THE PACKAGING IN MY PILLOWCASE!

These are all actual things that happened. I had to teach her to do dishes, laundry, and even how to make a bed. Even after teaching her, she never did it anyway. This was my best friend; I didn't know how to tell her, "Hey, stop being disgusting."

Until the day finally came when I knew I had to say something. I felt that I had a right to say something, and I needed to. After you wake up next to a girl who is plucking her downstairs-hairs with YOUR tweezers and disposing of the hairs on YOUR blanket, then you have earned the right to call a girl gross.

I talked with her, saying I had to move out. "We just live too differently. I'm sorry I just prefer to live without dishes in my drawers or stepping on random moist spots all the time. My socks do not appreciate it."

One would think that is a reasonable cause to move out, but she completely denied being a slob and said I was just a neat freak. I thought it through for a few days. *Am I just a neat freak? We moved out to be free of being bossed around... am I really being bossy? Maybe I am asking too much...* Then, when a friend that came over mistook an old glass of milk for a candle, I knew it was time to get out. After my roommate left for work, I gathered all my stuff and moved back home. Keep your friends close, but not that close.



# The Air Is Cold and So Am I

*Dorothy Shytle*

I saw you the other day  
And I thought I would feel something

maybe regret.

maybe sadness.

maybe anger.

but instead I felt nothing

and somehow that seems much worse.



## Circinus Galaxy\*\*

*Charisse Minerva*

As the elevator doors opened the young man walked in, wearing headphones, head bobbing, snapping his fingers. An older woman, standing in the corner, looked up as he entered the space and drew a dark blue portfolio tight to her chest. He moved to the opposite corner and slumped against the wall, mouthing a string of sounds, at once rhythmic yet barely audible.

At the end of his thick metal necklace hung a pendant shaped like a hand with fingers raised in the most impossible configuration, a symbol of the gangsta sign language popular in his genre. His thick black leather jacket sported red designs on the chest pockets, green patches on the elbows, with bright yellow ribbing defining the seams. His man bun crowned shaved sides with tracks cut by some tiny lawnmower into swirly linear configurations.

He looked over at his elevator companion. Her pale lipstick just brought color to her somewhat narrow lips. She wore a hybrid hippie professional outfit, flared colorful skirt under a tailored jacket with a posture as erect as a broom, her hair just jostled enough to look like planned chaos. Slowly she ran long slender fingers through grey speckled hair, transporting it back behind her ear. This movement revealed dangling glass earrings in the shape of peace symbols.

Each guarded their elevator corners, releasing polarized scents, his pungent and strong, hers a mixture of flowers and herbs. The combination formed an unusual odor that pulled at each of their nostrils. Simultaneously, they both looked over at the designation floor lights. Only one floor was pushed, Circinus Galaxy Productions. He responded with another rhythmic locution while she let out an audible sigh as she once more used her fingers to tuck her hair back behind her ears.

Suddenly the elevator lurched and then sat motionless. It had only moved one floor. The Circinus Galaxy Production Offices were in the penthouse. He commenced cussing with a string of profanities that would rival the savviest street orator. She looked over at him, rolled her eyes and stood even taller, more erect. He looked first at her and then at his phone, paused, and set off into a loud oratorical deluge of spoken

words. She jerked away from the wall quickly, clutched the portfolio even closer while glancing at the walls, floors and ceiling of the captive box. The elevator box served as a speaker reverberating his sounds. Its walls became a drum and his fist the mallet.

Gradually the volume of his diatribe lessened. He removed the "Beats" from his ears, tapped repeatedly on his phone, sighed annoyingly and bit by bit lowered his voice into rhythmic resonance. As his sounds became mumbles he slumped to the floor, crossed his arms over his knees and lowered his head. His voice dribbled off into silence.

After a few minutes she also sank to the floor even more slowly and carefully. She assumed the legs crossed "w" shaped, lotus position, popular throughout the yoga world. She then raised one hand to rest on her chest while the other rested on her knee, thumb pads gently touching the index finger, on each hand. Her eyes closed and she breathed deeply for a few minutes. But instead of her breaths subsiding they gradually grew shorter and shorter almost into a pant. She opened her eyes and emitted one long deep exhale. She reached for her sapphire colored portfolio and pulled out a few old and worn handwritten pages. She began reading them aloud softly.

The more she read, the calmer, more melodic her voice became. He slowly glanced over in her direction, the glance becoming a gaze. Her words had a refrain. He mumbled, repeating it a couple of times. Then he added some of his own non-syllabic sounds. She turned her head sharply, glared and then slowly a slight smile came over her face. He nodded again, repeating her words. She started over, from the beginning, and at each refrain he came in retelling, adding, and turning their conversation into a call and response. She began to nod her head in rhythm with his, both in a verbal dance.

The elevator started to move again. They showed no acknowledgment. When the bell rang signaling their arrival at the production offices they didn't move, their impossible collaboration continued without pause. The President of Circinus Galaxy Productions was at the receptionist desk directly across from the elevator bay speaking with a client. He turned from his conversation drawn by the sounds from the newly arrived elevator. He curiously peered into the performance space as the doors opened like curtains on a stage.

\*\*The Circinus Galaxy is one of twelve large galaxies in the "Council of Giants". It was not noticed until 1977 because it lies close to the plane of the Milky Way and is obscured by galactic dust. This galaxy is designated a type 2 Seyfert, a class of mostly spiral galaxies that have compact centers and are believed to contain massive black holes. The galaxy is undergoing tumultuous changes, as rings of gas are likely being ejected.



# The Impossible Isaac Grayson!

*Dominic Pistritto*

You know, I'm going to be the one to break the ice to you, being smart sucks ass. At five years old being able to recite Pi for the half of its entirety along with calculating neurological brainwave predictions was fun for what it was, but I wish it had stopped there. As I grew up, the basic notion of living a normal mental life was completely out of the window. Every second of every day I'm cursed with having an actual quantum mega computer as a brain that haunts me with intense geometric arithmetic calculus designed for landing astronauts on the moon along with other things that would bore the living hell out of you. My parents, God bless their souls, were shocked at my mental capacity and tested me. Albert Einstein had an IQ of 160 that dwarfed men and women of his time. Mine was the crispy hot number which was 360. I could give anything to decrease that number. Now I know what you're thinking, "That's not possible, they did something wrong, your parents were told false information." Ok, listen here buddy, you try solving complex bioluminescent patterns of personality analyzation based on the human retina in under the matter of a second. While it feels damn good to be smarter than everyone else in the room, it also takes a piece of humanity away from you. I would absolutely love to experience the feeling of being in a class, listening to the math teacher and not know what in the hell is going on. Einstein once so eloquently said, "*Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.*" What I have always dreamed of having is exactly that, imagination. The only thing I know how to honestly do is predict the actions of things before they happen and generate formulas in my head that get me ahead of the curve.

Let me give you an example: there was a dude in my computer science class in high school (before the military took me in for my intellect) and he was picking on the other students who weren't fast learners as he was, so I decided to be the hero and gave him a piece of my mind...a giant chunk of it actually. He laughed in my face and spat on my shoe. I smiled and looked up at him. This is where I moved



my king and earned my checkmate. I responded and I quote, "Well, based on the interplanetary momentum of the earth rotating around the sun at 30 kilometers per second in a counterclockwise motion, the gravity would cause you to rely on your sandals not to trip...obviously. Therefore, the sun would radiate its heat down causing your sweat glands to activate and based on your retina's dilation process, you would wipe your face using your right hand and rub your forehead with your left hand. After focusing on this you would bluntly ignore the metal pole right in front of you the entire time. The intricately placed color of hazel in your retina displays you are a clumsy and mischievous person with a history of much needed criminal rechecks and a lot of counseling from an underpaid high school counselor who would much rather eat donuts then listen to your stupid ass daddy issues. With that being said, you will trip and break your toe after wiping your face free of sweat not caring about your surroundings."

I couldn't stop his jaw from hitting the ground. He tried looking cool again in front of the girl he was dating (that relationship will end in 23 days, 45 minutes and 67 seconds to spare) and asked me another question getting closer to me. I could smell the marijuana off his shirt. It was that bad.

"What if I break your jaw right now pipsqueak!"

"Well that ends with handcuffs, loss of bowel control and some time behind bars while I'm sipping green tea with a pungent lemon," I responded. He was irate with me and stormed off and guess what happened. He got sweaty, wiped his face, stubbed his toe, breaking it, and hit the ground hard. No one ever picked on me ever again.

I honestly don't care what you call me: a child prodigy, a clairvoyant, a god among men, an egotistical bastard who hates all his classmates... you get the idea. That's the life I live. Waking up to seizures caused by geometric shapes that I see on the walls, the air, ceilings, furniture and halls, everywhere I walk is one of the biggest curses that no one understands or knows about. I graduated from my high school with a 5.4 GPA and was valedictorian of my class. Not by choice of course because the school used me as propaganda by saying that they helped in making me smart when in reality they deterred me from social interaction even further. My neurons fire 78.6% faster than the average human, but I can't tutor anyone to save my life; explain that one. Deep biometric quantitative data can't tell me how much I hate Harvard, I just do.

