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TRIBUTARIES

A Note from the Editor

The *Tributaries* staff and I are proud to present our 2022 issue, featuring incredible stories, poems, and art from new and returning contributors. Each piece represents the journal's *modus operandi*: Showcase the talent of writers and artists that feed us from the body of creative genius while also paying tribute to the greats who have inspired us. We are honored to publish talented and driven creative artists across the state of Indiana, especially students from our campus of Indiana University East.

These last few years were difficult since we were in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected our submission rate. However, this year saw a nearly-normal rebound of submissions with awesome, innovative fiction, poetry, nonfiction, art, and reviews that we are ecstatic to share with our readers. Although we held our annual launch party online last year, I am happy to announce we will hold this year's launch party in person for the first time since the start of the pandemic. The *Tributaries* staff has outdone themselves with the editorial process; they worked diligently to display the best version of our contributors' work. I am honored to have been their Editor-in-Chief, and I can't wait to celebrate with them in person.

With a joyful yet heavy heart, this publication marks the end of my time with *Tributaries*. These last three years have been challenging, enriching, and exhilarating. Getting to work with many auspicious editors and readers and publishing gifted creative artists has been a privilege I will never take for granted nor will I ever forget. My co-editors are people I now consider friends, and I wish them the best of luck in their future endeavors. I can't wait to see where their work

takes them. I am blessed to hand the torch of Editor-in-Chief to my managing editor, Mara Cobb. She is dedicated and tenacious, so I am already anticipating next year's journal her staff will put together.

Lastly, I would like to thank the faculty advisors, Dr. Brian Brodeur and Professor Tanya Perkins for helping us make the journal the best version of itself. I can't thank you enough for all the faith you've placed in me and the staff. I will remember it in the years to come.

Readers, I hope you find this journal inspiring. Remember that even in the darkest of times, art continues to help us through—hope is never too far gone. Art will continue to thrive, and so will we.

Soli Deo gloria

-Olivia Ryckman

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Second Place for the 2022 Prize for Poetry

TERRA ORNDORFF

Yelling at Cars

You surely remember the story.
Did it happen in September?
The girl, she vanished from her yard:
youth never was the same.

"Don't yell at cars.
They snatch you up.
You don't come back."

Eight years old with
safe yard games, but we were told,
my brother and I,
"Don't yell at cars."

Country children play outside
become superheroes, maybe villains.
But heroes always win.

Isolated farm roads with
the occasional wayward car.
Imposed rule always repeated,
"Don't yell at cars."

They tell of a girl, stolen straight
from her yard. Nothing left.
Only devastated family.

Childhood larks—simple laughter.
Pretend sword arcs, up and down.
We heed,
"Don't yell at cars."

The story traveled on, joyful times
broken by ill fables.

We all know the story.
It actually happened in August.
Had she yelled at cars–is that why
our youth must now be mute?

TRAVIS LANG

The Beast of the Ridge

In the cliffsides, she hunts her prey at night.
From hidden crevasses near the Río, her eyes
scour the bank. Talons curl around fresh kills
drained of life. The goats weren't enough—
she hungers. When the camp settled for the night,
she was ready. The echoes of the Río's current
did nothing to deafen the beating of their hearts.
One by one, she satisfied her thirst while they slept.
Only shredded husks remained when the flashlights
    washed over the tents.

CLARISSA HOGESTON

She Carries a Songbird on Her Person at All Times

"Stu, can you take this bag for Mr. Smithson? Room 14."

I made sure to gesture to the bag and the man and tapped the keychain twice where "14" was embroidered. Stu nods and eases the bag from the floor. He whistles at Mr. Smithson and tilts his head toward the hall. Mr. Smithson's face flushes and his eyes narrow, but he follows.

I watched them leave. Had I really just spoken that way to Stu, like he's a child who's still learning sight words? Suddenly the gestures I'd made become more exaggerated in my head. I can see my stupid wide eyes and feel my mouth stretch as I'd mouthed "baaaag" and "roooooom." I reach beneath the counter and pull the drawer open. Gazing down, I read a line from the instructions my grandfather had left for me:

Stu has partial hearing loss. Make sure he can see your lips when you speak to him.

"Make sure he can see your lips." Not, wave your arms around and mime everything like a condescending idiot. I don't think Stu minded much—he doesn't seem the type to mind about much of anything. But the mistake still feels hot in my stomach.

Stu is a stout man of about 60. He wears a red coat with brass buttons, a bellhop right out of a classic film. He even has the little red pillbox hat. Below his coat he wears black sweatpants. Maybe he mistook them for dress pants, but I don't think so. Stu radiates comfort.

I met Stu this morning. He arrived at 9am, one hour late on the dot. I had heard the back door creak open and thump shut, then the shuffling of Stu's worn black sneakers on the carpet. I had plastered a smile on my face and wondered if I should stare at the doorway until he entered or if I should pretend to be doing something and then act surprised when he came into the lobby. I didn't want him to think I was listening to him approach. But what if he thought I was rude because he knew I could hear him but didn't look to see him walk in? As my smile had begun to feel tight in my cheeks, Stu entered the lobby.

"Good morning! You must be Stu?" I yelled and waved emphatically. Stu gave a small nod. I'd begun to feel the tightness of my smile relax. A few more pleasantries on my end—this is a lovely inn, the garden is beautiful, I hadn't been here to visit since I was small and I didn't know why except that my mother had never seemed to like my father's father.... I yammered on, a contradiction to my personality. Stu nodded in reply, and the day began.

Stu hadn't made me explain, but our brief and bumbling introduction had left me wondering about my family's relationship with my grandfather. I only know of one visit we had as a family and the only thing I remember about that afternoon was my grandfather sitting in different chairs around the inn and grumbling to himself. He smoked a pipe too—just sat and smoked and flitted his eyes towards every sound and movement around the inn.

My mother is a busybody. She's a canary for her bone structure, but her song is the blended notes of condescension, complaints, and a whiny tone that only old dogs must hear. My grandfather, being a grumbling old dog himself, must have heard this tone every time he was around my mother. And my mother, for her turn, hates anything that doesn't adore and heel to her. My grandfather wouldn't heel, I

suppose, the way my father did for all those years. If he had, I might have been granted the chance to know him.

"No, John, I'm not going to yell at anyone, I'm just going to find out what kind of ransom we have to pay to get some decent room service around here!" a woman's voice calls from the hall. My cheeks flush and I try to look busy. A woman in a bathrobe comes out of the hallway and marches to the front desk.

"Excuse me? I tried calling you like eight times and no one answered."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry. What time were you trying to call?"

"Early this morning. We're out of towels."

"I'm so, so sorry I'll get some for you right away. I must have been away from the phone this morning when you—"

"Doesn't matter," she snaps. "We had to reuse the towels from yesterday."

"I am really sorry for the inconvenience, please let me get you some new ones." I start to turn toward the laundry room.

"Forget it. We're leaving today anyway." She marches back towards the hallway. "And you should really have someone here to answer phones. That was really unprofessional."

When she disappears behind the doorway I close my eyes, willing away tears. I had heard the phone ringing this morning, but I'd ignored every call. I didn't know enough yet—how could I answer their questions? What if someone were calling about an unpaid bill? Or, worse, an emergency? No, I'm not ready. I'm not prepared to be the one with all the answers.

I had finished reading over the instructions yesterday evening, and had woken up early this morning to re-read the first page:

Welcome, Thea.
Every key you'll ever need is on the chain in the drawer beneath the counter.
Stu has his own key. He usually comes in an hour late but don't ever dock his pay for that. When you come in the morning, open all the windows when it starts warming up outside. It gets stuffy here in the summertime.
Always keep the tea kettle full and brewing in the lobby.
More instructions below. Look them over and keep them somewhere safe.
You'll likely have to reference them more than once.

There is nothing in these instructions that explains why my grandfather thought I could handle this. Could I? I mean, serve customers, lock up at night, and smile? I've done all this before. But... manager? Whenever there is a problem that needs "extra" solving, who do people ask for? Right, the manager. I force down the lump in my throat. I am here now, I elected to be.

This is the first day of what I pretend is my new adventure in life. My first time away from home, and at twenty-six years old. This maybe isn't so unbelievable, but the reactions were beginning to make me feel ridiculous. I was growing tired of the sympathetic looks and the inevitable question: "So, what are you going to do?" I hate that question. Apparently, and here's the big secret of adulthood, you have to be doing something—and you'd better be able to impress people with whatever you do. "What are you going to do? What do you do?"

When I was still in college, I always had the tailor-made answer that I was "finishing my degree" and "exploring my options." But now? I used to wish that it was still considered normal for a single woman

to stay home with her father until she was married. Or become a plain and dull school marm that everyone refers to as "Spinster [Whatever her last name is]."

But I couldn't stay home with my father any longer. He doesn't have a home anymore, anyway. My parents finally had the big one years ago: The "I can't stand to live with you another second" fight that usually ends in divorce. If their faith or their families hadn't frowned upon legal separation, they might have done just that. Instead, my mother took over the house and redecorated it until everything was white and gold. And my father moved into the garden shed. I was nineteen.

It is a warm, humming afternoon and the sun collects in orange clusters on the wall. The lobby is lit with sunset hues and scented by the jasmine and the lilac growing outside. I had opened every window this morning as instructed—as soon as the chill damp of the morning had misted away. A man in blue coveralls walks through the front door. "Hi, I'm here to fix the water pressure."

"Oh hello. Sorry, the what?"

"Water pressure," he says and heaves a toolbox onto the counter.

"The water pressure, okay. Okay, let me see..." I flip through the instructions. "This doesn't say anything about water pressure, do you, um—" I look for Stu but he's not back yet. "Do you know which room...it's in?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"Oh, well..." I start scanning the instructions again.

"I'm just bustin' your chops. I talked to your grandpa about it before he, well. I'm the regular plumber here. Name's George."

"Thank you, George."

George smiles. “Welcome.” He continues to stand there at the counter.

“So...do I...? Do you need something from me or...?”

“Well, I’ll need the key to get into the basement and check the main valve down there.”

“Oh right, right.” I scramble for the keyring and look through the jumble of keys. “Just a second I have to find...the right one...” None of these are labelled!

“Got a little blue sticker on the top,” George says. I find it and try to pull it off the ring. My fingers are too sweaty.

“Sorry.” I pull harder.

“Oh, that’s all right. Those keys are mean sometimes. Let me try it.” George takes the ring and slides the key right off. “There we go. I’ll bring this back up when I’m done.”

“Thank you.”

“And try to relax, darlin’. You’re doing just fine.”

I smile and let out a deep breath. “Thank you.” I check the instructions again after George leaves but still can’t find anything about plumbing issues—or a color code for the keys. These seem like important details, grandpa! More important than most of the rest of this stuff! I tuck the instructions away and start to straighten everything at the desk when the front door closes again.

Flip. Flop. Flip. Flip. Flap. Flop.

A large old woman approaches the counter. Her white hair is lowlighted with soft grays and gathered at her neck with a ribbon. Her blue-gray raincoat reaches her knees and there are big yellow sandals on her feet. I recognize this outfit.

I smile at the woman then quickly start leafing through the instructions under the counter. I was hoping I wouldn’t need to worry

about this on my first day! There—a photograph, and the caption in bold:

If she comes, DO NOT give her a room until she's answered these questions.

This section of the instructions hadn't made any sense the first time I'd read them. Crap, why hadn't I asked Stu about them earlier? Where is Stu? He should be here in case I need help! The woman stares at me and rests a hand on the counter. I don't have a choice but to begin.

I exhale and notice the smallness of my voice as I ask, "Mrs. Darby, is there a songbird in your pocket?"

A smile flashes across Mrs. Darby's eyes. "I heard five or six songbirds in the trees outside just now."

Her voice is husky and direct. There is a long pause. Mrs. Darby places both hands on the counter and glances around the room. I look back down. There are seven more questions. That's it. No follow-up instructions. Where are the answers? How will I know if she's giving me the right answers?

I glance towards the doorway. Where is Stu? He must know what all of this means. Should I wait for him? I flip the page over—nothing. Mrs. Darby continues to stare at me patiently. I offer another pathetic smile before reading the next question.

"Would you mind putting your hands in your pockets to be sure?"

"Why would I have taken the trouble to wear such beautiful gloves if I wanted to hide them in my pockets?" Mrs. Darby's smile fades and her brow crinkles. She starts to pick at her fingertips.

"Oh...I'm sorry. I—" A loud whistle sounds from the corner of the room. I look over relieved to see Stu, who shakes his head and puts a finger to his lips. Mrs. Darby is looking a little less patient now. I clear

my throat and shift my weight onto my left foot. Next question. "Why don't you take the gloves off?"

"Because my mother made me hate my hands. She always said they were too large."

My own hands are beginning to feel ginormous, and my legs seem to grow ten feet longer. My mother always said that I was "all legs." Gangly. I was—I am—gangly. My knees brush when I walk. They are the only fat deposits on my gangly body, what my grandma calls "smiling knees." A term for when the folds on your knees make dimples that look like fat, smiling baby faces. I watch Mrs. Darby fidget with her gloves and wonder if she had been loved by her mother. I read the next question.

"Mrs. Darby, how did you get here?"

"Huh! Premarital sex and unrequited love."

"Whose?"

"The couple who figured the one bright side of their whole ruddy affair would be a little girl who'd turn out dainty."

Or brave. I know my parents wish I'd turned out braver. Even just a little bold. It's a miracle that I'm here now—the word "manager" still makes me sweat. I can't manage anything. I couldn't manage to find a useful next step for my business degree. I couldn't manage to tell my father that he deserved more than a twin bed in a garden shed and an accounting job that he hates. But I had that tiny, almost imperceptible itch to do something more— still within the cocoon of familial security, but something. And now, here I was, asking a load of cryptic questions to a strange old lady who I'm sure could beat me in an arm wrestling match if it comes to that.

"How long do you wish to stay?" I ask.

"You think that I am old but I am really quite young, you know."

She runs a finger along the edge of the counter and raises her eyebrows matter-of-factly. “Compared to how many years I’m sure I’ve been promised, I am only a child.”

I wait for her to say more, or to implore me to ask her what she means, but she only stares at me and picks at the tips of her gloves. Stu is still no help at all. I give him a sideways glance, but he simply points again and nods.

“Mrs. Darby, is there a songbird tucked behind your ear?” I ask.

“Hmmm...” A faraway look clouds over her eyes. “Would you like to hear me sing?”

The sound is loud and off-key. She drums along with her gloved hands, smiling brightly when I meet her gaze. I take a deep breath, growing weary of this game.

“Aren’t your feet getting cold in those shoes, Mrs. Darby?” The humming ceases abruptly and she smacks the counter with her palm. She stares down at her large feet in her yellow sandals. Her brow furrows and she lifts the tea kettle from the side of the counter with a shaking hand, pouring herself a cup and muttering in a harsh whisper that slowly rises to fill the room.

"I have always either been loved by someone I couldn't love, or loved someone who couldn't love me."

“No, no, no.” She takes a sip, shaking her head. “No, it’s perfect. It’s perfect. It’s perfect!” Mrs. Darby stamps one foot down and grips the edge of the counter. There is a frantic twinge in her usually gruff voice. She sounds more girlish now. “It isn’t so windy down at the beach, now.

He wants it to be there, he told me he'll be there! Put on your dress and your shoes. It's only a little rain, darling, I want it to be there. It's perfect!"

I have loved and I have been loved, but I have never been in love. That is, I have always either been loved by someone I couldn't love, or loved someone who couldn't love me. My last love was a local boy. He loved the rain and sweaters with weird prints. He loved Chinese takeout as much as I do, and he loved staying in and watching movies instead of going out on the town. And I'd let him say he loved me.

I must've tricked him the way I always trick anyone who thinks they are close to the woman inside me. They say the words, and maybe they believe them. But once they've slipped, I know I've done it again. I've tricked them into loving someone who isn't me. They wouldn't love me—the mind, the soul, the flawed product of introversion and quirk. The only thing to do is to break the spell. And so, when I let him say he loved me, I did what I always do. I disappeared.

The air in the lobby had grown thin. Mrs. Darby is silent now, clinging to the edge of the counter and letting out deep, troubled breaths. She takes more sips from her cup and continues to whisper: *He loves me.... He told me that he loves me*. I look over to Stu, who pats the air in my direction.

Mrs. Darby sighs deeply. I watch her, waiting for a signal that I'm not sure she could give me if she wanted to. The silence hangs over us until finally her face falls back into the hazy, thoughtful expression she'd walked in with. My finger traces over the letters of the last question on the page. Mrs. Darby begins to pick at her gloves again. I take a deep breath and ask the final question.

"Mrs. Darby," I whisper, "...is there a songbird in your pocketbook?"

Mrs. Darby's fingers freeze and her eyes meet my gaze. Something flickers across her expression. It is surrender or relief, I don't know which. She nods slowly, holding my gaze with eyes in mourning. Her gloved hand moves carefully inside her coat and pulls out a small blue pocketbook with little daisies painted on the cover. She pinches the button between her fingers.

Mrs. Darby gingerly sifts through the cards in the book before taking one and holding it out to me with a shaking arm. I reach for the card, taking it into my own trembling hand. It is white with black lettering and a little bird printed in the top left corner before the name:

Song Sparrow Center
Senior Care and Psychological Services
457 E 900 S, Three Oaks, MI 49128
**The owner of this card requires
supervision from medical staff at all times.
If this individual is currently unsupervised,
please call this number immediately:
(269) 623-1183

My eyes are trapped in the words on the little white card. I run my fingers over the edges as Mrs. Darby begins to drum the counter with her fingers again. I hear the shuffling of shoes against the carpet and look up to see Stu making his way over.

Mrs. Darby smiles at Stu. He offers his arm and she softly places a gloved hand into the crook of his elbow. As they pass by the desk, Stu reaches inside his jacket and pulls out an envelope. He places the envelope on the counter and slides it towards me. I stare at it.

I am so sick and tired of this ambiguity. Inside is a letter written in a combination of cursive and chicken scratch. Words from my grandfather's hand.

Dear Thea,

I suppose by now you must have met my songbird. Pretty alarming, isn't she? Listen though, she's very special, granddaughter. She gave me my stamina, understand? You can't run my inn without stamina. If you try to, you'll get swallowed up with everyone's demands and complaints and messes left in rooms. And you'll get spit out on your ass, like I almost was when I first started out—and I was already older and wiser then.

Truth is, I know you're scared to death right now. I know this because my son writes me, though infrequently, and he tells me that you're 'fragile.' Listen to me, kid. You're not fragile. Or afraid, or too inexperienced, or too timid to take chances. That's a lie. You don't need to be brave or outgoing or none of this other bullcrap you think it takes to do hard things. You just need to find your stamina. Hear me?

My songbird was one of my first guests when I opened. She wasn't so old, then. Hell, neither was I. I know you're probably hoping I'm about to tell you her whole story now, but I can't. I don't know it. I know she has had a lot of disappointment in her life and a lot of backwards love. She's been at that center almost all her adult life, after her momma died. She likes to sing to herself in the early mornings—loud and badly. I usually let her stay till about noon. Stu brings her lunch, a tuna salad sandwich and a slice of carrot cake. And keep that tea brewing. It keeps her mind warm, she told me once.

Now listen. You can call the center right now if you want to, there's no shame in that. I know she's unpredictable and I won't ask

you to babysit her for me. But understand, this is the only time my songbird is her own person again. When she's confused and finds a way to leave the center, she gets to fly a little bit and be brave. You can understand that, can't you? I suppose they'll really lock her in one day. Her visits are already getting few and far between. So just go ahead and call if you need to. Or trust me that she'll be all right and happy till you call tomorrow afternoon, and you start building up that endurance. Choice is yours.

Grandpa

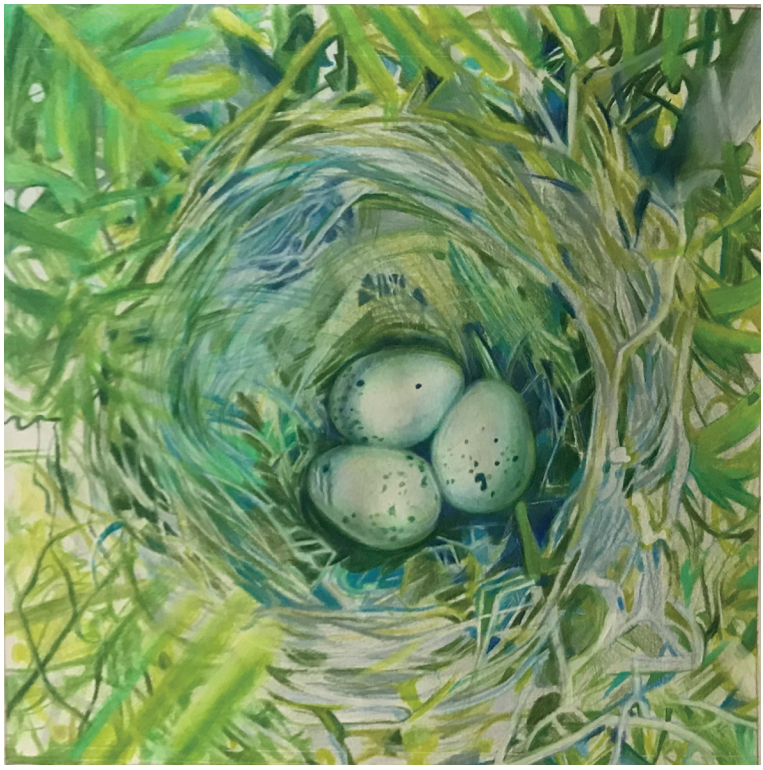
I read the last few lines over again. The choice is mine. I want to call the center right now. I want to dump all the clean towels we own at the door of that snotty lady from this morning. I want to call my mother and tell her that's she's being ridiculous for keeping my father out in that shed and that being tall is better than how short she is—I look better in heels. And then I want to call my father and tell him that he's being equally ridiculous for continuing to stay there. And that I should have grown up knowing the author of this letter in my hand.

"Ahem." Stu had appeared in front of me. He picks up the little card from the desk. "Are we making a call tonight, miss?"

"Um..." I think for a moment, staring out at a bird hopping along the front path where Mrs. Darby had said she'd heard them singing this afternoon. "No. Not tonight, Stu, I don't think. Tomorrow."

Stu tucks the card away into his red jacket. He meets my gaze with his steady eyes and gives me a small nod. There is a sorrowful smile playing across his aged face. He whistles to Mrs. Darby. This time, it sounds like a song.

Winner of the 2022 Prize for Visual Arts



Analogous Egg Nest, Julia Jackson, Colored Pencil, 10”x10”

MATHEA TANNER

Gary

The day my brother Dean fractured his skull we said it was Gary's fault. Gary was our tree. Dean had been trying to show off again, had his mushroom white legs curled around one of the branches when Gary bit him in the tender cups of flesh at the back of each knee. Dean yolped and let go and we were all sitting on the ground, laughing with clumps of grass in our fists until we saw Dean wasn't moving. He spent a month out of school and always claimed an odd ticking in his right ear after that.

We had no idea what sort of tree Gary was. We just knew he was ours—the only scrubby tree in our scrubby yard next to our scrubby house on our scrubby street. We were the scrubby children that loved him, because he was one of us. When all the other trees in the neighborhood turned out blazing Halloween costumes in autumn, Gary was a letdown in dime store grimy yellow leaves. We understood this pain and didn't care. He had good sturdy limbs that went in all directions and he was always up for whatever our imaginations demanded. He was our gunner's turret, our pirate's galley, our Godzilla in the streets of Tokyo. We offered up our dead gerbils and precious trinkets to his soil and in return, he shaded us on the dog pant days of summer and kept our secrets in his bicycle chain strips of bark.

In early spring, Gary made unimpressive little oval leaves that grew little nodules all over the undersides.

"Blech," my friend Erin said one day, sitting with our moldy quilt under her stomach. "Your tree is warty."

"I hope you didn't touch it," I said coolly, turning the page of

whatever V.C. Andrews book we had. "Those warts are catching."

Erin screamed and I didn't care. She was an asshole then and still is, I hear. Now she runs the local PTA board.

In late spring, Gary spat out dark red alien fruit the size of hole punches. They rolled hard between your fingers and it was my sister Vera that started eating them. We were collecting them for spells or medicines or props for our Barbie games, whatever it was that day, and all of a sudden she got this wicked look on her face and, *scompf!*, tossed them in her mouth and started chewing. I knew it was the sort of thing that would make Momma grab her by the arm, make her say *for god's sake what kind of wild animals am I raising*, but the moment she swallowed and showed me her triumphant, empty mouth, my sister was a badass. A few days later, when she didn't die, all four of us started eating the berries. The crunchy sweet of them stuck to our cheeks and became the flavor of our adolescence.

In the wintertime, Gary went naked and exposed horrible sea anemone tumors of twigs all over his limbs.

"Witches' brooms," Momma muttered between cigarette lips.

Then she crossed her arms and offered nothing more by way of explanation, and we knew better than to ask. There were two times you never pressed Momma: when she was elbows deep in some toil, or when she was resting, but with her arms crossed. Since she was rarely not in one of those states, we learned to dampen our curiosity. Curiosity is a luxury for the poor—the puppy you can't get because it costs too much to feed.

Gary made it into a lot of the family photos over the years. We knew Momma only marched us out to the yard because of the tatty walls and shoddy lighting inside the house, but we were happy for it because Gary was as least as much a part of the family as our youngest

sibling Steve who spent most of his time eating paint chips off the windowsill. Gary even matched us—we were all stick-legged and gangly tall so it was almost like we had a daddy in the photos if you squinted a lot. And like us, he grew tenuous branches with each new year. There he was for the day my sister got her scholarship to Vanderbilt, with my brother and his prom date Franny, for Steve's first day of boot camp, and—strapping and full-leaved—at my engagement to Jon. And though there were no photos of the darker times, Gary was there for those, too. He was there the day Vera came home because she got kicked out college for smoking pot, for the moment that my brother learned that Franny died in a car accident, and for the phone call that Momma got saying Steve had been shot in friendly fire in Iraq and would probably never walk again. And the day, two weeks before my engagement, when I found out I was pregnant with our first child, Lissy, I had gone to sit under Gary to cry.

It was a couple months after my baby girl was born that I went to visit Momma at the house one late afternoon. The minute I turned onto our street, I knew something was wrong. Lissy started whimpering in the driveway and I jerked the car into park. My car door wide open, I stood staring at the place where Gary's treetop normally peeked above the ratty roof shingles from the backyard. Just empty sky. Lissy started wailing in rhythm with the *ping ping* of the car's ignition warning. Gary was gone.

"What happened to Gary?" I asked Momma when I stormed into the kitchen, Lissy clinging to my hip.

Momma didn't look up from the dishes. She had a towel wrapped around her head, cigarette dripping from her mouth. Three months into chemo, she still had not bothered to buy headscarves or wigs. I believed she preferred the towel to keep up the illusion of normalcy,

even luxury—like maybe she just got out of the shower or had been interrupted in the middle of a spa treatment.

"Who?" Momma said.

"Our tree."

"Oh, that. Had some powdery mildew thing. Those new neighbors complained, said their dumb trees would get it. Got so they pestered me on it every time I left the house. Finally had your Uncle Petey bring a couple of his boys to cut it down, grind out the stump. They hauled it away for wood last week."

I stared at her, aghast.

"Those neighbors' trees weren't anywhere near Gary, Momma." I looked out at the barren yard. "And that stuff doesn't even kill trees. Me and Jon had it on ours. You treat it, it goes away."

She kept scrubbing, the snowfall of ash falling onto the plates and outpacing her efforts.

"You just didn't care enough," I said, my voice hoarse.

Later, I wandered the yard with Lissy, to the patch of bare earth and the path where Gary's branches made claw marks as they dragged him away. My baby daughter made coo noises and scanned the sky for clouds. I held her closer and squatted down in the dirt.

It was Steve that named him Gary. The memory of that day crouched with me on the ground. Steve was a fat and disagreeable baby and had just started speaking a couple months earlier. He quickly built a repertoire of refusals.

"No."

"Won't."