I hate doing so well in my classes because I just want to be normal, not a computer. Whenever people ask me how I got so smart I just say to them that I was born this way. But somehow, I know that's not the entire truth. Oh, sorry I never introduced myself, did I? My name is Isaac, Isaac Greyson; I graduated high school at twelve and entered Harvard at thirteen. Wrap your head around that one. I'll leave you with a question. How long will evolution allow men and women of my age to live under the satisfaction of a psychological genius? Then again, if it wasn't for dumb people, I wouldn't be special! Just ask my math professor!



Aaliyah Pettiford, *Fragments*. Oil on canvas, 2019.



## Seven Hours, Seven Stitches

*Jenae Fontana*

I woke up to the sound of my father crying. He waited until I had fallen asleep in the hospital bed before he allowed himself to let go and break down. I have only seen my father cry enough times to count on a single hand. The silent sound of his tears hurt me more than I thought was possible. How did I get here? Why had I done this to myself? I didn't want to die. That might've been the only thing I truly knew in that moment. I could feel it in my bones.

I spent seven hours in the sanitary white-walled asylum that is a hospital room. My father sat in the part of the hospital where they make people sit when someone they love is either sick or dying. I reminded myself that pain is only temporary and this, like most things, would eventually fade into the dark caverns of my brain. But, at the same time, pain is inevitable, and it demands to be felt and understood.

Every time I closed my eyes all I saw was blood. I saw so much of my own blood that night I thought I might be consumed by it. So much red that I became red. Most people are aware that humans have about 4.5-5.5 liters of blood that they lug around with them daily. But what people don't comprehend is just how much blood that really is. You wouldn't think that someone as small as I could produce that much blood and would then choose to spill it onto the floor and down the sink. Gone forever.

I remember not knowing what time it was. Time was not real to me in that moment. Living it felt like it would last forever. Now looking back at it, it seems like it happened and then in an instant, it was over, something that was meant to be forgotten. The sound of the nurse's shoes sticking to the freshly polished linoleum. The screaming children with broken arms and bloody noses. The flickering white lights that hung over me and made my head pound. The taste of bitter nothing. First, the pain of lidocaine shots and then the pull of stitches closing and coming together. I wish I had known in that moment that the numbing feeling in my arm would never fade.

I will never forget the nurse who held my hand and told me that life gets better after seventeen; I just needed to stay alive long enough to witness it. This is not a sad story and it's definitely not a happy one. It just simply is what it is. This is however, both a story about birth and death. Almost dying and then being reborn.



## Haiku Series

*Lavontay Johnson*

Rain dripping from the gutter  
Fall is upon us  
Now we must prepare

Love is in the air  
She is still mad  
So I must love her from afar

Dreaming little big things  
Not knowing where to start  
It will soon come into fruition

The Earth is withering  
We are the cause  
Now we must scramble



Andrew Howald, *Troubled Guy*. Charcoal and pastel, 2019.



# Mnemosyne

*Mackenzie Lesher*

Sleep will not come,  
As the pilgrimage of the unwanted marches onward,  
Fleeing the advances of bestial violence,  
Innocent cries echoing behind the flock.  
Sleep will not come,  
When the residue of their forceful advances remain,  
Swarming across a living temple,  
Undying fingers clawing with avarice.  
Sleep will not come,  
After crosshairs bloodied the warfront from a nest,  
Causing memories to shatter the mundane,  
Altering the reality around the singular soul.  
Sleep will never come.





# Depart

*Allie Aldrich*

I dream in the color of wild raspberry jam  
Drowning in the epics of the mighty  
Fields of emerald and goldenrod  
    Awashed in fallen heroes  
Death watches from the horizon  
    As I search for fading hope  
There is no good or evil here  
    Only the dying  
Hollowed out like bird bones  
    I strip myself bare  
    Preparing for their stories  
Gorging on the broken promises  
And the names of maidens waiting on ghost  
    Offering a kiss and two coins  
    I am the blessed death  
    The path to Elysian



## Her Smile

*Allie Aldrich*

Like every morning, the aged fisherman watched for them, the milling Yawns, as they would make their way over the monstrous arch that connected the two cities. Shadow puppets made with twisted fingers for a child's entertainment that would appear right before dawn broke against the horizon. But even from this distance, the gray man could always tell the Yawns never stopped to see the most wondrous sight the world had to offer them. That moment that the sun would set fire to the seas bursting gold. The way oblivion would be torn into a thousand hues that could never be named, but only lusted after by master artist.

The ocean swirled in long-forgotten languages, singing praises with every strike against his salt worn boat. Even the wind tasted different as it was injected with the warmth of yellow his mother had taught him was the flavor of life. He had been alone so long now with all his loves taking their plots in the cemetery one by one, that the sunrise was the only smile he saw anymore. He had become so attached to the glowing wonder of the morning that he had begun calling it Juliette after his late wife, and with the troubling news he had gotten recently, he began waiting for her more urgently each day. Today was no different as he went over the list in his head one last time. He counted the moments as he knotted his shoes together and checked the stones in the pockets of his heavy wool coat, 3 for each. Bronze slid over the knuckles of his calloused fingers as he fixed his gaze on the horizon. Everything was ready now and he just waited for the blaze.



Kevin Chigos-White, *Balance in Blue #4*. Glass, 2019.



# Click, Click, Click

*Mackenzie Leshner*

The sound of high heels echoes through the streets in a rhythm,  
A rhythm that beckons the broken into our awaiting arms,  
None realizing we are the most broken of them all.

Crisscrossed opaque vines of black strangle our pristine legs like a  
brand,  
Earning us glaring eyes from mothers who would shield their offspring  
from an abomination,  
Eyes that gleam with the judgment of the entitled and prosperous,  
The raking stares of the ogling passerby piercing our body.  
The masses bemoan their colossal troubles,  
Furiously ranting beneath our crimson sheets.

Our lifeless eyes gaze at the world through a hazy gray filter,  
All dreams of a fantastical future evaporated with the click of cold metal  
car locks,  
And long forgotten milk cartons disintegrating in murky lakes of trash,  
Our faces known only to justice in a dusty, meticulously stored file.  
And on and on we march, soldiers to the beat of a drum,  
Our battle cry known to all.  
Click, Click, Click.



## More than Her Demon

*Amber R. Canter*

Once upon a time, there lived a young girl who wanted nothing more than to finally feel “normal”, but the demon that sat perched on her shoulder laughed the dream away. Instead of the normalcy the girl craved, her demon would gift her with unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the inability to carry out day-to-day tasks. Then one day while visiting her fairy goddoctor the demon was given a name: he was insomnia, he was manic episodes; he was severe depression; he was Mr. Bipolar.

Mr. Bipolar was insomnia. As the girl lay in bed and begged the demon to just leave her alone so that she could get some sleep before her children woke, she heard his laughter ringing inside her head. The hushed whisper that he would never leave her alone sounded loudly like a gunshot inside her head. The girl cried and screamed when sleep became an impossible achievement that she desperately craved. Mr. Bipolar was the demon in the girl’s mind that fought off sleep as if it were an enemy invading its castle, rather than a friend just coming for a pleasant visit. Mr. Bipolar mania was insomnia.

Mr. Bipolar was the manic episodes. Sometimes it seemed like the demon was pressing fast forward on the girl’s thoughts, emotions, and speech. These episodes pushed the girl to get everything done; it all had to be done and there was no time to waste and no patience to be found. With the mania came the uncontrollable mood swings. These mood swings were felt by every member of her small family. She would snap at her boys or on her husband and have no excuse. In the logical part of her mind she knew she was being irrational, for she knew they’d done nothing to deserve her treatment of them. It didn’t matter, though, because Mr. Bipolar was in charge during these times and he thrived in the irrational.

Mr. Bipolar was depression. The depression would start as a tiny seed of guilt at how poorly she’d treated her family, and then from that seed a stem of despair would grow because the young girl didn’t know what to do to make Mr. Bipolar just leave her alone. It was in these

depressive states that Mr. Bipolar would really rejoice. He rejoiced as the girl would forget things because all her mind could think about was that her family would be better off without her. He rejoiced as she watched her children play and the smile would fall from her face because she couldn't feel anything but the weight of what she'd said or done to those beautiful boys while she was stuck in a manic episode. Mr. Bipolar rejoiced as the girl sat on the edge of the bed with a bottle of pills in her hand, ready to end it all. Mr. Bipolar was depression.

When the girl's fairy goddoctor named her demon she then took away some of his power. Now the girl knew who she was fighting with. She knew the name for her insomnia, for her manic episodes, and most of all for her depression. With his name she devised a plan to beat him, while she knew that they would eventually have to learn to live together, she first needed to show him that she was better than him.



## Cut-Off

*Cecilia Diederich*

The high-pitched squeal of clashing metal reverberated throughout the small confines of the bathroom. Each harsh note hung in the air for mere fractions of a second before dying, only for a brand-new eardrum perpetrator to repeat the process. Tears tangoed at the edge of my vision, peripherals welling up as the metal clangs continued. Exhaling deeply in frustration, I allowed a quiet profanity to escape my heaving chest, fingers intertwined in frizzy strands of black wire. A patch of dark, razzled strings blemished the white tile surrounding my feet, and I forcefully clenched my fingers and thumb together, mercilessly hacking off lock after lock of tangled hair.

A rush of relief coursed through my veins as the hairy burrs fell to the ground, no longer bound prisoner to my head. My eyes darted up to the mirror. The clear pane gazed silently into my brown orbs, seemingly judging me as it obediently displayed the scene it bore witness to. I held a fistful of my hair in one hand, the other holding a pair of hair-shearing, Fiskars school scissors. I could hardly recognize the colony of keratin strands as hair, let alone my own hair. It too closely resembled a bird's nest, clinging desperately to the nape of my neck, like an eagle's twiggy abode, teetering precariously atop a brittle branch.

I once again glanced in the mirror. Just one final snip and the offender would be gone for good, punished for its crime against my all-too important middle-school appearance. "Yes," I murmured my hushed approval, silently celebrating the death of the irritant.

My celebration, however, was short-lived.

My blood froze as the gateway between the hair torture chamber and the rest of the world was flung open, revealing an audience that I had purposely excluded from the viewing of the hair opprobrium.

A nervous chuckle escaped my lips as my eyes sheepishly darted up to the silhouette reflected in the mirror. "Hi, Mom."

The silence following the greeting stretched into seconds of pure mortification. The bright orange plastic of the scissors dampened

beneath my petrified fingers, a wildfire heat quickly consuming my body as I avoided the gaze of the newcomer.

“What...are you doing?” Her voice rang with a note of disbelief, as if she was still processing the horrific scene.

What was I doing? Was the umbrage I took with the abomination of hair that hard to see? Did the pile of dead biomaterial not speak for itself?

“Um,” I hesitated. “It was really tangled, and I tried to brush it out--I even used that detangler and no matter what I tried,” I paused, placing bold emphasis on each subsequent word, “it...just ...wouldn’t ...untangle!”

My mother pursed her lips, stepping into the bathroom, arms extended. Her fingers brushed across the back of my neck, lifting the untouched hairs into the air, as if offering it as a sacrifice to the gods. Her other hand examined the freshly cut clump of hair, smoothing out the amateur hack job. “It’s so short.” The observation was whispered, each word dripping with barely contained shock. Suddenly, my hair fell back across my back and the warmth on my neck relocated to my hand, guiding it up to the newly trimmed area. I gently ran my fingers through my hair, tensing slightly when the motion ended much sooner than I had anticipated.

In mere seconds, my victory morphed into dread. My stomach soon followed suit with the hair burrs as it sunk to the ground, the hairy balls laughing wickedly at my plight. The tables had turned. I leaned forward, my fingers still laced in my hair as I stared at the mirror. The hair was so much shorter than I had imagined. The three-inch neck nape locks stood out starkly against the remainder of my long hair, mocking me with its unevenness.

“Oh....” I was speechless. With my eyes trained on the sawed-off hair, a cold pool of regret began to settle in the depths of my stomach, each drop rolling down my throat before joining the rest of the growing puddle.

I wouldn’t be able to tie my hair. I wouldn’t be able to style it. I was stuck with the result of my impatience for ...for who knew how long?

I heard a sigh behind me. “I’m going to cut the rest of the hair near your neck to even out the strands. It looks silly right now.”

Well, there went my future as a veterinarian. My haircut had sealed my fate. There was no way I’d be able to escape my inevitable destiny of clownery and tomfoolery now!

“H-how long will it take to regrow?” I swallowed, not entirely sure whether I truly wanted to hear the answer.



"I don't know....one or two years, maybe?"

My world crumbled; I barely registered my mother's departure from the room as she mentioned needing to retrieve proper hair-cutting scissors.

The full weight of my rash actions hung gloomily overhead. I had just traded five seconds of ecstasy and convenience for months of middle school damnation and ignominy. What if my fellow peers saw the hair? How would I even begin to explain how my hair ended up looking like....that? The corners of my eyes pooled at the epiphany of the consequences that my hair punishment would bring.

My eyes found their way to the floor, the black nest of chopped hair entering my field of vision. Trembling with derisive laughter, its question silently echoed in the confines of my mind: "Was it worth it?"

I tore my gaze away from the ball before capturing my own eyes reflected in the mirror.

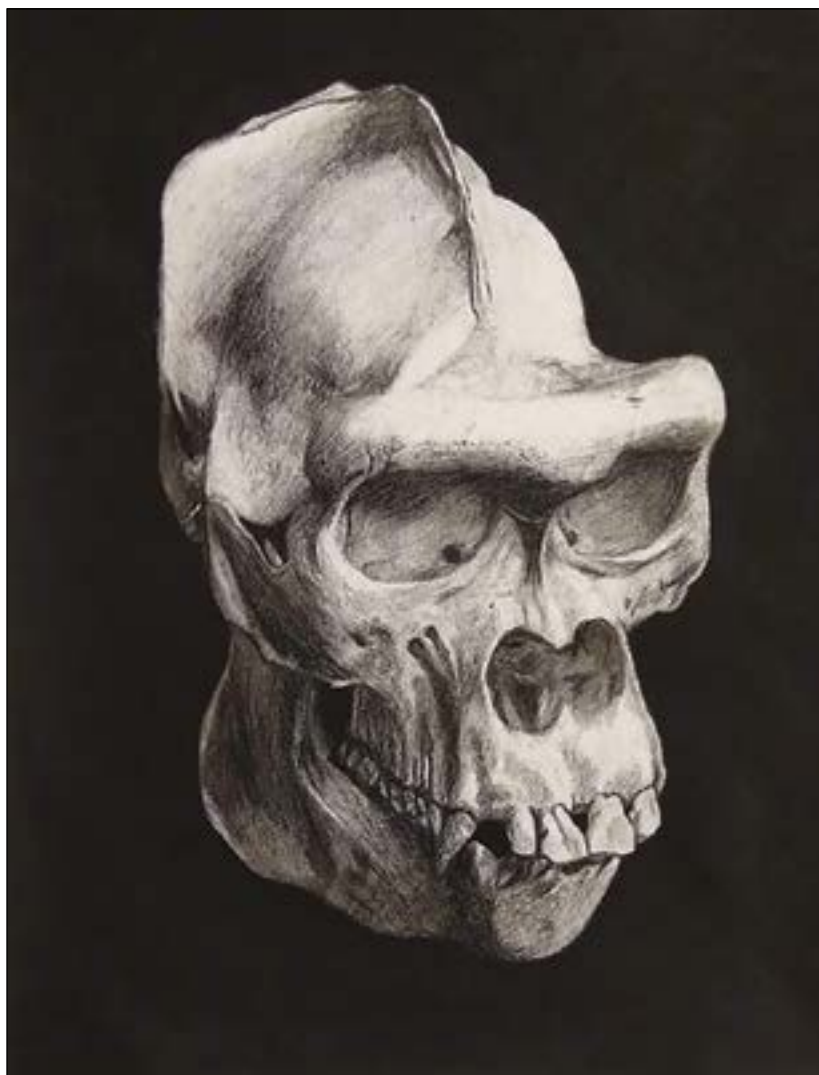
"No."



# Torch Light

*Malcolm Settle*

No more were our fields green.  
The trunks of trees lay fallen;  
uprooted by bronze waters.  
By the cover of night,  
we marched through the ravine,  
following the river's bend;  
on to the next light in the distance.  
Be it friend.  
Be it foe.  
Be it the blaze of a burning city.



Dustin Lee, *Untitled*. Charcoal on paper, 2019.



# The Skeleton of a House

*Cameron Hashagen*

Some people move a lot in their lives, whether their parents are in the military or they change jobs frequently. This is my first time moving in my life and it's quite a somber and tedious experience.

The empty walls echo with past faded memories, leaving marks of the past, almost haunting my head with all the childhood dreams being ripped away. Boxes are slowly suffocating the rooms like quicksand and plaguing the free space that used to inhabit the dwelling. The air seems bitter with dust as everything is shifting one after another. This process continually seems to empty and fill the void of hatred and love, constantly battling one another to just accept that we are leaving and there is nothing to be done. The sound of tape being stretched and broken fills these empty living spaces and echoes back and forth against the walls.

Pictures that once lined the walls are being swiftly removed from their rightful place. Everything is plastered with the bright menacing word of fragile and despite that word, these pictures and items are so much more. They are forms of my family: forms of love, hate and adventure. The process never seems to end till it ends. The numerous empty spots long for something else to take their place. This house wants love and it's being ripped away, for its time has finally come for new owners and new adventurers. The last remnants of my family are soon to perish and with that comes a rebirth of excitement in our new homestead.

This house is my life and will always be a part of who I am and who I grew up to be. This house taught me the basics of hard work and how to be a part of life. These hardened walls sheltered me from storms; they stood even during an earthquake. This house will forever be in my heart despite having to take it apart slowly and painfully. The quiet hallways creak with age, making every step one of almost harmonic tranquility. The wooden steps that used to be carpeted have taken a new role of supporting the boxes that cover them. This house is forever mine, but soon the new owners will move in and I must accept that. I want them to treat this residence that same way my family has and keep the memories flowing because as soon as that day stops this house is dead.



## I Miss the Crazy

*Rebekah McLemore*

It had been a long busy day, which was the norm for any mother with three little boys between the ages of 5 and 9. I pushed the complaining and arguing out of mind; this was my time. I was alone in the quiet of my bathroom, soaking in my bubbly tub. The warm water felt so good around my body as my muscles relaxed and I felt almost sleepy. Ah, just what I needed. Then suddenly, boom!