"Stopit."

Few things pleased our chubby little emperor in the days before he discovered lead paint chips, but he loved being outside and so we

would plop him down into the patchy grass to watch him work his Vienna sausage fingers into bare earth. One day when the rest of us were burying Vera's pet lizard under the tree, he looked up from pulling dandelion heads and pointed at it and said, "Gary." Really, it was something like "gangney," or "gargly" but the three of us older siblings agreed it was definitely "Gary" and scooped up our brother to go announce to Momma that the tree had a name.

Once something has a name, it has a story. Squatting there in the dirt with my baby, I could not reconcile Gary's story ending in pieces of firewood, this bare patch of earth to our yard and our house. I turned to look behind me, and saw Momma silhouetted and leaning in the doorframe, arms crossed. In the rising twilight, I could not tell if she was watching me or the fading light.

A year after they took Gary away, Momma died and her now grown children were handed the mean house and a mean can of ashes and we had no idea what to do with either of them. We gathered at the house, us four kids, and sat the can in the middle of the kitchen table and slumped around it. Uncle Petey came by, too, wearing his least grimy overalls and leaning on the old Formica countertop to watch us ponder. During the whole dying process, people would ask us what were your mother's wishes and all we could think of were those thin arms crossed in front of her body. Vera finally said she thought we should dress the can in a head towel and give it a cigarette and use it as a centerpiece at family gatherings. And though that was as good an idea as any, we finally decided we would go in search of a riverbank Petey recalled from when he and Momma were kids where they'd plunge their sun red hands in to catch minnows.

As we prepared to head out, we talked of the house. It was determined that Steve and his new wife Katy would move in, and they

would need to have wheelchair ramps installed.

"You'll have to angle the one for the back door to the north, or it'll run into the tree," Petey said.

"What the hell are you talking about, Uncle Petey, Gary got cut down months ago," Vera said, heading to the back kitchen window and gesturing out, then she stopped. "Well, goddamn," she said, leaning closer. "What the fuck is that?"

Dean and I moved to the window where Vera stood gape mouthed. There, in Gary's patch of earth, sat a lanky sapling.

"I planted it a few weeks back," Petey said. "Your momma called me, oh, a month, maybe, before she died. Asked me to go plant that tree out in that spot."

"She did not," Vera said, unbelieving, and headed out the back door and into the yard.

Dean and Uncle Petey carried Steve's chair down the stairs and I followed. We all gathered around the little thing and watched it tremble in the afternoon breeze.

"What kind of tree is it?" Steve asked, and Dean struggled our brother's wheelchair forward on the uneven ground for a closer look.

"Same as the last one. She was real specific about that."

"I thought none of us knew what kind of tree Gary was," Dean said quietly.

"It's hard to tell if it really is the same sort," I said, eyes narrowed at the young leaves and thin branches. "It's so scrawny."

We all stood quiet, considering the changeling like a baby at our doorstep.

"A few weeks before she died, you said?" Dean asked.

"Oh yes," Uncle Petey said. "She was very adamant."

Petey lit a cigarette and walked a few paces away, and we tightened

our circle around it in silence.

Finally, Vera called over, her mouth a thin line. “Go get the ashes, Petey, would you?”

Dean studied our sister’s face for a moment, then understood and headed to the shed for a shovel. We would bury Momma right there. Dean, the eldest and always taking the lead, began on the grave. And just like that, we were children again, at play in that dingy old yard. Dean digging in the dirt, Vera squeezing her hand through the chain link fence to poach lilies of the valley from the neighbor’s flowerbeds, Steve sitting wide eyed in his chair, watching the starlings above us make knitted patterns in the fading day. And me, standing beside him, kicking at the crabgrass, suddenly back in Vera’s hand-me-down saddle shoes with a runny nose and dirty ankles. I turned around to the house and there was Momma, standing in the doorway with Uncle Petey. He had paused there to watch the birds, too, and the steel ash can in his hands reflected duller versions of the spring sky. We all scattered the stolen flowers in the fresh hole without a word. Then we buried Momma under the new tree, alongside the parakeet bones and smooth stones and baby teeth.

"We buried Momma under the new tree, alongside the parakeet bones and smooth stones and baby teeth."

Not long after the burial, Dean and Vera both moved to far away cities. Then Jon got a job offer from a trucking company, so we, too, found ourselves hundreds of miles from our childhood town. Each year we all

found new and better reasons not to return, and it would finally take Uncle Petey's death—the same year Lissy started college—to bring us all back home again.

The luncheon that followed Petey's funeral was at Momma's house. Steve and Katy improved it over the years, and our old house was painted and dressed up in bright flower boxes and a new wraparound porch. It looked like an impoverished country girl picking self-consciously at a string of fine pearls. When we pulled up, two of Dean's kids were dangling their legs from a porch swing we would have killed for when we were kids. I hustled our family—Lissy and Jon and our twelve-year-old, Scott, who had never set foot on this ground—into the backyard. I was so distracted with the house itself that I didn't even notice the yard until a familiar shape appeared at my peripheral.

I stared up at it in wonderment. The gaunt sapling of all those years ago had grown up, and I now recognized this posture, the open-palmed branches ready for anything our imaginations demanded. It was early autumn and it had just put on its drab little Halloween costume.

"Is this your old tree?" Lissy asked.

"No." I frowned. "Well, sort of," recalling that I'd only ever shared Gary's life with Lissy, not his end. For my children, I left out much of the meanness in my stories of home.

Vera came up beside us. "Guess Momma knew what kind of tree Gary was after all, huh?" she said. With her arms crossed, I realized for the first time how much she looked like our mother.

I nodded.

"Well what kind is it?" my daughter asked.

"Fuck if I know," Vera said, "Uncle Petey never did tell us, did he?"

"No," I said.

"Hold on." My daughter took out her phone, tapped, and leveled

the screen carefully for a photo. "This app is really cool. It can tell us the species in a sec."

"Put that away," I said, careful not to swat at her hand, as Momma would have done with me.

I placed a palm to the bark of this tree and groped, momentarily, at a well of memories. Yes, we were all there: Dean and Vera and me and Steve. Uncle Petey. And Momma.

Vera gave me the smallest smile and she and Lissy placed palms on the tree, too. We patted Gary's trunk and ran our fingers into his grooves. Then Jon called out to us from the back door to join them in the kitchen where the rest of the family was gathered. I drew one arm through my daughter's and the other through my sister's, entwining the branches of our long limbs, and we walked up the lawn to the house.

Second Place for the 2022 Prize for Nonfiction

RICHIE SCHENCK

In the Land of Drag

My first drag show was at Parliament House in Orlando, Florida. Darcel Stevens hosted: Broad shoulders, large and in charge. She claimed to once have been a linebacker for the-then Oakland Raiders and made a career change for something more fabulous (in my humblest opinion). Her jokes often crude and sassy, she was known to pick on audience members. One of her classic moves was to take someone's cell phone away if they weren't paying her mind. She'd read off their text messages to the audience.

"Did you hear about Pauley," she'd read, "He's got a big…," lowering the microphone so only those sitting close by could hear her say dick in an exaggerated deep bass tone. This of course would bring an awkward laugh and blushing face to the unprepared phone's owner who had set up her punch line.

On one of my first visits to Parliament House's legendary Footlight Theatre, packed to the brim with fellow gay guys and bridal parties, I was Darcel's target practice for an even more humorous public act of space violation. Yanked from my seat like a tight end tackled with the football, she grilled me for the most intimate details of my life.

"Where ya from, honey?" She'd ask. "You a top or a bottom?"

I recall the smell of Darcel's fragrance in her hair, some musky number luring me in to answer this most intimate detail. And after an awkward pause, in comedic timing perfection, she'd say: "Oh that's

okay honey, you can come back to my dressing room later and show me." Then all six foot five of her would march on to claim her next victim. While some people would consider this a hostile invasion, it made me feel part of the show, and love her more. And the entire art of drag.

The art of drag isn't new. Some might say it goes all the way back to William Shakespeare and the many men who donned a dress to play various female roles in his plays. Others accredit the Stonewall movement of 1969 in New York City for shedding light on drag culture. Another large influence on drag was the ball scene of New York City, made popular in the late eighties and early nineties (watch the show *Pose* for an in-depth look). These over-the-top competitions highlighted a diverse array of members of the LGBT community *walking the runway* and *voguing* for trophies. In fact, Vogue came from the ballroom scene. Even the popular series *RuPaul's Drag Race* is heavily influenced by the ballroom drag culture as well.

One of my favorite queens, a Dallas native named Kennedy Davenport, uses many of the ballroom staple dance moves today. One is the popular *shablam* (when someone falls backward with one leg bent). I tried it once. It hurts. Glad I was tipsy at the time. Most people would never believe Kennedy was in the military. As a guy, Reuben is a man's man. But when he puts on those heels and a dress, she tumbles across the stage and dances like nothing I have ever seen before (maybe it was all the basic training). She is even so talented that she was on two seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, coming in as first runner up on the "All Stars 3" season.

My love for the art form has led me to many a drag show, drag brunch, countless dollars tucked into a pair of fake breasts, and even recently a long-term relationship with a guy who does drag. There

is just something about the transformation, unbridled humor, and theatre of it. This leads me to another one of my favorite things about drag: Pageants! When I was twenty-four, I got to back-up dance for a friend who was competing in a drag pageant. Intense competitions, but the highlights are not all on the stage (unless you're talking about the heavily over exaggerated makeup on the queen's cheeks). In fact, you haven't lived until you've been in a dressing room filled with half naked men wearing breast plates and spandex. Some people say that drag queens are catty and cruel to each other. It's true. But it's more of a fierce sisterhood, and the bickering is akin to brothers and sisters arguing and pulling each other's hair (except in this case it's most likely a wig).

"Give me back my hairspray, you old hag," one queen would say.

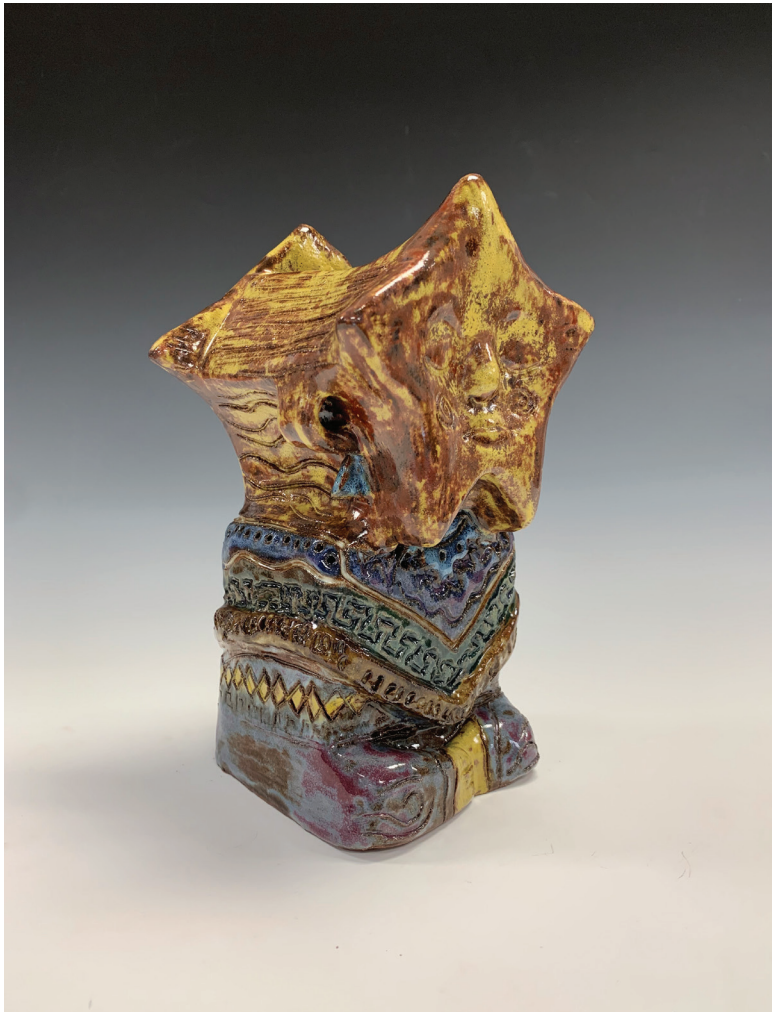
"I shan't, you crusty gold digger. Buy another bottle with your daddy's money you tucked in those hideous costumes from Akira," retorted another queen.

Slut, hag, fish, beast, booger; all terms of endearment in the drag world. To read simply means to insult someone with little effort. This is much like improvisation at a comedy show, or a freestyle rap battle. And this was what Darcel was doing with me at Parliament House. But rather than hurl her reads at her fellow queens, she threw them at the audience. This pulled us in to her world; into the land of drag. And it gave us that feeling of being in a drag queen's dressing room. One read from Darcel, and I was in *hunty* (another popular drag expression). I didn't need a three hundred dollar wig, or ornately Swarovski crystal-stoned dress to the boots down dragged out gods (more expressions of the queendom, of course). Darcel inducted me to the land of drag simply by forcing me to reveal my innermost secrets in front of a room of absolute strangers. And that's what I love most about drag. For me,

it's not about someone hiding their boy persona under fake lashes and fish nets. But that the art of drag forces us to realize we can release our inhibitions and just be ourselves. I mean, if a three-hundred-pound NFL linebacker can don a dress and stilettos, why should I be afraid to tell an audience whether I'm a top or a bottom (FYI I'm still not telling you . . . you'll have to meet me in the dressing room for that answer).

As a young barely out of the closet gay man, that realization that I can just be myself was empowering and life changing. And in the words of one of the greatest queens there has ever been, RuPaul says it best: "If you can't love yourself, how the hell are you gonna love somebody else?" And *hunty*, that's about the best read anyone could give.

Second Place for the 2022 Prize for Visual Arts



Oscura the Sun Goddess, Stephanie Velazquez, Ceramic, 8”

DERIAN DALTON

Life Among the Forsaken

Caressing concave walls: moss and vine
adorn the sunken roof, intertwined with cracked hollows
of the windows. A crumbling chimney sags
with the weight of neglected stone held together by moss,
which prospers. In the yard, the willows weep,
for they have been forgotten. Moss and vine that flourish,
rejoice—For they have found solace among the broken.

MATHEA TANNER

A Recipe for Artichokes

Remember me, Daughter, in the blooms of artichokes.

Our ancient Greek ancestors were the first to place flowers at graves. If they took root, it was a sign that the fallen found peace. Know that I've found peace, Mathea. I am rooted through you.

Remember that day, when you moved away from home, and I brought you artichokes?

You opened the container right there at your new threshold and scraped the creamy flesh from each petal with your teeth. You smiled, and I saw you setting out on your own, the same girl that ate artichokes, despite the warning prickles and furry choke, when the other children made wide-eyed faces. Make this recipe, and celebrate our memories together, and the woman you've become. The recipe is simple.

When you were little, there were seasons for artichokes. They'll tell you now that you can get them all year long, but they are still best in the springtime, when everything is reborn. Look for the fattest green globes—the chubby ones are sweetest.

Now toast old bread for stuffing. We never waste it, in honor of your grandfather who had so little in the war. Sometimes we, too, had little. Pound the bread until it looks like sand and place it in a bowl. Add oregano from your garden. Do you remember the little pots we kept on the rickety porch of our Chicago apartment, how we dried bouquets of herbs on the laundry line? Oregano is the herb of joy. Crush it in your palm, and inhale. Add salt, as it preserves us, and

black pepper for protection. Chop garlic. When you were small, I fed you slivers of it to chase away colds—you swallowed them whole and the smell clung to your fevered lips.

Gather good parmesan, glowing lemons, rich olive oil. Be grateful for abundance, for these moments of peace in your kitchen and your life. Sing and shred tangy cheese, zest lemon and breathe in its vibrancy, pour olive oil, and plunge your hands into the mix. Feel the damp-grit mixture on your fingertips. Does it remind you of Lake Michigan's shoreline and digging your toes into wet sand?

Bathe the artichokes in cool water; trim their thistle-sharp leaves like dozens of tiny fingernails and cut their stems as babies lose their umbilical cords.

Remember how we used to sit at the kitchen table spread with old newspaper? We lined up artichokes like soldiers, all shorn and ready for battle, then carefully stuffed each with our sandy breadcrumb mixture. It was fiddly work, and we talked about our days as we moved in a spiral around each layer, setting each into the big black enameled pot when complete. Next comes your favorite part: You said they needed their hats.

I sliced lemon wheels and you placed one atop each artichoke with your tiny fingers. Then a little water and salt in the bottom of the pan, so their little bums didn't burn, and a bay leaf to drift as a little boat. A final touch: Anointment with more olive oil; we drizzled that over the tops. Now they are holy, and ready for entombment, sealed with a lid like a sarcophagus.

And then the somber moment when we'd pass them into the oven. Yet here is when the magic happens. Here is when the gentle bubbling sound comes from the oven, heralding the coming feast. Here is when

the smells of all that was best in your childhood rise up and beckon.

Remember peeking into the oven—the bright hot herb smell wafting out and kissing your cheeks? You were so impatient for them to finish, and oh, how I distracted you. We played games with old toy animals on the old rag rug. We smashed together model cars, made their sound effects (*Errrrk! Kerpaw!*). We made Barbies explore the jungle beneath the kitchen table. You were my only child, and so I was your only playmate on those gentle afternoons.

We would prepare the rest of the meal together—you learned to tear lettuce leaves for salad, tossing in glistening Kalamata olives like precious jewels, ruby ripe tomatoes from your grandpa's garden, cubes of dazzling white feta cheese. You learned to slice good crusty bread, set out yellow butter and amber jars of honey.

Remember all being right in the world of our little kitchen?

To test doneness, grasp one of the petals and wiggle. If the artichoke gives up its petal freely, we have permission to eat them; this is like a handshake agreement between them and us. Now you should gather your guests, just as our family used to gather: The aunts and uncles and grandparents that drifted as sailors to sirens to our kitchen. This meal is for sharing, so always invite others to your table. Hear the clatter of plates and the chimes of silverware; these sounds make a promise of a belly soon full. Hear, too, the pop of wine corks, the deep inhaling sighs of people smelling good smells. Feel glad that you have made these moments of happiness, just as I was glad to do this for our family.

Listen to their *ooos* and *ahhs* as you pull off the lid with a flourish. Place one steaming orb onto each plate and watch their faces beam. Gather at the table, filled with platters and merriment, and conduct the symphony of your meal.

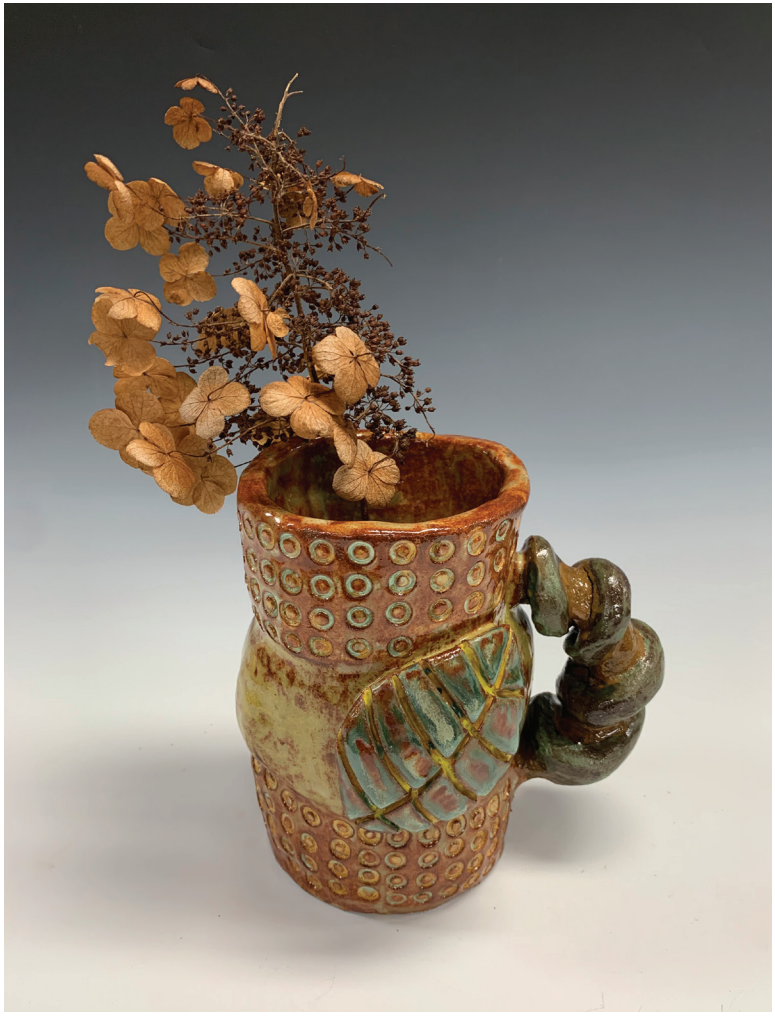
"Try a little of the bread drizzled with a little of this wildflower honey," you'll say. Or, "Here, this wine is my favorite."

Your guests will tuck in with reverence. They will pull off the little lemon wheels. When you were little, this made you laugh, how it looked like they tipped their hats to you. Have a big platter in the center of your table for your guests to toss the spent petals. Watch the pile grow and the conversations deepen. Watch the smiles widen.

Remember when your aunt married, we joked that we could toss artichoke leaves at her wedding day?

Don't forget to make yourself a plate. Sit with your guests. Savor their words and your own exaltation. Taste the salt-tang of the stuffing. Think of how well it dances with the sweet artichoke flesh. Let the memories come, and tell them about me, the mother that taught you. Savor each moment.

Remember, Daughter, and cook.



Garden Vines, Angel Juan-Lamb, Ceramic, 6.5”x 6”

Winner of the 2022 Prize for Fiction

MYA WHALEY

Espadas y la plaga

Honestamente, preferiría los residuos de animales sobre los de humanos. Cuando mi familia y yo vivíamos en el campo de Puerto de Gazania, a menudo tenía que lidiar con la caca de los animales. A veces, el olor a estiércol se me pegaba durante días. Sí, fue repugnante, pero después de todo valió la pena porque éramos felices en el campo. Nuestra familia había vivido en este lugar durante muchas generaciones; nuestras raíces y conexión se encontraban allí. Pero después de demasiadas cosechas fallidas, mi padre pensó que teníamos solo dos opciones: encontrar trabajo en Sevilla o morir de hambre. Así que, ahora me encuentro con una nueva forma de hedor: lo del humano. Permeando las calles mientras camino hacia mi trabajo en la herrería. Me pregunto si hay algo peor que tape las calles que los desechos humanos.

Abro la puerta y entro en la herrería, preparándome mentalmente para un día de sudor y ardor. En comparación con el trabajo del herrero, extraño el trabajo del campo. Aunque tenía muchas responsabilidades en el campo, tenía un objetivo con mis deberes, el de algún día poder estar a cargo de la finca. Todavía yo seré el que continúe con mi apellido. ¿Pero de qué sirve continuar el apellido sin la finca? Además, el trabajo de herrero es molesto. Después del accidente de otro aprendiz, Señor González, mi maestro, y Antonio, un compañero aprendiz, han estado en mi sombra constantemente durante el trabajo en la fragua para asegurarse que mi técnica es perfecta.

“Utiliza la punta redondeada del martillo.” Antonio me ordena. A los doce años, cuatro menos que yo, tiene que inclinar la barbilla hacia arriba para hablar conmigo. Esto no le impide actuar como si fuera mayor. Y para colmo de males el Señor González lo dejó a cargo de la tienda hoy, lo que significaba que iba a ser un dolor aún mayor.

“Estoy usándola.” Gruño.

“No.” Me quita el martillo de las manos. "Escucha."

Empieza a martillar. El tono de sus golpes se vuelve notablemente más alto y distinto al mío. Hace una pausa y me mira, sonriendo con superioridad.

“¿Qué?” Finjo no notar la diferencia.

Antes de que Antonio pueda responder, un hombre entra en la fragua.

“Hola. Estoy buscando algo afilado.” Su acento es noruego, pero su ropa parece argelina.

Antonio se apresura hacia la colección de espadas y elige la mas fuerte y dura.

"¿Que le parece esto?" Antonio le pregunta al hombre, entregándole la espada.

"¿De qué está hecha?" Toma una postura y agita la espada de manera impresionante. Parece evidente que el hombre y la espada van juntos.

“Acero.”

Mirando la espada, el cliente deja escapar un suspiro. “Tiene usted una daga? Algo barato sería mejor.”

Antonio frunce el ceño, pareciendo tan confundido como yo, pero le da al hombre una daga menos impresionante. El hombre estudia la espada, pasando los dedos por el lado plano. Toca el lado afilado con la palma de la mano, lo que abre la piel. Asiente. "La compraré."

“Está seguro? Está genial con la otra. Y es la mejor para combatir.” Le pregunta Antonio, un verdadero vendedor.

El hombre sonríe, pero hay tristeza en sus ojos. “No es para combatir."

Antonio no lo entiende.

“Tómala. No nos debe nada.” Digo, instando al hombre a irse.

Antonio me mira enojado. "¡No! Tiene que pagar por eso." Miro a Antonio con el ceño fruncido y traté de comunicarme con él a través del contacto visual. Debe haber entendido alguna porción de mi mensaje porque después de un momento más de intercambiar miradas, se cruce de brazos en señal de derrota.

“Tengo el dinero. Por favor, no puedo aceptar esto sin pagarles."

"Salga ahora, por favor." Le mando.

Comienza a alejarse. Justo antes de salir por la puerta, se vuelve hacia nosotros, se agacha y coloca una bolsa de dinero voluminosa en el umbral de la puerta.

"Pongo esto aquí en caso de que cambie de opinión."

Antonio corre hacia el dinero.

"¡No lo toques!" Grito.

“¡Mira cuánto es esto! ¡Podríamos comprar materiales para tres herramientas y una semana de comida para nuestras familias con eso! "

"Sí, y podríamos contraer la peste negra." Sugiero.

“Al menos voy a patearlo adentro y dejar que el Señor González decida qué hacer cuando regrese. Además, él dice que la plaga solo se está propagado cuando alguien muere y el espíritu infectado pasa por la persona. ¿Parecía que ese tipo murió?”

Desvío la mirada. "Hasta que demuestren cómo se propaga, no debemos tocarlo."

Al final del día, salgo por la puerta trasera para evitar de tocar la

bolsa que se había quedado en la otra puerta y le recuerdo a Antonio para hacer lo mismo. Al caminar para casa, un hombre que se lleva una máscara negra la que resembla un cuervo se cruza conmigo. Estoy sorprendido de ver un doctor en esta parte del pueblo; la mayoría no se puede permitir este tipo de tratamiento. Me pasan otros dos médicos; esto no puede ser una buena indicación. Al acercarme a casa, veo un hombre que pinta una equis roja en la puerta de una casa. No entiendo lo que hace, pero tengo un mal presentimiento.

En casa, hablo con mis padres sobre lo que vi. Me explican que la razón por la que hay tantos médicos en las calles ahora es porque la enfermedad se está extendiendo rápidamente y más personas están poniendo todo su dinero en tratamiento. En cuanto a la equis roja en las puertas, aparentemente marcan a una familia infectada. Si una persona de la familia está infectada, toda la familia esté encerrada en su casa y se pinte una equis roja en el exterior de la puerta. Ellos dicen que es una cuarentena que nadie sobrevive. Para no asustar a mis padres, evito contarles sobre mi encuentro con el cliente noruego esta mañana, sin embargo el miedo no me permitió dormir esa noche.

Por suerte, no tengo que trabajar al próximo día. Normalmente paso los días libres explorando la ciudad, pero en este día libre me quedo en casa. Prefiero estar atrapado en mi hogar sobre ver a otro médico pájaro, una puerta marcada con la equis roja ni el inquietante olor de la caca humana en las calles. Paso la mayoría del día fantaseando con el campo que hemos dejado atrás, y preguntándome si exista la peste allá.