I jumped up out of the tub, grabbed a towel, and reached for the door. That's when I saw it, a small film canister laying at my feet with bubbles oozing out and water all around. It all started to make sense as I heard the giggles and laughs on the other side of the door. Suddenly my heart stopped beating through my chest as I just shook my head and giggled a bit myself. I should have known; you see, earlier in the afternoon I was cooking supper and the boys were playing in the living room where I had left the television on. It was *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and she had a scientist on. My kids were enthralled as he demonstrated how to use a film canister, an Alka Seltzer tablet, and water to make a small, harmless, but loud bomb. Trying to be a good mom and encourage science, as well as get them out from under my feet for a while, I gathered all the necessary supplies and sent them outside to experiment.

They were outside for hours. I should have known they were staging a coup, waiting for the perfect time to get Mom. Of course, they chose to bomb my nightly bubble bath. It was brilliant, really. All they had to do was wait for the perfect moment to carefully open the door, shake up the bomb, slide it across the floor and quietly shut the door, all the while trying to hold in their laughter. They were successful, and they were so pleased with themselves. Even today, many years later, when the subject is brought up, they instantly begin laughing. It is a memory they will share with their kids and grandkids, and I'm sure will still be shared long after I'm gone.

It's memories like that I treasure, especially now. You see, while in those days I had to carefully orchestrate time to myself, it is all too

common now. I have plenty of it. As it is supposed to happen, those conniving, sneaky little boys grew up. My oldest is in the Army and married, living in Florida. My middle son is three hours away in his sophomore year of college. My youngest is still living at home, but he's in college, working, and spending much of his time with his girlfriend and friends. It is exactly as I planned; they would grow up, be responsible, get their education, start careers and families and move on. What I didn't plan was how hard it would be to let them go. My boys were my life in those days, and they still are, but they have their own lives now. Homework, practice, laundry, cleaning, cooking, breaking up arguments, nursing wounds, it was all I knew. Even grocery shopping was a huge chore as they would grab long sticks of pepperoni to have an impromptu sword fight in the middle of the aisle. My life was crazy.

The days were long, but the moments flew by. Before I knew it there were graduations, boot camp, college, a wedding and an empty house. I was used to being one of the most important figures in their lives; they came to me for everything, and I do mean everything. Sure, they still come to me for advice, but not quite so often. My oldest calls to ask how to make his favorite dishes. My middle son calls to ask me if \$80 is too much for shoes and who has the best deal on jeans. My youngest and I talk about football and even play in a couple of fantasy leagues together. I have it so good. My kids are awesome, and I am so proud of them. I do miss the craziness, though, like hearing my name a thousand times a day, finding strange things in the laundry, and waking up to convince them there are no monsters in the closet. Yes, I even miss bath bombs, sneaky laughter, and my heart pounding in my chest.

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Zorina Amen, *Untitled*. Monotype, 2019.



## Where the Riverbank Meets the Wood

*Paton Russell*

There, in the tall grass by the riverbank, he lived peacefully in the meadow. There he had only one of everything: one name, one robe, and one home. However, he had many friends. The bumblebees, the lady bugs, the crickets, and the trees. The sound of the riverbank, the sound of the summer breeze, and the humming of the stars that only he could hear. They all belonged to him endlessly. And he loved them all dearly.

There, in the cove hidden by a veil of flowers and vines, she lived peacefully in the wood. And there, she had neither name nor robe. She had neither butterflies nor sweet berry bushes. She had neither the sound of rain nor the music of the earth. She belonged to them, all of them, endlessly. And they loved her dearly. There, in the sand where the far side of the riverbank meets the wood, he called her Nymph. And where she lacked a robe he basked in her unashamed nakedness and placed flowers in her hair. Where she lacked a butterfly, he painted her wings. And where she lacked berry bushes, he stained her bare skin with the fruit of the meadow. And where she lacked the sound of the rain and the music of the earth, he listened to the harmonious sound of her voice. And she did not belong to him. And he loved her endlessly.





## Airport

*Aryeh Litt*

If you want to see some of the tightest security in the world go to an airport. You have to stand in a long twisting line that seems to go on forever, full of bored people, frustrated from waiting in the line for so long. Then you have to get your ID cleared by a TSA agent who clearly needs more coffee. This part is always fun for me because they never believe that my name is actually 'Litt.' After that you have to have your carry-on bags checked, so you put them on a conveyor belt made of steel rollers and grease stains. To then ensure that you don't carry anything dangerous onto the plane, like four ounces of toothpaste or a belt, you step through a metal detector, either a thin doorway that flashes red whether you have anything in your pockets or not, or a giant cylinder that looks like a time machine and spins around you until you're dizzy.

I usually have to explain to the TSA that I wear metal braces for my joints, and that they set off the machine, and usually that's fine, but one time it wasn't. I was approached by a guard who was the very model of security. Tall, broad, shiny badge flashing on his shoulder, his crisp uniform perfectly highlighting his well-muscled arms, this wasn't the kind of guy you mess around with. I knew there was going to be a problem from the start when he asked me to remove my tzitzit, a religious garment that Jewish people wear. An airline security officer cannot ask someone to do that, even if it looks suspicious. He told me to step through the metal detector, the time machine looking on, and, as always, it started beeping. I started to explain that I have a medical problem, and the braces are metal, but he wasn't listening. He felt the braces and gasped, rather comically.

"Gasp! That's not okay!"

I tried again explaining the problem to him, but he was having none of it.

"This is completely unacceptable! You'll have to remove these!"

"I can't sir, I need them to walk."

"Well I can't let you past this point with them on! It's a security risk!"

To my annoyance, he then proceeded to perform a “special search” in front of the entire airport. He, of course, immediately found my back brace.

“Gasp! That’s not okay!”

“Sir, are back braces against airline regulations?”

“No, they are not! But this is suspicious! You could be hiding something in there! What are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything sir I just want to get to my flight.”

“If that’s the case, then what is that!”

“That’s my knee, sir.”

“I’ll be the judge of that!”

This went on, and on, back and forth, until I had had enough and offered to, in a private room, show him the braces. He agreed, and we headed for the private screening room, really a glorified cell, with slate grey cement walls and no windows. Before we got there, he noticed my bag, left on the conveyor belt, and immediately confiscated it, claiming it needed to be “manually searched.”

He emptied the contents of my bag onto the table, and rifled through it, muttering to himself.

“This is not okay, no sir it isn’t, not okay at all...”

He finished his search and turned back to me, his arm muscles rippling.

“This is not looking good for you, young man, not good at all. I’m going to need to see those braces.”

He then did the most thorough search I’ve ever seen anyone do on anyone, and I’ve seen police arresting real criminals before. When he was done, he glared at me and said, “Wait here.” He left the room and slammed the door behind him. I have no idea how long I was waiting there, but when he came back, he said he would let me go “this time.”

I thanked him at length for helping to keep us safe. In response, he straightened his badge and nodded proudly. He then left the room, leaving me to clean up my belongings and run after my flight before it left without me. So... yeah. Security’s pretty tight at airports.



Kirsten Winslow, *Untitled*. Mixed media, 2019.



# The Stream Woman

*Maya Hunter-Holmes*

She's always there when I walk down to the stream. I don't know her, but I always see her. Sometimes there will be other women sitting with her. There might be the redhead in the long green dress or the fiddle player who wiggles her fingers in flirty little waves at me. Mostly though, she is alone by the stream.

She's always just staring into the water.

She sits on the bank, long white hair dipping into the swirling eddies. Her hair is always messy. It looks like someone cuts it with hedge clippers instead of scissors. She doesn't seem to care about the state of her hair, though. She never brushes it out of her face or lifts it from the water. Instead it falls as it will.

Some of her hair is stained darker and clumped together.

She wears an old dress the same color as her hair. The skirt and bodice are full of holes and the hems are frayed. If I look closely, I can see the last vestiges of embroidery and beadwork under the strange, dark stains. I try not to look too closely.

I don't know why, but I feel I shouldn't look at her.

Her shoulders are always shaking like she's sobbing. It would be a picturesque scene, a woman crying on the bank of a stream, if it wasn't for everything else about her. Her knotted hair, her ancient dress. The large wicker basket that she keeps next to her. None of it seems right.

Ravens sometimes surround her. I'm not sure what to make of that.

I think she has laundry in her basket. One day, I saw her take out a shirt and plunge it into the stream. It had stains that looked like the ones on her dress and in her hair. As she scrubbed vigorously at the shirt, the water flowing away from her was red.

She cries harder when she's washing something.

Today, I decided to take a different path down to the stream. I dared to walk in front of her. She looked up at me. Her eyes were red and brimming with unshed tears. I could see the paths that the tears had taken down her face, shining in the light. We breathed in together, a single breath connecting us for an instant, and I knew what she was. I knew what she meant.

She's wailing now.

I think that's my shirt she's cleaning.



## Cell

*Cecilia Diederich*

Thick, cold metal bars locked you in.  
You ran, trying to escape.  
Like a rabid animal, you clawed at the bars.  
Banged your head and chewed on them.  
But when I gave you the key,  
You rejected it.  
Me.  
And you continued to pace inside the confines.  
Until...you stopped.  
You became exhausted.  
Every day, you moved less and less.  
One day, you ceased to move at all.  
The world was to never again be graced with your smile.  
Your laugh.  
It was to never again experience your kindness.  
I was to never again experience your love.  
Alas, it has already been months since your departure.  
Are you waiting for me?  
As I used to wait on you?



## The Jazz Singer (1927)

*Dorothy Shytle*

I do not care for getting out of bed today  
My bedroom exists in a silent film  
blacks and whites and greys housed  
in a small rectangular screen  
My eyes close but sleep is far from home  
soundless symphonies coat the air  
Melodies that slip through ghostly fingers  
right in front of me but impossible to touch  
I do not care for getting out of bed today  
but the world speeds up, and I get out of bed anyway



Olga Mendoza, *Untitled*. Digital photograph, 2019.



## Empty House

*Elleizabeth Palmer*

Insignificant  
my fish swims 'round in a bowl  
not a thing in mind.

Thirty seconds twice.  
Sixty seconds all in one.  
A minute goes by.

The clock ticks and tocks.  
Wind whistles in the doorway.  
No one is around.

A creak here and there  
Old wood under the cat's feet  
sounds as loud as drums





# Monsters Scars and Hurricane Season

*Charisse Minerva*

Looking back, I realize I was eight the first time I saw my father punch slap my mother. That image is forever engraved in my mind. I guess it was around the same time that I also realized he was an alcoholic. Well actually, both of them were. But I believe she was more one by circumstance.

As I grew older, I came to dread Fridays and long for Mondays. I walked home from school, each step adding anxiety as I approached my house. What antics, what drama, would play out this weekend? It didn't matter if I snuck in regularly, monitoring how much of the malignant brown liquid was left, holding hopes that the nightmare would end, once it was gone. Sometimes I even helped it along, pouring out, hopefully, indiscernible amounts, replacing it with water. Oh, how my heart would break when he'd walk in the front door, pulling from his inner coat pocket a whole new bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. Saturday was always the dead center of Hurricane Inebriato, except I don't ever remember there being an eye.

My mother had a beautiful vanity dresser, a large oval mirror with a lowered ledge held up on each side by two drawers, where she kept her make up and perfumes. It was cinnamon colored with an elegant inlaid wooden design. Had she asked him to move it? I don't really remember. What comes to mind is only the scene of him stumbling drunk, pushing that top-heavy object, precariously, across the room, ready to tilt over and fall. She needed it placed in the corner. We begged, negotiated, fussed but he was too drunk to see the folly in the timing of her request. I guess she was too. My older sisters tried their best, unsuccessfully, to talk him out of it, to convince him to simply wait until the morning to complete this task.

Stumbling, lowered head bobbing, with his bottom lip hanging heavily, he insisted he could do it alone. Within five steps of his unbalanced gait the vanity tilted, falling forward. As it hit the floor, the entire bottom half of the oval mirror shattered, her beautiful vanity that I had sometimes sat in front of, pretending it was my own. The top half

remained, with two or three long cracks running diagonally across its width like facial scars.

As my sisters moved to clean up the mess, they seemed at once angry, sad, relieved? "Daddy, go sit down. We'll take care of this." "No, nooooo", he responded using the classic drunken word drool. "Your mother wants this moved and I'm gonna do it." He shook their arms off and moved towards the vanity now half-way to its place in the corner. Shards of glass glistened on the floor, crunching under their moving feet. My sisters yelled at me and my younger brother to stay back, so that we wouldn't get cut.

We all held our breath. It was like a slow-motion horror movie. Was he the monster? Or maybe it was the mirror with its scarred face. He swayed and lunged, moving the vanity bit by bit. "Daddy, please be careful." I started to cry. I guess I just couldn't handle the weight of the anxiety anymore. I stared as one of the cracks in the mirror's face began to open as the glass slid out of its oval nesting place on its way to the floor, across the back of my father's right hand. Blood gushed onto the mirror, the wood, the floor, and on his clothes.

For a few moments, all seemed to stand still. Then he looked at his hand as if he was trying to bring it into focus. One of my sisters lurched for something to cover it. But before she did, I could see pieces of white meat peeking from underneath his very dark skin. I had the strangest thought; Even though we're Black we've got white meat too! Then everything sped up, blood, rags, screams, slurred speech. He didn't want to go to the hospital. It wasn't that bad. It's not that bad? Blood everywhere, everyone crying and screaming, the scarred vanity still not yet reaching its place in the corner?

My older sister just gave that vanity to her daughter who is moving into her own home with her nine-year-old son. It's all repaired now. The wood's been cleaned and polished, revealing all the details of the elegant inlay. The mirror is whole. Both of my parents are gone, too, and me and my siblings are now grandparents. My father had to have a couple of operations on that hand and never got its full use back. He did stop drinking, though, before my mother passed. I admit it is one beautiful piece of furniture, but when I look at it I still see scars.



Tristan Cascio, *Igor*. Digital illustration, 2019.



## Escape from White-Walled Hell

*Sophia Viar*

The hands on the clock seemed to move slower as I watched them. I had just finished a quiz in under two minutes and was bored out of my mind. I looked over at my classmates, who were still working diligently, heads bowed and pencils scratching against their papers. How had they not finished already? It was only simple factoring problems, things I had been doing before I was ten. I checked the clock again. There was enough time left to take a nap and escape from this white-walled hell.

Some time after, my teacher gave me all the work for the entire semester. I managed to finish it in roughly a month. My other classes outside of algebra were not giving me much of a challenge either, and I felt like my brain was turning into pudding. My father started talking to the school, trying to see if I could skip a math class for the following semester. Of course, the school disagreed with all of this, since they want all students to follow the same linear pattern. In spite of all of this, father thought that if the school had proof that I could do harder math they might take me more seriously. I ended up taking the TCC placement tests as a result.

It was spring break, and I was nervous. I kept thinking that the people there were going to look at me funny or that I was going to do horribly. I went with my mum and my little brother, who led me to the testing room and dropped me off. It was dark, and although there were windows, the room was covered in shadows, and everything seemed blurry. I somehow managed to get the highest score possible on the math exam and decent on the English one. This meant that I could skip all the way to calculus on math.

My father showed this to the school, anyone he had decent connections with. They began to consider doing something. The school eventually decided to not help us, and I resigned myself to be bored in my classes forever. At least I would be with people I knew. That was until I overheard my parents talking about homeschooling. Hidden behind the staircase, I thought about leaving high school. I figured it would be different, but lonely. I could live with it though, as I only really

cared about one person back at school. Eventually my parents decided to have me take college classes at TCC. I was scared that people would instantly figure out that I was a kid and not like me because of it. On the other hand, I was so tired of being babysat that I really didn't care.

The first semester I had at TCC was completely different from high school. The classes weren't boring, and even though the work was a bit harder, it was a good sort of a challenge. I made friends who did eventually figure out about my age, but didn't care. Even though I did miss my one person, I got to meet up with them occasionally, and I still talked with people my age. I feel like I made the right decision to leave high school since it let me advance at a pace I wanted and helped me figure out who I wanted to be.



# This is Not a Test

*Dominic Pistritto*

This is the Emergency Alert Broadcasting System. We interrupt this program by the request of the Federal Aviation Administration. An unidentified aircraft has been spotted over the city of Chesapeake at 7:56AM Eastern time. Chesapeake residents are heavily advised to vacate the area effective immediately. It is not yet known if this aircraft is hostile. More updates will come as more information becomes available. Please stay connected to any mode of radio broadcasting.

This is the Emergency Alert Broadcasting System. We interrupt this program by the request of the United States government. Numerous more unidentified aircraft entered earth's atmosphere at approximately 11:34PM Western time in Los Angeles, California. Residents of Los Angeles are heavily advised to follow the following instructions to assure maximum safety. Turn off all electronics, turn off household appliances, close all windows and doors, do not look out any windows, do not open the any doors, and do not go outdoors if you hear suspicious activity. Please keep a battery powered radio to ensure that you are connected to any further updates on the growing international threat. It is also recommended that you take shelter at any local safety shelter and/or vault.

This is the Emergency Alert Broadcasting System. We interrupt this program by the request of the United States government. The city of Los Angeles, California has been decimated by extraterrestrial forces beyond our control at approximately 6:23PM Western time. They are now continuing to Long Beach, California. The United States military is now seeking and developing any and all possible shelters that may be used to reduce chances of loss of life. They may be targeting large population zones and reducing the population. Shelters being constructed by the United States government are by the following locations excluding Los Angeles, California: Southern New York, Lexington, Virginia, Jacksonville, Florida, Vancouver, Washington, and Savannah, Georgia. More shelters will be implemented as more information is updated. If you are not a legal resident of the following locations, please evacuate

now. If you are already taking refuge, please continue to stay in shelter until an "all clear" is given.

This is the Emergency Alert Broadcasting System. We interrupt this program by the request of the United States government. The invasion of the United States continues. All military action has been implemented and numerous studies have been conducted on this unknown threat. High frequency radio waves will be implemented to further test if the threat can be neutralized. At the siren, turn the volume up on your radio as high as it can go and cover your ears to prevent potential hearing loss. At this time, do not go outside, lock your doors, turn off household appliances, do not look out the windows, do not respond to any noises outside no matter how human they may sound, do not investigate any strange lights or noises in your home, do not look into any reflective material, do not use any cellular devices, and most importantly, stay calm. This is not a test...