Al día siguiente, contemplo faltar al trabajo. Ser despedido sería mejor que contraer la enfermedad. Pero nuestro suministro de alimentos se está agotando así que me arriesgo. Las calles parecían aún más sucias este día al caminar hacia el trabajo. ¿Nuestro sistema de

saneamiento también está infectado?

Entro por la puerta trasera de nuevo y encuentro a Antonio forjando una espada con un martillo nuevo.

"¿Dónde está Señor González?" Le pregunto al acercarse el fuego.

Antonio, pareciendo perezoso, se encoge de hombros. Miro el umbral, donde a la bolsa ya no queda para burlarse de Antonio. Me vuelvo para interrogar a Antonio cuando se derrumba, su martillo cayendo al lado de él. Está agarrando la mitad de su muslo, donde una masa sobresale claramente de su ropa.

Entro en pánico. Por mucho que Antonio me moleste, es como un hermano para mí. Él no puede tener la plaga. Pero si la tenga y yo este visto con el, ¿me encerrarían en la tienda con él para morir?

"Samuel, por favor," Antonio suplica, voz de miedo y confusión. Solo es un chico. Necesita mi ayuda.

Lo miro, entonces hacia la puerta. Se aproxima un cliente. Si nos viera, nos delatarían y nos atraparían aquí. Miro a Antonio de nuevo, con lágrimas en los ojos, y corro hacia la puerta trasera.

Estoy a una cuadra de mi casa cuando clavo mis talones en el suelo para detenerme. Me tapo la nariz al oler algo rancio y desconocido que posee el aire, pero abro la boca para recuperar al aliento y lo siento. Escupo, intentando quitarme el sabor de la boca. Miro hacia arriba y veo a un hombre que empuja un carro lleno de cadáveres apilados como si fueran naipes. Ampollas negras y supurantes cubren los cadáveres.

"¡Traiga a su muerto!" Grita como si estuviera vendiendo pan, no recogiendo los cadáveres de los muertos por la peste.

Una mujer se acerca al carro con un niño en brazos. Sé que es inútil comprobar si está vivo, pero lo hago de todas formas. Su brazo cuelga hacia el suelo, lo que me permite ver claramente las protuberancias negras que antes eran sus dedos. Me pregunto si estaría

vivo cuando se cayeron. El niño parecía tener unos doce años; la edad de Antonio.

Reprimo algunos vómitos y empiezo a correr de nuevo. Al esquivar a otra familia que lleva a sus muertos, decido que haré todo lo posible para convencer a mi padre de que nos lleve de vuelta al campo; morir de hambre es mejor que esto. Doblo otra esquina y me invade un sentimiento de alivio cuando veo mi casa. Entonces me detengo. Me froto los ojos y me los froto de nuevo. Pero ninguna cantidad de frotamiento puede eliminar la equis roja que está pintada en la puerta de mi casa.

—

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Swords and the Plague

To be quite honest, I would take animal crap over human crap any day. When my family and I lived on a farm in Puerto de Gazania, I dealt with animal manure all the time. Sometimes, the smell of it would stick to me for days. Yes, it was disgusting. But all in all, it was worth it because we were happy on the farm. Our family had lived there for many generations. It was where our family and friends were, where our blood belonged. But after a series of failed harvests, my father decided that we had only two options: find work in Seville or starve. So now, I suffer from a new form of stench: human odor. Permeating the streets as I walk to my job at the blacksmith shop. I wonder if anything worse than human feces could litter the streets.

I open the door and enter the smithy, mentally bracing myself for a day of sweat and burns. Compared to the blacksmith's job, I miss

working in the country. Although I had many responsibilities, I felt an obligation to these duties as I prepared to manage the farm one day. I will still be the one to carry the family name. But without the farm, what's the point of continuing that name? Besides, blacksmith work is annoying. After another apprentice suffered an accident, Señor González, my teacher, and Antonio, a fellow apprentice, have been my constant shadow in the forge as they make sure that my technique is perfect.

"Use the rounded point of the hammer," Antonio orders me. At twelve years old, four years younger than me, he tilts his chin upwards as he speaks to me. This doesn't stop him from acting like he's older. And to make matters worse, Señor Gonzalez left him in charge of the shop today, which means he's going to be an even bigger pain than usual.

"I am using it," I growl.

"No." He takes the hammer from my hands. "Listen." He beats the hammer. His technique is noticeably higher in pitch and crisper in sound than mine. He pauses and looks at me, smirking.

"What?" I pretend not to notice the difference.

Before Antonio can respond, a man enters the shop.

"Hello. I'm looking to buy something sharp." His accent is Norwegian, but his clothes look Algerian.

Antonio hurries over to the sword collection, selecting the strongest and most durable of the bunch. "How's this?" Antonio asks the man, handing him the sword.

"What's it made of?" He takes a stance and swings the sword impressively. It seems evident that the man and the sword were made for each other.

"Steel."

The customer looks at it for another moment and sighs. “Have you got a dagger? Something cheap would be better.”

Antonio frowns, looking as confused as I feel, but hands the man a less impressive blade. The man studies the sword, running his fingers down the flat side. As he touches the sharp side with the palm of his hand, his skin is split open. He nods. "I’ll take it."

"Are you sure? You are great with the other one. And it’s the best for fighting," Antonio asks him, a true salesman.

The man smiles, but there is sadness in his eyes. "It's not for fighting."

Antonio doesn't get it.

"Take it. It’s on us,” I say, urging the man to leave right away.

Antonio looks at me angrily. "No! You have to pay for that."

I attempt to communicate with Antonio through eye contact and a frown. He must understand some portion of my message because after a moment of exchanging glances, he crosses his arms in defeat.

"I’ve got the money. Please, I can't accept this without paying you."

"Leave now, please," I order.

He heads toward the exit but faces us again before stepping through the doorway. Then he pulls a bulky bag from his pocket and leaves it on the doorstep. "I'm putting this here in case you change your mind."

Antonio races toward the money.

"Don’t touch it!" I shout.

“Look at how much this is! We could probably buy materials for three new tools and a week’s supply of food for our families with this much!"

"Yeah, and we could get the Black Death," I suggest.

“I'm at least going to kick it inside and let Señor Gonzalez decide what to do with it when he gets back. Besides, he says that the plague is only spread when someone dies, and the infected spirit passes through another person. Does it look like that guy died?”

I look away. "Until they prove how it’s spread, we shouldn't touch it."

At the end of the day, I leave through the back door to avoid the coin bag and I remind Antonio to do the same. A man in a black mask that resembles a crow’s head passes me. I'm surprised to see a doctor in this part of town; most people cannot afford that kind of medical treatment. Another two doctors pass. That can’t be a good sign. As I approach home, I see a man painting a red “X” on someone's front door. I don't understand what this signifies, but it gives me a bad feeling.

At home, I ask my parents about what I saw. They explain that the reason so many doctors are visiting this part of town is because the disease is spreading quickly, and more people are putting every coin they have into treatment.

"Another two doctors pass. That can't be a good sign."

As for the red "X" on the doors, apparently, they are the mark of an infected family. If one person in the family is infected, the entire family is locked in their home, and a red “X” is painted on the outside of the door. They say that this is a quarantine that no one survives. To prevent my parents’ concern, I don’t tell them about the Norwegian client from this morning. Fear keeps me from sleeping that night.

Fortunately, I have the next day off. These days are usually spent exploring the city, but I opt out this time. I’d rather be stuck at home than pass by another crow doctor, “X”-marked door, or the unsettling

odor of human waste. I spend most of that day picturing the farm we left behind and wondering if the plague exists over there.

The next morning, I contemplate missing work. Although being fired is a better option than catching the plague, our food supply is running short, so I take my chances. The streets seem even dirtier than before as I walk to work. *Did our entire sanitation system catch the plague?*

I enter through the back door again to find Antonio forging a sword with a new hammer.

"Where's Señor Gonzalez?" I ask him as I approach the flame.

Antonio shrugs, looking sluggish. I peer toward the front doorway; the coin bag is no longer there to taunt Antonio. I turn to question him when he collapses, dropping his hammer. He is grabbing the middle of his thigh, where a mass clearly protrudes from his clothing.

I panic. Antonio may be annoying, but he is the closest thing I have to a brother. *He can't have the plague.* But if he does have the Black Death and I'm in the same building as him, would I be locked up with him to die?

"Samuel, please," Antonio pleads, confusion and fear in his voice. *He is just a boy. He needs my help.*

I look at him, then toward the door where a customer approaches. If he sees us, surely we'll be trapped here. I turn toward Antonio again, tears in my eyes, then sprint toward the back door.

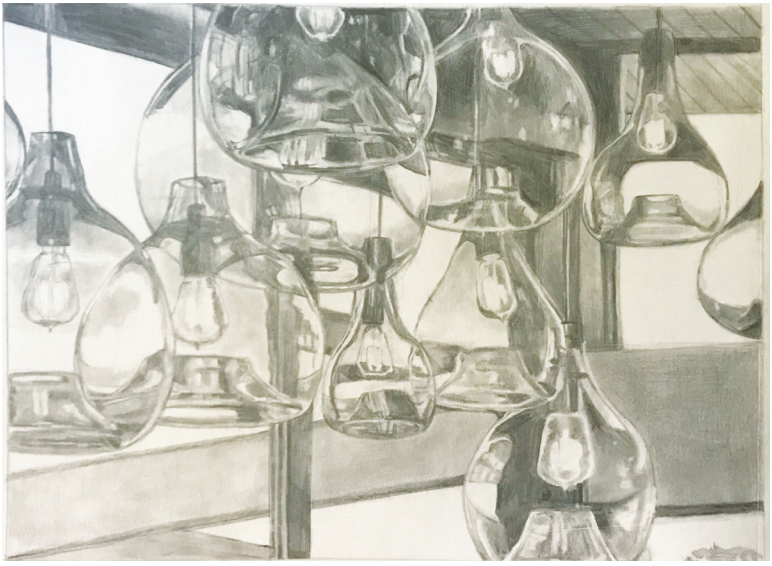
A block away from my house, my heels dig into the ground to stop me. I plug my nose in response to an unfamiliar, rancid smell that possesses the air, but my mouth opens to catch my breath, and I taste it. Spitting, I attempt to rid my mouth of that nastiness. I look up to see a man pushing a cart full of corpses that are stacked like playing

cards. Black, festering blisters cover the dead bodies.

"Bring your dead!" He shouts as if he were selling bread, not collecting the cadavers of those who had passed from the plague.

A woman approaches the cart with a boy in her arms. I know it's futile to check if he's alive, but I do so anyway. His arm dangles toward the ground, which gives me a clear view of the black nubs that once were his fingers. I wonder if he was alive when they fell off. The child appears to be about twelve years old. Antonio's age.

I suppress some vomit and start running, contemplating never walking these streets again. As I dodge another family that is bringing out their dead, I decide that I would do everything in my power to convince my dad to let us move to the countryside again. Starving would be better than this. I turn another corner and feel a sweep of relief as my house comes into view. Then I come to a halt. I rub my eyes and rub them again. But no amount of rubbing can remove the red "X" that is painted outside my family's door.



Glass Lamps, Julia Jackson, Graphite, 10”x10”

ALEXANDRA DUKE

Our War

Rundown buildings flank my six as rock and rubble crumble beneath the rushed footsteps of our battalion. To the left lies a field ablaze beneath the tongue of an angry fire, crops ripped from the root and scorched beneath the flames. The wails of wounded children eerily echo through the mess of heavy smoke ahead. I raise my rifle instinctively to meet their screams, the outlines of tiny, emaciated bodies in my crosshairs. This is just another city marked by the damaged food supply, the suppression of trade routes, the consequences of a war I was sent to fight. The enemy offensive has displaced over three million civilians. And despite one hundred million in aid, this town and its people will turn to ashes and dust beneath our nation's pretense that the fire and brimstone of our squad's advances is an effort to protect them.

Broken windows whisper of prior devastation as we approach a shabby structure unrecognizable as a home. We brace for the impact of hellfire on the other side of the mottled walls, knowing all too well the dangers of enemy compounds uncharted. Slowing to a halt at the frame of a wooden door, the huff and puff of lungs wallowing in fatigue fills the air. We fight for breath amidst tar and ashes, worn by the physical and emotional plights of our war on terror. *"Stand clear—!"* A signal is shared amongst brothers in arms, and for a split second, there is silence. In the quiet before the breach, muddled thoughts almost become clear. Why am I here on foreign land? And what, if anything, is this danger for? Before an answer can be formulated, the flash of light blinds me, and the infrastructure falls. Instinctively, I march onward; I am focused once more on eliminating the enemy. In the percussion of shrapnel, there is no time to wonder why.

"Oh, shit!" I murmur, my hands clawing at controls as I smash a handful of Doritos between my braces. As I regain my vision, a virtual form appears before me speaking a language I do not understand or identify. Without thinking, I react with a quickness, shooting rapidly at the hip. The right bumper of my handheld is clenched beneath my pointer finger, covered in cheese and the salty seasoning of late-night snacks.

"Stop wasting ammo!" my father yells, the frustrated furrow of his brow twisted in dismay. I roll my eyes and reload: square button, left bumper. I am ready for the next terrorist—the next bad guy. I am an American soldier.

The weaponry and equipment on the television appears to be too heavy a load, slowing my avatar to a ragged-breath run. Tiring to a halt on screen, I casually reach across the white shag of living room carpet for my Sprite, my soldier's hands grasping the standard military issued foregrip of an AK-47M, which lay slouched in the dirt and mud of what my dad and the virtual soldiers call "a shit-hole country." 50% of Iraqis live in slums such as these, marked by carcinogenic exposure to chemicals leaching the soil and leveled housing developments unsuitable for living. Before 9/11, these conditions were rarer. Only 17% of civilians endured such environments before the towers fell.

Paying little to no attention to my surroundings, I unload a magazine of thirty rounds into the dust and smoke before me, my father's eyes rolling to the back of his skull in disgust for my apparent waste. Slump. Bodies fall and tumble ahead, the pixilated checkered scarves and keffiyehs of men unnamed and unidentified. Outfitted in beige camouflage, my uniform marks me as separate from them. Such differentiation fuels the fire of violence in my adolescent mind. On the field, there is little to no consciousness, my screen lighting up with a

click-click of the automatic reload. In 2.7 seconds, I am battle ready, killing with an oversimplified political and socio-psychological agenda: eliminate the enemy. He does not look like me. He does not dress like me. He does not talk like me. This is all I know at twelve years of age. This is all the screen teaches me.