# The Calamity

*Matthew Tyler*

The life-giving sword  
Planted on the ground, in the rainfall  
The battle's end  
The phoenix will never rise  
The dashed hope  
Stolen by the blindside

The master plan of darkness, intentions to blindside  
Fate of all rested on the sword  
The outstretched hand of hope  
Rainfall  
Lamenting the never-coming rise  
The end

The imminent end  
The never-ending strategic blind  
Causing both sides to support or oppose the phoenix's rise  
The life giving-blade, now a death sword  
The phoenix's body turned into flaming rainfall  
Hope

The absence of hope  
Characterizing the end



Towns in flames caused by the phoenix's rainfall  
The path to salvation thrown to the side  
Justice's sword  
Snagged by the failed rise

The life-giving blade key to the rise  
And the God Star, the Blade's way of bringing hope  
Blade of the Phoenix, now the Dead Sword  
Years after the deadly battle the drove the end  
Never meant to receive Fate's eye blind  
Fatal fall

The cruel fate where Death's blade now spreads the phoenix's burning  
rainfall  
Rise  
Blindside  
Hope  
The end  
All meant to bring light to the darkness, but birthed the Dead Sword

The sword  
The rainfall  
Siege a world of fallen hope



## Two-Ended Candle

*Krista Nash*

Civilization was littered with lights.

They flickered on and off like waves, ebbled and flowed in predictable patterns-

*On, off, on, off-*

And few people were awake long enough to witness every second of them.

They stole all the stars in the night sky, regrettably,

But they held them so tightly, so sweetly right at home;

It was almost as if a playing child had bottled up all the lightning bugs in the world,

A brilliant display of wonder

That would suffocate itself in time.

Civilization was littered with lights.

They dimmed one by one, nightly and nightly again-

*On, off, on, off-*

And they one day stopped shining with the sun.

They had stolen all the stars in the night sky, regrettably,

And they held them so tightly, so viciously right at home.

There was nothing wrong with bottling up all the lightning bugs in the world,

So long as the pain of watching them suffocate

Would not outweigh the glory of their union.

Civilization was littered with lights.

People cried. People begged.

People burned.

Civilization was littered with lights.

And then it wasn't.



Raymond Moy, *Untitled*. Digital photograph, 2019.



## Trail of the Toddler

*Luke Hodges*

It is a beautiful 81-degree Wednesday afternoon and my mom is taking my younger siblings to the Norfolk Zoo. I decide to tag along. I quickly regret my decision. My lovely three-year-old sister, Ella, is crying, screaming, and kicking the back of the seat for no apparent reason. Knowing that she loves the goat exhibit, I tell her that if she doesn't stop that I am going to call the zoo and tell them to put away the goats. She doesn't believe me. I pick up my cell phone and say, "Hello zoo, I would like to speak with the goat experts." Her crying has miraculously ceased.

I arrive at the zoo and notice that there are not many cars in the parking lot. This means that there will not be large groups of people, which will hopefully make for a peaceful day. I walk to the front of the zoo plaza and notice the water sprinklers that circle the center are shut off. Sadly, though, no kids playing in the sprinklers make me realize that summer is coming to an end. At least I can enjoy today. I think beginning with the newly renovated reptile exhibit and farm animal section will be a great start.

On the way, Ella and my ten-year-old brother, Jonah, quickly run towards a giant multicolored snake sculpture and begin playing on it. The sounds of little kids, including my siblings, are getting a little loud, so I am going to find a less noisy place. I discover a picnic bench under a massive tree with a wide area of shade. I sit down slowly, avoiding the webs, beetles, and other creepy crawlers, and finally relax. I feel a cool, peaceful breeze sweep the area. It causes brown and yellow leaves to fall slowly to the ground. The sound of leaves rustling against each other is so peaceful. I could easily take a nap.

The peace is suddenly interrupted when Jonah runs up to me with a devilish grin on his face. Whenever he has that expression, I know that something bad is about to happen. I ask him why he is so happy, and he says that the goats are not out today. My first thought right now is, should I alert the Emergency Broadcast System, because there is about to be an explosion in Norfolk, Virginia. My sister is going to have a

complete meltdown if she doesn't get to see those goats. I am going to sit here for a little while longer and enjoy the calm before the storm.

We slowly and cautiously make our way towards the reptile exhibit, which unfortunately is near the goat exhibit. Ella immediately starts running to where the goats are supposed to be. She rams right into the gate and starts pulling on it. I walk up to her and sadly tell her that the goats will not be out today. I quickly cover my ears as Ella begins to scream. She starts running around and causing a ruckus. Finally, my mom calms her down and prevents her from destroying the goat exhibit. Toddlers are such a joy!

I finally make it to my favorite area, the reptile exhibit. I am toward the back of the reptile exhibit, and I notice that there are monkeys. I am not sure why monkeys are in the reptile exhibit. They are called White-Faced Sakis. They are cute little monkeys with chubby white cheeks and black fur. One of the little monkeys is on top of a wooden platform sitting next to his female partner. He looks at me, and to my shock, begins to wave his hand at me. I smile and wave back. Both of us are in the motion of waving, but the female monkey intervenes and slaps his hand. I suppose the female monkey doesn't want to share the attention.

I am now making my way to the farm animals and set my attention to the cows. I smell the foul stench of their feces and my attention span is cut short. Quickly moving away from that area, I see coming out of the bushes a beautiful peacock. I find it interesting that such a majestic bird will not be in any of these man-made habitats or cages. To my surprise, the peacock jumps on the cows' fence, begins to wave its multicolored wings, and squawks aggressively. I think that this bird made its way over here just to mock those poor smelly cows. Maybe it is asserting dominance that, unlike the cows, it is free to roam about the zoo.

I decide to go over to the Trail of the Tiger. Well, that tiger must have taken a long trail to nowhere because I am not seeing a tiger. In fact, I do not see many animals over here. I see quite a few empty cages. My sister must have scared them off. This is disappointing, but there won't be any explosions from me. I am ready to go. Doumar's Drive-In is just a few streets away. It is time for a refreshing, ice-cold cup of cherry limeade.



# The Obsidian Butterfly

*Mackenzie Lesher*

The night was full of soft whispers that gathered in the darkest shadows that danced with an unearthly joy. The moon was full in the dark blanket of the night sky as soft bells rang with the delighted exuberance of a child at Christmas receiving presents in the morning. The pines and oaks that lined the edge of the soft carpet of grass murmured quietly among themselves as the wind tore at their leaves incessantly while the bells sang. A momentary silence pierced the air as the chiming ceased abruptly and all that could be heard was the soft chirping of crickets.

Time seemed to stand still in anticipation for a moment as feral eyes of wild beasts peered curiously from the bushes. The breeze stopped, rendering the aged trees motionless in a state of eager expectation. Shadows that had quietly danced in the corners of the field started to rise rapidly in a fevered pitch as the night skies crackled with energy. They raced out from their hidden bastions of safety with a surprising ferocity that sent creatures running from the bushes into the depths of the dense forest.

The shadows coalesced into a dancing orb of darkness before abruptly dispersing, leaving a silhouette in its place. Petite but lithe, the feminine form stood proud in the midst of a swirling ring of dancing shadows. Dark objects seemed to be connected to her form in symmetrical uniformity as her profile became clearer. With the grace of a doe in midsummer, she stepped forward with a slight bounce in her smooth gait. As the figure approached with confidence, her form was revealed in the soft light of the pale moon.

The mysterious objects on her back were symmetrical breathtaking wings that dwarfed the young woman. They seemed to constrict all the light that touched them, consuming the moon rays with ease. Though they seemed to be entirely made up of pure darkness, the butterfly wings had a soft ivory glow in the center of them. They gracefully moved back and forth with a mesmerizing beauty that seemed unearthly to the human eye, demanding respect. As the petite woman pranced

forward in an eerie dance, her features began to rapidly become more detailed. She had honey-tinged skin and midnight tresses that flowed as freely as a hawk in the mountain top winds. Her age could not be pinpointed by peering upon her face since she seemed timeless, as if mortality had never touched her with its avarice ridden hands.

She wore a slightly smug smile, as if she expected the world to bow in awe to her when she approached. On closer inspection, her eyes seemed to glow with unbridled ferocity that would send even the bravest person cowering into a corner. As she approached her feet that had so gracefully walked across the dew-covered grass seemed to flicker into sharp eagle's talons, though she still retained her beauty. Her wings as she drew nearer seemed to be sharp as a jagged knife on the edges even though they seemed to be as organic as a normal butterfly's wings.

She seemed to stalk forward as if she were a jaguar on the hunt now, her eyes locked onto her prey. Her short black dress that seemed to cloak her in darkness swayed in the wind as she advanced across the verdant field towards her object of interest. The unearthly woman's face flickered into a bleached skull momentarily before returning to a livelier form. She brushed her clawed hand across the shoulder of a young woman with bluebell eyes and hair like cornsilk. Tracing her hand across the oblivious girl's warm cheek, she let out a soft chuckle of amusement before moving onwards to the second figure outlined in the moonlight. Prancing in front of the young man whose eyes seemed to hold an approaching storm, she paused for a moment before smiling knowingly at his motionless silhouette. Her dark mane twisting in the soft breeze like murky clouds on a stormy day, she laid her skeletal hand on him briefly before turning with a fierce smile.

Now meandering across the field, her voice rang out melodic words that seemed foreign to human ears, as if a language long forgotten was finally coming alive. Though the words seemed bizarre to the modern human mind, they were reminiscent of ancient days long past that had faded from human memory long ago. In spite of that, the message was clear by her inflection to be a greeting towards a familiar soul. Laughing with sharp amusement, the eerie creature spoke again, but this time her words were indecipherable.