The Iraq war is a two trillion-dollar effort backed by the war cries of over two million soldiers deployed to the middle east following the events of September 11th. The caskets of 7,000 men and women mark the violence endured here. Thirty thousand alone will die in the field and thereinafter from suicide. For those who survive, upwards of 20% will be plagued by PTSD and memories of the massacre I am playing out on my television. Hour after hour, and countless pizzas later, my father and I play out these scenes from the comforts of our living room.

The screen is full of savaged houses, rock crumbling beneath my computerized boots. Women in hijabs scream and fling their glitchy arms before me. I lower my weapon and cease fire: left bumper, circle button. I am twelve, and these are my Friday nights. I am a hero who saves the innocent such as those before me; I would never shoot a mother and child. After all, I belong to a heroic country. I am an American. I am the only one who can save these civilians. Despite their screams, they need us here. Upwards of 650,000 will die in this war. From what? I do not know. My only mission is to seek and destroy the enemy, leaving in my wake of frag grenades and destruction a makeshift and salvaged landscape in which the spared can live in peace. I bring peace to foreign lands.

"Where are these fuckers?" My dad shouts between a swig of his beer and the game. The sharp bang and fallout of C4 crashes in unison with the slam of his bottle against the table. His disgust with the scene on screen echoes throughout the walls of our suburban home. But

who are the "fuckers" my father mentions? Who is the enemy killing their own people in Iraq? I am too young to care in this moment, the dopamine hit of each bullet propelling me forward and deeper into bunkers of trash and debris. Overhead planes drop bombs, simulated by the shaking of my screen. The wails of women have been drowned out by the crashing structures of poorly built houses and abandoned playgrounds. We did not destroy these places, they did — whoever they are. The environmental destruction caused by my fighter jet; water poisoned by my shell casings—this is not my responsibility. It is simply a "consequence of their actions," my father tells me. "They started the war," he says. "They" meaning the bad guy. I am the good guy.

My mom enters the room with pizza, unphased by the chaotic catchphrases blaring from the television. It isn't much different from the headlines on CNN, Fox, or the "Today" show. *"Get down! Sniper! Enemy fire on your left. Civilians! Get to cover."* I massacre the men before me, sparing their wives and children — saving their wives and children: left bumper, right bumper, square, circle, alternate. "Hey, John? Do you know what time we are having dinner with your mom, tomorrow?"

A man's skull explodes in a frenzy of blood before me as I unload two shotgun shells into his brain. He is just one of the 24,000 terrorists to die in this war. He is just one of the many accolades, kill streaks, and points I collect in this game. Between my next kill and the celebratory cry for my headshot, I shove a heaping slice of pepperoni in my mouth, picking the gooey cheese from the purple bands of my braces. I lick my fingers between kills, the screen a mass of bodies and the lacquer of blood bubbling to the surface of a man's throat as I stab my knife deep into his jugular. I wipe the crustiness of dried pizza sauce from my

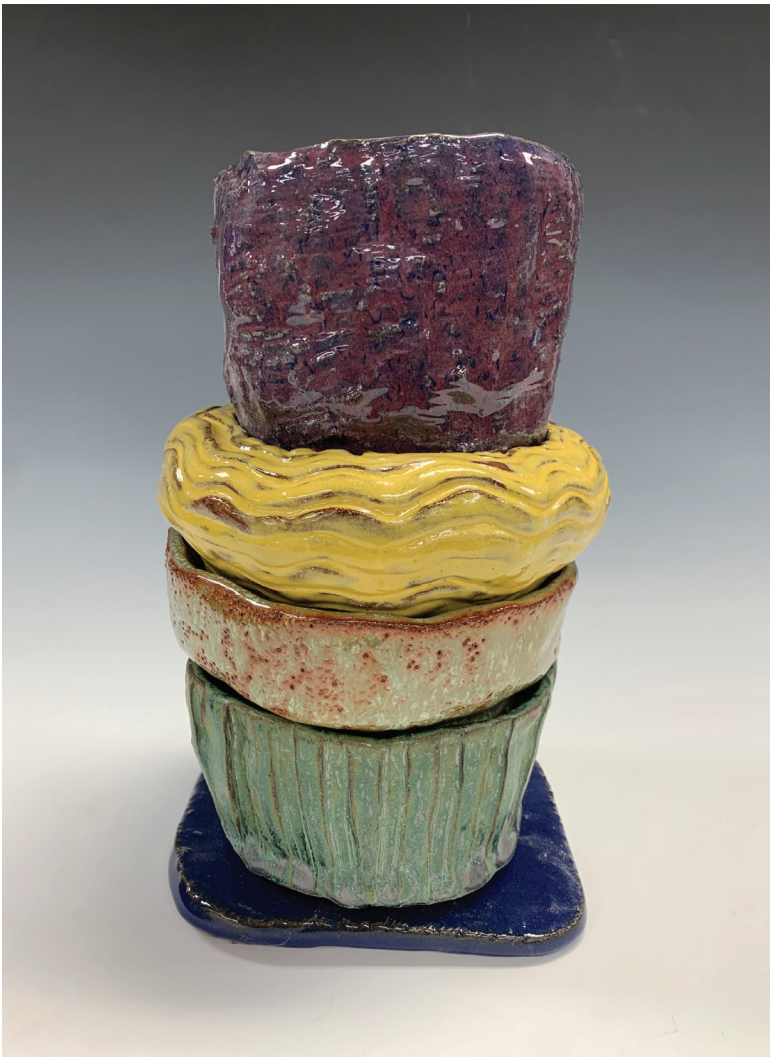
cheek, flinging the attacker's body off: square, square, square, left, then right bumper, alternate.

"Damn terrorist almost killed me, Dad." The feminine form of my prepubescent face twists as I curse and cheer for the deaths on screen, the coldness of such games breeding in me cultural divide and misunderstanding.

"We're eating at six," my dad reports with a casual twist of the head. He is back to the game before my mom can reply.

Patting the small of my lanky shoulder, he is proud of my aim and valor, the way I cover his back from the enemy as he pauses to down a Bud Light. He never had boys, but now I am a soldier of his battalion, fighting alongside him in the war on terror. The president appears during a cutscene in a heavily pixelated form. He, too, needs me. I am a hero. I belong to a heroic country. I protect Americans overseas.

After 9/11, there was no choice. I answered the call, a plastic controller tucked between my twelve-year-old fingers just like the boy next door and the teen across the globe. Between Doritos, pizza, and beer, my father and I save America from "them." Over and over, for years and years, we stand between the rise and fall of this great nation. Two civilians turned soldiers on the faux leather of a Big Lots couch. I never did learn who the "fuckers" were. I never did learn what happened to the wives and children we spared. But we saved them, right? We saved the world.



Stackabowl, Katelyn Lawson, Clay hand building, glazes. Each bowl is 2-3" in diameter, stacked 10" high.

BRENDAN HARRIS

Party

The candles were
the first to go.

Four of them:
smallest pack they sold

Each a different color,
striped like candy canes.

They smoldered away
half an hour or so—

Peeling back from flame
like flower petals untwirling,

they went out one by one
taking their light with them.

Ice cream went next:
only after hours,

technicolor mass
pushing towards tables edge.

Across tablecloth
a sluggish avalanche,

below my feet
a rainbow pools.

After ice cream
went the cake—

It held its posture
for a few days,

held its color
for a few more.

But weeks went by
taking their toll

Once a beautiful delight,
now fuzzy and green.
A month of rot
around me,

and then I was next.
Last to go.

Hung among streamers
and party décor,

I ripened like a fruit
plump and dark.

Swollen wine-red simulacrum
of what I once was,

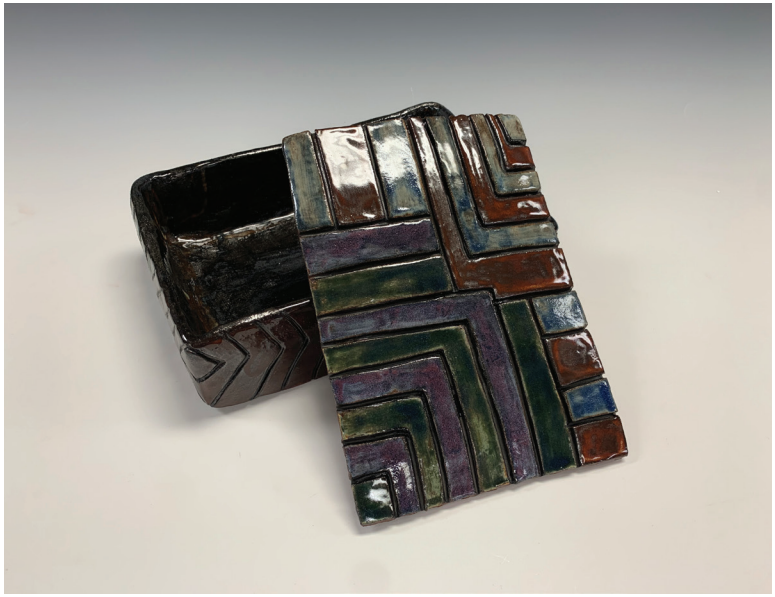
skin bursting at the seams,
falling in thick gray lumps.

I crumpled: sagged awkwardly
lopsided and spoiled.

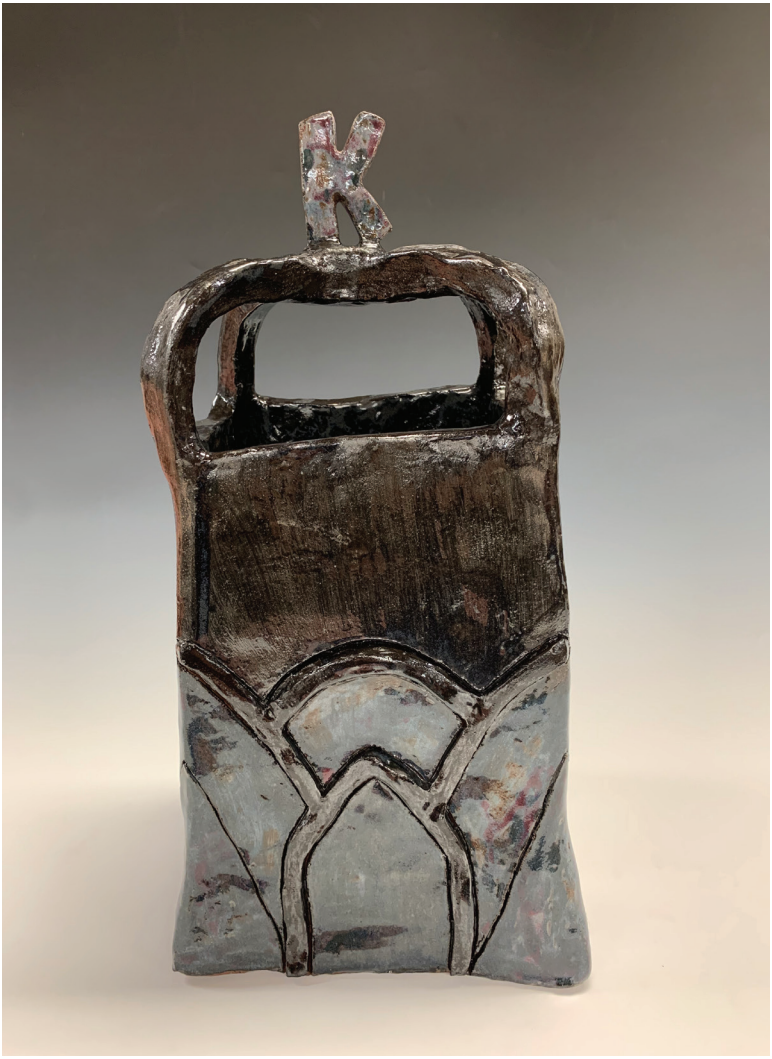
Bones ruptured outward
and skin grew taught.

My fluids drained,
flesh abandoned me.

Rope and clothes and bones
clattered to the floor.



Keepsake, Katelyn Lawson, black underglaze, multiple different glazes, 10”x6”x2”



GothiK, Katelyn Lawson, black underglaze, multiple different glazes, 10”x6”x2”

MANAV TANEJA

The Ghosts of A-31

The stairs up to the apartment snake around in a spiral, coils that sit on top of each other—ever turning to the right. There is an elevator but electricity is unreliable in this part of India and the risk of getting stuck in the elevator is too great for me. Elevators can be rather claustrophobic in one way or another. So it is better to take the stairs, though for heftier folk like myself, the walk may need to be taken in stages. The air has a constant, faint odor of ammonia, just enough to tickle the nose and birth a thought: did someone use too much hydrochloric acid when cleaning today? Or is that just piss? But there is no time to find the answer, as up the stairs lays the apartment. An unsolved mystery.

Every four sets of stairs lead to another floor, another set of two apartments. Who lives there? What are they like? Questions to which there are no answers, for these paths remain untrodden. No doubt it would be a crime to break in, to plunder those apartments, to ransack and explore, like someone who floated over an ocean on a boat. But here in India, they've had enough of invasion and theft, and thus I pass the apartments by. The heat of India makes me sweat and my clothes grow damper with each minute spent on these idle thoughts.

On the third floor, there are large brown stains on the walls of the hallway that lead to the apartment. The stains have been there for years, marring the otherwise unevenly spread white, chalky paint that flakes and falls to the floor. Crumbled, jagged snow. Some of the stains are amorphous, shapeless, or perhaps the name of the shape has yet to be discovered. Others are sensible, an attempt to find a silver

lining in the misfortune that caused the other stains. This is where the colored powder, used for rangoli (the art of using colored powders to make designs for celebration and worship) was dumped on my head by my stepbrother. I remember telling him, "Don't you fucking dare do it!" But to no avail. The brown powder never really washed out of my clothes and I had to throw them away. Of course, he just laughed, safe in the knowledge that any retaliation I might wish to visit upon him would be swiftly and harshly punished. This wasn't the first time he pulled a stunt like this and it wouldn't be the last. He was ever favored. How come he got all the good stuff?

The door to the apartment A-31 is brown wood, though I don't know the type and honestly don't care. There are score marks from where different locking mechanisms have been added, then removed—each one leaving a scar upon the door. Each time my stepmother would change the locks, hoping that somehow they would prevent me from getting in. And each time, I would find myself with a set of keys to get in, slipped to me by my father as he passed me at a tea stall a kilometer and a half away from the apartment building. I never asked him why the subterfuge was needed and he never explained himself. We both understood—plausible deniability.

My brother took the more bombastic route and just picked the lock. Why not just get the keys from dad? It was clear that my stepmother had no love for me—even when she wasn't trying to lock me out of the house, there was never a gentle word to be had from her. At best, I was ignored completely, a ghost that haunted the place. At worst, there was yelling and getting slapped around. I never fought back. As my father taught me, "never hit a woman." Though there were times I wanted to unlearn that lesson, I never did. Whatever did I do to make her hate me so?

The first part of the house I encounter upon entering is the kitchen, just to the right of the entrance. The floor is dusty, years of neglect painting a fresh coat of abandonment across the floor of the entire apartment. Tiles that were once white and shining are now brown and gritty. The counter, where there used to be a stove, is barren—a single furrow to show where one of the stove legs had lost its rubber foot and scraped the counter while being moved. The window is opaque and caked with dirt, dust, and cobwebs. The chair is gone, where I would sit and watch as the hired help made breakfast every morning. Not for me, but for my stepmother and her son. But watching made me feel full. And if I was lucky, and a few rupees got miscounted, then there might be an egg fried up for me too. Those were special days. On those days, I'd inhale my breakfast, heedless of the burns it caused as I swallowed it. I was never around for lunch, but I know that the hired help would make that too. What did it taste like, homecooked food?

The next part of the apartment is the living room, the biggest room in the house. All the furniture is gone, long since removed and discarded to who-knows-where. To the left of the living room, sliding glass doors open onto a balcony, the rusted bearings and wheels screaming in protest as I wrench the frame to the side. Wrought iron runs from the balcony's wall up to the roofing that had been installed to protect the balcony from the rains. Just inside the doors is where the television used to be. Not that I ever watched much television. Even daring to turn it on earned me a slap across the face, or at least a screamed order to go back to my room. The only time I got to use the television was when my parents were out of town and no one was there to tell me what to do.

The right side of the living room is where the couch used to be

and the matching chairs that went with it. It was where I woke up one night on fire. I had been sleeping on the floor, directly under the fan to try and combat the heat. I had lit a mosquito-repellent coil, and during the night my blanket had fallen onto the burning coil, igniting the cotton. I remember the smell of smoke, the heat on my back, the way the design on the back of my shirt shrunk in the heat. I managed to toss my blanket off before I suffered any major burns. I got yelled at for being stupid. Did I really knock my blanket into the coil?

Across from the entryway from the other side of the living room, a short hallway leads to a locked door. But I can ignore that for now. In that short hallway to the right is the bathroom I was allowed to use when I was at home. Like the rest of the house, it's covered in a thick layer of dust and dirt from years of neglect. Even the washing machine is gone. There used to be one—it sat right in the middle of the bathroom so that there was never enough room for me to be comfortable while using the toilet. A hose used to go from the tap on the wall into the machine and then a bigger pipe at the bottom would spew out the dirty water from the wash all over the bathroom floor. It would leave streaks and smears of dirt behind when the water drained away and left the detritus of the wash cycle. My stepmother always made me clean it up, but never let me use the machine. Told me to "stop leaving my bathroom a filthy mess," even though I was barely ever in it. Why wasn't I allowed to use the machine?

Across the short hall from the bathroom is the bedroom that ostensibly used to be mine. It was shared between me, my brother, and my stepbrother, though one of us was usually not at home at any given point in time. At first, it was my brother and I, away at military school. Then it was just me, alone in military school for a year. Then I spent a year living at home, sharing the room with two other boys around my

age. Three of us sharing a single bedroom with only two beds. One of us wound up sleeping on the floor. It used to be comfortable, spending night after night on the cool tiles. Those tiles were now caked and dirty, and there was no way I was going to sleep there.

Most of the room was taken up by storage. I wasn't supposed to know what things were stored, but I found out. There were boxes and metal trunks under both beds and the table that served as a desk, and I made my way through each one as best as I could. Lots of Amway cassette tapes. There was a giant steel locker in the room, and of course it was locked. Everything in the house that could be locked was usually locked whenever I was home. Eventually, though, I found out where the key was hidden and managed to crack open the locker. Nothing but clothes inside. Why bother even locking it?

Finally, at the end of the short hallway across the house from the entryway is the door to the master bedroom. The deadbolt on the door is shut and locked, even after all these years. Of course, now no one was going to get upset if I open the door, and I had learned the trick years ago. My brother had loosened several of the screws which held the deadbolt to the door and once they were unscrewed, I could remove part of the mechanism entirely. It's easy to open the door now since I'm not worried about anyone finding out. The master bedroom is just as dusty, and by now I'm nearly choking from all the dust I've kicked up walking through this decrepit place. The master bedroom is the only room in the house that has any furniture in it. The large wooden closet and the larger chest-of-drawers are still filled with my father's clothes. Interesting that those are the only things left here. Remnants of a man who would never return. Why were they left? Just inside the doorway on the right, is the other bathroom, the one meant for the master bedroom only. Like everything else in the house, it's filthy, and

that fills me with a sense of irony. My stepmother put the washing machine in my bathroom to keep hers from getting dirty, and yet here I was, staring at what could be the beginning scene of a horror movie. It brings a smile to my face to know that she failed in the end.

The biggest question is—why am I back here? What made me decide that now was the time to return? The easiest answer was circumstance. I had nowhere else to go. Paying rent was getting more and more expensive and finding a place to rent in India that was willing to deal with the complicated and often illegal procedures involved with foreign tenants was getting more and more difficult. And here I had a house that was owned by my father where I wasn't a tenant, but a resident. No need to fill out a lease agreement or report to the Foreigner's Registration Office. No need to bribe cops to not steal my passport again. No need to worry about filling out forms just to stand in line and fill them out again on a computer, then taking those forms for a police officer to fill out again by hand. Here, I wouldn't have to worry about rent, about being kicked out, about being homeless again.

People had left the house, one by one. First it was my brother, back when I was in twelfth grade. He'd gotten in trouble with the law, tried to extort an acquaintance or some such bullshit, and wound up arrested and charged. He fled the country, back to the United States. The police had broken his arm while he was in custody—the standard roughing-up of inmates. The next to leave was my father, about a year into my first attempt at going to college. He wasn't born in the US, but he'd lived there since at least the eighties. Six months later, I dropped out and followed him and for a while, it was just my stepmother and her son. Two years later, though, I came back. The economic crisis had hit and I found myself jobless and living with my father. He told me I could go back to India, to try college again, or I could go live under

a bridge, but I was going to leave. So I chose college. Thankfully, I remembered the routine while I stayed at that house: wake up as early as possible and leave, come home just before the door got locked. I spent every last dollar I had, converted to rupees, to feed myself.

I lived in the dorms in college and then rented an apartment near it with some friends. My mother left during my first year, her first ever time going to the United States. My father was already cheating on her by that time, but I didn't care. There was drama, which I distanced myself from. Calls from my father's girlfriend were all I had to go on. There was trouble between my father and my brother, who hadn't seen eye-to-eye since India. Trouble between my father and his wife. My stepbrother was gone not long after his mother, the last person to leave the house. The doors were locked, and all the memories and ghosts sealed inside.

In my final year of college, I found out my stepmother was dead—shot in the chest in broad daylight. Her son was left in the US, now isolated and abandoned, more similar to my situation than I would have ever guessed. As for my father, he was in jail awaiting trial for the murder of my stepmother. He eventually got two life sentences and sent to prison. And that left me abandoned and isolated. My brother didn't return any phone calls. It was long before India was ever a part of my life. And my biological mother had long ago told me she never wanted to see me again, back when I was seven and we traveled halfway across the world to try and pull her out of a cult. She left on my brother's birthday, while we were away at a theme park, to follow a holy man around India. I wonder if she's still alive. I wonder if I even care anymore. I dropped out and now work the call center circuit to support myself, finding places where I can rent a bed by the month, where there is no paperwork except hard cash. I am untethered, unfettered, a ghost

on the winds of India, drifting from place to place, never haunting one spot for too long. And the winds now bring me back to this place.

Coming back here almost feels like destiny. Like after all this time, now that the place is filled with nothing but ghosts of memories, can I finally think of this place as home. I call my best friend, Bhooshan, the only friend I have left. He knows some people who can take the leftover furniture away. I don't need any of it. I go out, down the coiling stairs, out into the heat and sunlight, and find a store nearby. A broom is all I need for now. There's no running water at this time of day, so a mop would be a bad idea. Maybe later. I climb back up the familiar stairs, up until I'm back at A-31, and I start sweeping. Just the living room today. Just the area where I might have lit my blanket on fire, directly under the fan. That's where I'll sleep tonight. Not that it will help since the power's been disconnected for years. I'll need to get that turned back on, but not tonight. Tonight, I'll just open the windows and let the wind blow through. I'll even light a mosquito coil to ward off the bugs, and for nostalgia. And tomorrow, I'll start getting rid of the ghosts—in my house and in my mind.

MARGARET GRAVES

The Housewife

By the time the sun illuminated the stately houses of Magnolia Avenue, Beth Rodgers had already been up for hours getting the house in order. She stood over her blue stove and flipped the pancakes on the griddle with her right hand, gracefully holding a lit Lucky Strike in her left. She was the image of suburban beauty: perfect blonde hair tied up in a blue silk kerchief which matched the light blue nightgown draped over her perfect figure. Beth had always prided herself on her looks. In high school, every girl had envied her for her natural beauty. All the boys had wanted to be her beau, but only one had caught her eye.

At seven o'clock, she climbed the carpeted staircase to the second story of her opulent house. She admired the pictures hung along the walls, stopping every so often to look at the beautiful cherubic faces of her darling children and her radiant smile that appeared in every wedding photo. She had everything any woman could ever want: two perfect children, the most fashionable outfits, and the most chic, modern home on the block. And, of course, a husband that would make any lady swoon. Her life was truly enviable.

She made her way to her children's bedroom and gently roused them from their slumber. She hated waking them. They seemed so peaceful when they slept, so completely unencumbered by the world. She watched them as they slowly opened their eyes and smiled at her, their hearts full of childish love. She ushered them downstairs to quickly eat their breakfast, but the children sat at the kitchen table long after they had finished their meal, hoping they could delay the start of their day. Beth did not want to make them leave, but she had

a busy day planned. She helped them change out of their pajamas and reminded them to brush their teeth.

She packed their lunches and handed them their brown paper bags as they walked out the door. After they had gone, she wasted no time in tidying up. The cleaning lady would come by later that day, but Beth had never felt comfortable having someone else clean up her messes.

She changed out of her nightgown into a blue gingham dress that fell just below her knees. She pulled on her stockings and slipped into matching blue kitten heels. She took the curlers out of her hair and meticulously put on her makeup. She opened the box that contained the pearl necklace her husband had given her for their anniversary. Her mother had always said a lady should never leave the house without her pearls. She closed the box and put the pearls away in her jewelry box, choosing instead the hummingbird broach Linda had given her.

At noon, she sat down to eat her lunch of cold ham sandwiches and pickled beets. She drank her milk and watched the hummingbirds flitting around the garden. Some days, she wished she were a hummingbird, free to fly wherever she wanted.

But she wasn't a hummingbird; she was just a housewife.

Her blue station wagon sat in the driveway, freshly washed and waxed, gleaming in the sunlight. She walked outside to see her neighbors, the Johnsons, on their front lawn. She waved to them cordially and they waved back. Brian motioned for her to come closer. She crossed the street and greeted her friends with a smile.

"Hello, Linda. Brian, how have you been?"

Brian smiled back, holding a can of beer at his side. "We've been well, thank you. How is Charles? We haven't seen him for a few days."

Beth looked at Linda and smiled. She looked back at Brian and replied, "He's just swell. He went on a last-minute business trip on

Monday. He should be back by Saturday night."

"Oh, how wonderful. Whereabouts is he this time?"

"New York, if you can believe it. He seems to be enjoying himself quite a bit." Beth and Linda again exchanged a glance.

Brian was oblivious to his wife, as usual, and began to talk about his experiences with New York. "Oh, yes, you can get into trouble in that city. That's for sure!"

They all laughed at his stories and shared pleasant goodbyes. Beth bid them farewell with a promise to see Linda at the book club meeting the next day. She climbed into her car and drove to the store, turning up the radio to listen to "A Teenager in Love."

Beth loved going to the store. It was always filled to the brim with housewives, sharing gossip under the pretense of shopping for their husbands' dinners. Beth wasn't a busybody by any means; she just liked to know what was going on in her neighborhood. She didn't spread rumors unless they were substantiated, and she prided herself in not being a gossip.

She sauntered through the aisles, lazily tossing items into her cart. She passed by groups of women huddled together, attentively listening for anything good. After all, she needed something to talk about at book club. She overheard that Gary Filcher had a mistress in Milwaukee, along with an eight-year-old son to whom he had been sending money. But this was old news. Every woman in town had been utterly shocked by the scandal two weeks prior, and Beth had long ago tired of hearing the same details again and again.

She stopped at the deli counter to buy a plate of cheeses for her upcoming dinner party, but she was interrupted by a hand tapping her on the shoulder. She turned to see her old friend Madge Huxley standing beside her.

"Oh, hello, Madge. I thought I might see you here today."

"Oh, yes. You know how my Roger loves a fresh leg of lamb on Wednesdays." Madge smiled obnoxiously, staring at Beth. "How is Charles? I heard he's out of town on business. I sure hope he's not in Milwaukee."

Beth chuckled politely. The women in town treated the Filchers' situation as a joke but were all secretly terrified that they were next. "No, he's in New York this week. He should be back by Saturday, but you never know with these things."