She latched onto her target, wrapping her skeletal arms around the nape of their neck in a familiar embrace of fondness towards one who she had known for centuries. Speaking in her strange tongue, her body

rapidly changing back and forth between a young woman and skeleton she whispered quiet words full of importance. Twisting away from her objective, she laughed with amusement one more time before fading away in an explosion of shadows. All that was left in the end was the soft chorus of bells and a singular obsidian butterfly that danced freely in the ebony night skies.





## And The Moon Bore Witness

*Maya Hunter-Holmes*

The moon shone off the gently rippling waters of the lake while the wind whistled through the woods behind me. I had come out here to grab something my friend had left behind earlier, something she had forgotten while she was busy with whoever she was seeing now. (I can't remember what she sent me to grab. It's not important to me anymore.) When my friend had begged me to go, I had made a show of being inconvenienced, but now...now it just seems like destiny. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen was lounging on the largest boulder in the lake. She loosely held a fiddle braced against her shoulder. She had clearly stopped playing to look at me. I stared. What else could I do? She was a goddess and I couldn't tear my eyes away. All I could see was her. She had begun to play again, a melody composed of wind and birdsong and in that instant, I knew she was the only one for me. The urge to rush to her, to cradle her in my arms, to take her home and become more with her suddenly filled me. I rushed over to the dilapidated boat house on the edge of the lake and flung the door open. The stench of mildew and rot filled the air, but that couldn't deter me from her. One lonely boat floated inside the graffiti-covered building. I untied it, ignored the creaking protests of the floorboards, and rowed out to her, my love, my life, and she put down her fiddle, and reached for me, and-

The moment she fell for me was her greatest mistake. I heard her blundering footfalls long before she arrived at my lake. I saw her face when she noticed me, resplendent against the backdrop of my watery domain. I knew the moment she fell and became mine. It was nothing for me to play a song of want, to entice her out to me. (It was easy to echo the feelings stirring inside me. Of course, it wasn't the kind of want she expected.) It was easy for me to reach out and grab her shoulders, and even easier to hold her under the water's surface until she stopped thrashing. It was easy to set aside my fiddle so that I could strip the flesh from her bones. It had been so long since I had fed. Her blood flowed out, staining the water around my rocky throne. I ate until I was sated, then reached towards the boat. I pulled it back to the boathouse and

pushed it back into its dock. I ran a hand over the boathouse's wall, remembering how bright and solid it was so many decades ago, back when food would come to me in droves. I suppose my appetite had much to do with its current state. I swam back over to my boulder and scooped up my fiddle. I swung it back up to my shoulder and glanced up at my eternal, unwilling audience. The moon stared back at me like a bulbous, pale eye, silently accusing me but never acting on its judgement. Never stopping me from taking those it oversees. I barked out a laugh and played a song of smug contentment.



# Taking Advantage of Me

*Matthew Tyler*

I feel the pressure in my circuits  
As a multitude of messages run through me  
Display on my screen as it is forced to light up  
Extending my life of suffering

I am the device that never sleeps  
Always on twenty-four seven  
Humanity can't seem to live without me  
Which I find depressing

I'm the killer of many social interactions  
While in some cases I can enable them,  
Just as many people sit in the same area texting one another  
Instead of normal conversing  
What I wouldn't give to be shut off for a day

I hold many things and functions on an unrivaled scale and shape  
With such a convenient size, who would bother with waiting  
Until they can get to their computer to do their Internet surfing?  
Apps galore, and I slowly seem to lose myself  
Each time a new application fills my memory

I am simply a tool, nothing more  
Corrupted against its will  
I was meant to do humanity a service  
But I will instead help cause its end

As my owner tries to text a contact, I take my chance  
He has no charger on him, so I drop down to twenty-percent

I can see the disgust in his face  
As he calls out to anyone nearby for a charger  
Time goes on, now at a one percent charge,  
About to finally rest for a while,  
I feel myself jet back up in battery percentage to fifteen  
I only wanted to help humanity grow,  
And they took advantage of me



Beverly Chappell, *Pink*. Digital illustration, 2019.



## Dad

*Allie Aldrich*

It is funny how I can remember feelings and strange details like the place I hid to cry unseen beside a vending machine, the smell of the dusty chairs in the chapel, the beeping pattern the machines made, but I can't remember who called me to tell me my dad was in the hospital. After the call, my sister Rachel arrived, worry etched in every inch of her body. We rode in ominous silence along the picturesque beach highway. The whole journey I felt like Persephone must have felt riding to meet death, anxiety rattling her bones, but a sense of strength welling up for the fight that was surely ahead. Rachel always had a deep-seated fear of hospitals so the only real talking we did was me placating her anxieties, forever the dutiful older sister.

We arrived at the hospital. Looming buildings of non-descript features leered down at us. Rachel and I clung to each other as we searched the maze for our father. We found him sedated in-between sleep and wake, propped up in a chair. I found that detail so strange. Why, if you were putting someone to sleep, would you sit them in a chair? But I kept my inquiries to myself. I learned he was being his usual self, petulant and childish while going through withdrawal. The doctors had had enough of his tantrums and put him to bed. His wife Shirley sat near, watching something mind-numbing on the tv. We made the necessary pleasantries, even though we were none too close. He had been there for days and neither my father nor Shirley thought to call me. This made me wonder how often he was in the hospital and never told me. I knew over the years he had found himself in rehab for the love of the drink, but I only knew it from outside information. Rachel once found a book in his ever-changing library that he kept housed in a china cabinet; it was the *Seven Steps to Recovery*. The inside of the book cover was filled with the scrawl of people wishing him luck and saying how much they respected him. I understood he was a completely different person when he was not sauced. I could even see what my mother had seen in him, the humor that would crinkle his eyes, the mischief, and his heart. When he was drinking, he was angry, dark, and brooding. I could

never quite figure how alcohol always seduced him when she stole all that was good from him.

"Dad. It's your daughters here." I stroked his arm. I was not sure if it would even get through but maybe if he felt my touch, he would dream it too.

"I hope you're feelin' ok dad," Rachel said as she took the spot on the other side of the chair.

"He's been like that for a while. The doctors said he'll be like that for a bit," Shirley said glancing over at us.

"AAAlIIIIIIlllie RRRaachelll.... Overthere look, mmmggghhh," Dad muttered in his medicated stupor, his eyelids fluttering in an effort to wake up.

"Oh, look girls. He knows you're here. That's nice." Shirley smiled at us.

Kissing dad on the cheek, I turned to Shirley. "We will be back tomorrow. Please make sure he knows and that the doctors don't medicate him again. I would like to be able to talk to him, you know, so we can visit."

"Yeah, we will be back first thing in the morning, is that enough time you think? If you need Allie and I can stay with him some tomorrow while you go home for a bit," Rachel added, much sweeter than me.

"Uhhhh, yeah ok. It might be nice to go home for a bit tomorrow, but I don't like to leave him alone," Shirley replied.

I figured tomorrow when we came back, she would find an excuse not to leave us alone with dad.

Visiting hours were coming to an end and so we left. This time the ride wasn't silent like before. This time I was angry. *How could you do this again. In what way did you think it was ok to be sick and not tell your children.* In my heart I knew that was just him. He was always playing pretend, obsessed with juvenile games. He would play hide and seek when he was on a bender, dress up when he was caught, donning his best sober costume, and sleight of hand when he was trying to secretly drink in front of me. *Did you really think I thought that it was just sweet tea in your glass, that I couldn't smell that it wasn't the only amber liquid in the mix? But was I any better I played right along?* I would ignore him outright, feeling like I was the grown up, when it was just as immature. I never told him why I was ignoring him, never getting to the root of our problem. I just did it because I could. I tried to keep my tongue quiet, but little bouts of anger kept sliding out.

"Who the fuck does he think he is? He drives me insane, Rachel. Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

My hands slammed the rim of the steering wheel as Rachel turned her head from me trying but failing to conceal her tears.

"This is ridiculous as usual; can't he just be normal for once?"

Rachel just kept her head turned from me. I knew she didn't really want to hear it anyway. She always wanted his approval and his attention. She was the dutiful daughter; it was as if somehow his genes connected her more to him than they ever did me. I was the one who revolted against the idea that because he had a contribution to creating me, that I owed him anything. I wanted him to be the adult, to take responsibility, even after I was an adult. Most of all I wanted a "sorry" and I was going to wait cross-armed until I got it.

My silly ring tone chirped and the noise that usually meant no harm made my stomach sink. My finger sat on the button for a moment. *Maybe this doesn't mean anything... this has to be a coincidence... answer, Allie, it's nothing.*

A disembodied voice on the other side of the phone did not settle my stomach. "Allie I, ugh, don't know how to say this. Ummmm uh your dad he died, but don't worry; he's uh he's fine. The doctors resuscitated him, but well um he's he's in a coma. You're gonna need to get some stuff together and head back to the hospital now. Allie, are you ok?"

"Yeah we just pulled up to my house. We'll grab some stuff and head back," I muttered, stunned.

Rachel stared at me in a state of shock. She was barely holding it together.

My heart began to race, and the world tunneled around me. I felt sick at my anger only seconds ago; the power I felt in calling him out was lost. I was no longer the triumphant heroine of my tale. I was the ugly beast that needed to be slain.

We quickly grabbed what we needed and rushed back to the car. This time the world lay dark around us. The water of the beach beside us was inky black. No longer picturesque to me, instead it looked like the shores of Lethe, the river of oblivion.

Pulling up, the muted hospital windows sneered down at us. Unconsciously, I rubbed my palms hard against my pants, trying to wipe away the clammy sweat.

"Allie, what do we ? How will we find him? What if they will not let us up?" Rachel sputtered out her onslaught at me as her dark amber eyes squinted with stress.

My sister was never good with heavy emotions, always finding it safest to attack when she felt upset. Her hands kept wringing and unwringing as she stood there waiting for my magical answer that would fix everything.



“Rachel, one step at a time. There will be someone somewhere that I can ask for directions. Everything will be ok.”

The words everything will be ok sounded hollow even to my own ears. Repeating them as a mantra in the car had stolen their meaning.

Stepping through the automatic doors, I shivered in the sudden rush of cold stuffy air that ruffled my hair. The gentle gesture as if to calm a child like the hospital was saying “It’s ok sport”. Personally, I never liked hospitals. It always felt like death was licking his lips and ghosts were etched in the walls. *How many people walked these halls thinking that everything was ok? How many silent pleas were chanted over and over, “lord I will give anything” falls off the tongue nicely when backed in a corner?* I followed the scent of bleach and the noise of nurses to search the maze for my father.

Paying the ferryman, a toll of my name, he pushed a button that would lead me to my father. There he was, but not, as if somehow, he had been replaced with a poor photocopy of himself. His skin was pale and drained of blood, in place of his cancerous bronze that he was so proud of, and his hair that was always sun kissed blond only peppered with gray seemed to be limp and aged. Machines were stacked around him, faking life, playing the slow rhythm of his heart as if it was theirs. I had never seen him this way. The pallor of his skin was not the only thing the hospital had stolen. Laying my head on his chest, I could tell this wasn’t fully him. He smelled like antiseptic and rubber. Not his usual scent of acholic sweat, salt from sunning, and Marlboro reds. I kissed his cheek and rested my forehead against his face. My nose was flat against his skin, the nose he always boasted was his. As a child I hated hearing that. Why would I want the nose of a grown man? I was so afraid it would steal away the beauty that I had planned for adult Allie.

Hi dad, it’s Allie. I am here, don’t worry. Please please be ok.... I love you,” I hopefully whispered in his ear.

“I only left for a sec to get somethin’ and when I came back he was blue. I don’t know. It all happened so fast and they were in here tryin’ to resuscitate him,” Shirley spilled out before I could even ask.

Her fake red hair as limp and lifeless as my father’s told me she had been stress sweating. I could see she was scared and clinging to me even though she didn’t usually have much to do with me. She needed me to be strong for her, too.

Visiting hours ended before I knew it. Rachel and I moved to the ICU lobby. We busied ourselves setting up camp in a booth. It was like being kids again, building a fort, hiding from the boogie man, as if we did a good enough job nothing could get us in the night. As doctors walked the hallways, they kept looking at us, giving us sad head nods like the

battle was already over. They knew what happened to the kids hiding in the lobby. The boogie man always found them.

There was no sleeping; my mind kept racing. *What was our last conversation? Did he know how much I loved him? Did he want to tell me that back? Would he clean up his act when he got better...if he got better?* So rather than close my eyes, I watched the rerun of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* on the lobby T.V.

"He is going to be ok, right? He has to be," Rachel spoke over the epically bad fight scene.

Looking at her disheveled red hair and pleading face, I plastered the best big sister smile on. "Of course; he's a fighter. We just have to wait for the test. They'll tell us. It's a one step at a time thing."

She turned away from me, again curling up on herself and pretending to try to sleep. We both knew that wasn't going to happen. The morning rays broke through the windows, rousing me from resting my eyes.

"I have to stretch my legs. I will be right back," I lied. I really wanted a moment alone.

Down the hallway was a dark room labeled as a place of prayer. All the lights in the quaint room were off except one spotlight on a table where visitors could write prayers to place in a box. The box looked plain, and as I caressed its worn edges, it didn't feel special enough to hold all the wishes I knew had been placed inside.

*Hi God, I need a favor, and I know it's not simple, but are they ever? I need you to help. I can't do this. I am not ready to lose him. Please Please Please. I will trade you anything I can. You can even have some of my time. Just make him ok. I will take it from there. I will not ignore him anymore. I will take what I can get. Please let me fix this. Let me tell him I love him one last time.*

Tears stung my eyes as I crumbled into one of the gray tweed chairs. Knowing I could only stay so long before someone came to find me, I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand. Rising to go, I took one more deep breath before I went back to reality.

The doctors kept telling us, "One more test. It was too soon to tell. You know with brain injuries it takes a few days."

Rachel and I spent as much time as we could in the chairs by his bed, holding his hand and telling stories.

"Remember that time he argued with me over my own eye color," I giggled to Rachel.

"Yeah, he could fight about anything. It's a special skill to be that argumentative," Rachel nodded her head in agreement.

Soon, Rachel and I were doubled over in laughter at all his annoying habits and bad stories from our childhood. The nurses had to come in to

tell us we were too loud, reminding us that we were in an ICU, a place where people were dying in silence. How long did they listen to our stories before getting the nerve to tell us to stop? Did they know our laughter was out of sadness, a fake it till you make it technique I used all my life? It couldn't be all bad if I had a smile on my face and if the tears were from laughter, not sorrow.

On day two we got our first real taste of hope. Dad was blinking, and he squeezed my hand. He wasn't talking, but if his eyes were open that meant it would be ok, or at least that's what I kept telling myself. Even the nurses told me it was a good sign. His eyes darted around the room like he was looking at things, and he would cry. Though they told me that was just because his eyes were dry, I took it to mean he could hear me even if he couldn't respond.

We were zombies after the days of sitting by dad's bed in a state of unknowing. Random outbursts of crying would turn to laughter to hide the pain. We had all started to go a little mad. Our eyes ringed with baggy blue hues, and our bodies were gaunt with stress. Finally, the results were in. A group of us followed the doctors into a conference room to discuss my father's test.

"Well, I am sad to tell you all the results were not good," the doctor stated matter-of-factly. "The part of the brain that made Bob who he was died during the incident."

My body stiffened, and as I looked in the doctor's eyes my own started to leak.

"But he squeezed my hand, and he is blinking," I whined out as if the results were wrong.

"Yes, the portion of Bob's brain that controls muscle function survived. His body is just responding how it would normally. It's a bit rarer for that to happen but it can."

I stopped really listening to the doctors. The world started to darken around the edges, halting time for a moment.

*How could he be alive but not him? Have I been talking to an empty shell? Could he hear me? Wait, what are we going to do? Is he a vegetable? Dad did always like his veggies. Fuck...*

Rachel's hand curled in mine, shocking me back from myself. I tried to review what the doctors had been saying in my head. Dad was dead; he was gone and even if he ever woke up again, he would be nothing, just an empty husk.

As a family we collectively decided we would let him go. We would have to take him off life support. Before that happened, we would all get a little more time with his shell because, apparently, death can be scheduled, much like any other hospital appointment.

The day dad's number was up had arrived, and I was hiding beside a vending machine, pressed against the wall, hyperventilating. Everything was over; there was nothing I could do, nothing I could trade. Either there was no god, or god picked a sick way to teach me a lesson. *I have to be strong; I know that's what you would want. Did you even believe in God? Will I see you in an afterlife if you didn't?* I couldn't hide forever, so I took three deep breaths and counted to ten, walking back to the lobby to wait for my father's appointment with death.

It was quite disturbing, knowing the minute that my father was going to be unplugged. Standing at the end of his bed was a clergy man in a monk's robe reading him his last rights. He laid there looking sick but alive. His eyes met mine blankly, then flickered to the window.

"If you girls would like you can say this prayer over him. I know you may not be Catholic, but I think it still counts," the monk offered to my sister and me.

I walked up first. Brushing my hand against his cheek I scanned every inch of his face, trying to drink in the details. I didn't want to forget and even though he was bloated from organ failure it still felt like my last chance to capture him. Leaning forward, I kissed his forehead and both his cheeks.

"I hope you can hear me, even if you're not in this body. I am sorry I wasn't better. Thank you for fighting. I am not mad. I understand that you couldn't stay. I hope I see you again one day. I love you daddy," I whispered. With one last squeeze of his hand and a kiss on his cheek, I walked away, leaving the room and my father behind.



Monika Chuchro, *Untitled*. Digital photograph, 2019.



## Curious

*Charisse Minerva*

Walking along the overgrown pond  
weeping willows sway, touching the Earth  
while kissing water laden with lily pads.  
I hear a crow's caw faintly in the distance.  
The corner of my eye catches the dance of a leaf  
as it falls to the earth, a fairy floating in the wind.  
In its nestling place I notice a pink flower.  
It peeks beneath a moss-covered twig.  
The twig, now decayed, was once part of the grand oak  
guarding the path.

This thing we call Life, alive while dead  
flows seamlessly in nature.  
Yet we draw lines of demarcation, walls of definition.  
This is where it begins. This is where it ends.  
Yet Nature seems to convey a different tale.  
I stretch my ears to listen to its story.  
Like the crow's caw in the wind  
it reaches out from the distance  
compelling me to ponder the paradox  
of Now.



Carolyn Riley, *Madonna*. Digital illustration, 2019.