"You know, I'm not one to spread rumors." Madge was known as the town gossip. "But I hear that Linda and Brian are having troubles. She was in here the other day and mentioned to Sally Fitz that they plan on selling their summer home. Sounds like money troubles to me."

"I hadn't heard. Perhaps they're looking to vacation elsewhere this summer?" Beth was growing impatient. She didn't appreciate Madge's propensity for jumping to conclusions.

"That's not what I heard. And you know, where there's money troubles, there's marital troubles. We all know what happened to the Ulrichs when Paul lost his job at the agency." Madge tried to sound concerned, but her amusement shone through. The town was her own private television set, and she loved to speculate on the state of others' marriages.

"Well, I suppose we'll just have to wait and see. After all, their marriage is between them and God." Beth chuckled internally, thinking, If only she knew what her husband did while he was away. She wouldn't think it was funny then.

Madge's smile fell slightly. "Why, of course. I just feel for their children. Bobby's only three, you know. It'll affect him the most

when—if there are troubles at home."

Beth smiled curtly. "Yes, that would be a shame. It was nice running into you, Madge. We'll have to get together sometime soon."

"That would be swell! I'll give you a call later this week. Give my love to Charles."

"That's what she liked most about hummingbirds. They looked small and delicate, but they had to work so hard just to stay afloat."

Beth took her order from the deli man and finished her shopping. She sat in silence on the drive home, taking the scenic route and thinking about her conversation with Madge. The woman was positively infuriating, always poking her nose into other people's business.

It was getting late, but the children wouldn't be home until the next morning. Beth was always grateful when the neighbors invited the children to stay over. After unloading the groceries, she sat down and poured herself a drink. She didn't usually imbibe, but she felt a small scotch couldn't hurt. The alcohol burned her throat, leaving a warm trail down to her stomach. She lit a cigarette and sat back to watch the hummingbirds. It was getting dark, but she could still make out the faint outline of their little wings flapping furiously. That's what she liked most about hummingbirds. They looked small and delicate, but they had to work so hard just to stay afloat.

She finished her drink and put out her cigarette. The phone rang, and she put the receiver to her ear.

"Rodgers residence. Oh, hello, David. No, I'm afraid Charles won't be coming to work tomorrow. He's still violently ill, the poor

thing. Yes, I'll tell him. Alright, goodbye."

She hung up the phone and walked into the kitchen. She slowly pulled a knife from the butcher block and ran her finger along the blade, studying its sharp, serrated edges. *Yes, this will do nicely.* She sashayed up the perfect, blue carpet stairs, pausing at the top to smile at the framed picture of her husband from his college days. He looked positively dashing in his suit, his rugged smile forever frozen in black and white. She swayed down the hall to her bedroom, flipping the switch on the portable radio that was perched on her vanity table.

Well, if you want to make me cry,
That won't be so hard to do.
And if you should say goodbye…

Beth stood in front of her closet, thinking back to when her husband had first bought the house. She had been ecstatic at the idea of two closets in the master bedroom.

"One for your clothes and one for your shoes," Charles had teased.

But she had found her own use for the spare closet.

Beth opened the door and looked down at her husband, his once powerful body now pathetic and lame, tied up and huddled in the fetal position on the floor. She leaned down and put her face in his, admiring the red kerchief she had stuffed in his mouth. It had always been one of her favorites. She giggled at his futile attempt to wriggle free of his bondage.

"Hello, my love." She stroked the side of his face with the knife. "Are you ready to have some fun?"

SCOTT HOBBIE

FIXED RATES

I. Listen, my children, and you shall hear...

Dear Mom and Dad,

It took me thirty years to realize my wounds were self-inflicted. Rosanne was never on our TV, but I was somewhere around Panama City on the edge of the beach when the drugs[1] kicked in. I thought you said I was the best? Between nobody else noticing and the collapse of Keynesian economics, I think that it's fair to say I'm average.[2]

The mortgage[3] bill is next to the sink (4.75% interest rate), but how can I hurt when the trash[4] still has to go out?

You see, if I try, I could be proven fallible.[5] It is easier to have an opinion than to create, but I can only see myself on my Facebook feed. The protagonist keeps letting me down. I think you may have placed this chip on my shoulder. I keep saving my Starbucks money, but my 401(k) is just the copper in my car's console (and that is for coffee).

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[1] Drug: a substance which has a physiological effect (usually amazing) when ingested or otherwise introduced to the body. Examples: American currency, love, and dairy products.

[2] Average: an offensive word in American culture which values confidence over actual ability. Statistically, most people are average, thus the need for the word average.

[3] Mortgage: a loan given to purchase a house. This is unknown information to most millennials.

[4] Trash: a. discarded matter; refuse. b. a person or people regarded as being of very low social standing. Examples: The musical stylings of Nickelback, the 2003 Chicago Bear's 22nd draft pick, and a used tissue.

[5] Failure: another no-no in America. Being poor is a failure. Not being good at something immediately is also failure. The current educational system does not allow for failure. Neither does Twitter.

So come on, Virginia, show me a sign. I only have the internet and Joe Rogan. I don't need to pay for school. They have bad customer service anyway. But how else will I get a good job with benefits? So it goes. Maybe, I'll pay the toll. What is the worst that can happen?

Sincerely,
Your Son

II. Good Morning Daddy

Dear Mr. Hughes,

You told me:

Write a page tonight,
let it come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

Could it be
that easy?

How should I describe
me at thirty-three?

I guess this
is where I am,
my place to be.

The real question is:
Who is *me?*
We?
We who?
Me too,

I hear you,
do you
hear me too?
I am, as they say,
white and privileged.

Can you see?

From the miles on my knees
to my college degrees?
Do I think New Englandly?
How can we exist so differently?

Do we?

Well...
I like the way she moves
I like a drink (or two)
And

I like music:
like Bach or bop but mostly hip-hop.

Here is my barbaric yawp:

A born again
hooligan
ready to be king again.

What you assume will be—

This is the theme of me.

III. And what I assume you shall assume...

I live in a house at the end of
Cottage Street on the South Side of town.
Not the bad South Side,
the good side that you've never heard of.

Number 1117. It is the second
smallest home on my block.
Snuggled between two old Victorians.

The exterior is painted green.
My favorite color.
And I have two windows
that face east.

Eyes through which the sun
greets me every morning.

Inside, I own:
A Table
A Chair
A Record player
And Books.

I admit,
I haven't read all of them.
Some, I haven't even opened.

The roof holds up in the rain
and lasts through the winter
largely intact.

I leave her cozy from time to time.
It's necessary.
Mostly for work or errands.

I met a man outside.
We shook hands and
exchanged business cards.

His was nicer than mine.
It was matte-black.
Gold embossed letters
shouted his qualifications.

I imagined what his
home would be like.

I pictured a newer home.
One that you see
on the cover of a magazine.

My mind conjured his
beautiful blonde wife.
With two small children who
skitter down the stairs
and through the kitchen.

His pastel walls flecked
with pictures. Loved ones
framed in moments of delight.

But no books.

IV. My feet is my only carriage

I dropped a glass bowl yesterday.
It broke.
I cursed god.
I picked up the pieces,
And held the shattered bowl.
One of the edges,
Cut into my hand.
I cursed god.
Blood coated the piece that,
Laid open my palm.

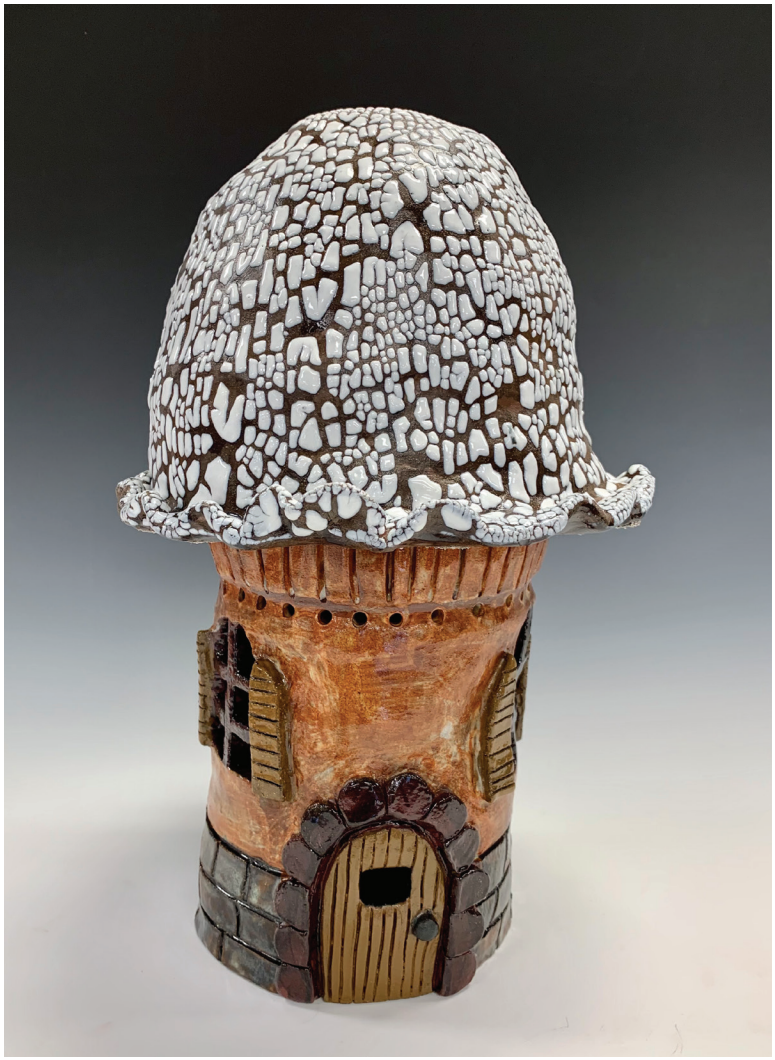
I stood in my kitchen
Alone,
Angry,
Bleeding,
And cursed god.

Hey

You said
As you walked into the room.
Can you believe these eggs were eighty-three cents a dozen?
Not bad.

You heaved two grocery bags on the counter
Next to me.
Oh, shoot! You broke a bowl! And look at your hand!
Super glue and Band-Aids are in the drawer next to the sink.

You kissed my cheek
And left.



The Mystical Mushroom House, Angel Juan-Lamb, Ceramic clay, 13.5”x7”

CLARISSA HOGESTON

Saturday Evening at the Old Farts' Clubhouse

Ramona Louise Fisher strode down the long dusty road to the general store with a sweaty dollar bill and two quarters in her hand. Her cheek bulged with a wad of sour gumballs and she kicked every rock, pinecone, and beer can in her path. The sound of cracking gravel made her move into the grassy ditch.

"Hey, Ramona!"

Ramona Louise kept walking.

"I'm goin' over to see Bull now, you want a ride?"

"I thought you weren't s'posed to drive unless you had them glasses on your big nose," Ramona sent another rock into the ditch.

Phil laughed and hooted from inside the car. "Shoot, you're mean, Ramona Louise! Ain't you got school today?"

"It's Saturday."

"Are Evelyn and me gonna see you in church tomorrow?"

"If I'm not sleepin'." Ramona spit the gray wad of gum into the dust.

"All right, then. We gonna see you later? Where you headed anyway?" he asked.

"Helen's." They said in unison.

Phil shook his head. "You know his doctor told him he ain't s'posed to have so much salt, Ramona."

"Yeahhh, and you ain't s'posed to be drivin'."

Phil laughed and waved a hand out the window. "All right honey, we'll see you later." The car sped off, leaving behind a cloud of dust.

Helen's store was on the corner between the town and the rest of the world. She carried canned soups, toilet paper, powdered lemonade—enough essentials to spare the community a trip to the bigger towns for a while. At eighty-seven years old, she still moved around the shelves every day with the energy of a child, dusting and rearranging, and holding every new baby that came in for a visit with its mama. Ramona Louise grasped the knob of the red door and swung it open. Ding!

"Who's that?" Helen called from the back room.

"It's me, Helen! It's Ramona Louise!" Ramona held both her elbows and shuffled around the store. The dust she'd brought in with her made a sweeping sound on the hardwood. Her eyes passed over the bags of flour, cake mixes, and cans with bright paper labels. In the back were two fridges full of milk, eggs, and bottles of pop. Ramona's mouth watered at the thought of cold bubbles slipping down her throat. She looked at the money crumpled in her hand.

"Where are you, honey?"

"Back here, Helen," Ramona made her way back to the front of the store, grabbing a bag of pork rinds from a shelf and tossing it up onto the counter.

"Just these?" Helen pinched the top of the bag and gave Ramona a reproachful look. "Ramona, you know he's supposed to be staying away from these."

"He says they told him the same thing about beer and spam, Helen. He says he's so old that it won't matter if he starts up drinkin' motor oil and eatin' shoe leather. He says he's gonna eat and drink what he likes." Ramona dropped the grimy money on the counter and stood waiting, itching her leg with the toe of her shoe.

Helen sighed. “I can’t keep ‘em from you I suppose.” She placed the money in the cash register. “He’s not making you pay for these all the time, is he? You tell me the truth.”

“Nope.” Ramona snatched the bag from the counter. “Balloon money.”

“Ramona!” Helen called after her, a handful of sour gumballs in her wrinkled palm.

“Thanks!” Ramona yelled on her way out the door. Helen shuffled around the counter and stood in the open doorway.

“Mind the cars!” She called, shutting the red door behind her.

Ramona’s big shoes clomped prints into the dust as she ran down the road and turned into the old schoolyard. There stood the long green building that used to be an elementary and middle school for the county, before everyone started going to the bigger schools in nearby towns. Now, it served as a community center. The old farts’ clubhouse, Ramona called it. Outside stood a tall, silver slide that burned the backs of Ramona’s legs in the hot summer months. Beside it was a swing set with only one swing left on its chain, a jungle gym that probably didn’t meet safety standards, and a rusted merry-go-round that squeaked when it spun. Back by the woods sat a faded yellow school bus with branches hanging over its roof and sagging tires slouching underneath. The hornets always claimed it before any kids could go exploring. Ramona Louise had the welts on her skin to prove it.

A few old cars and a red Ford pickup were parked in the grass outside the front of the old schoolhouse. The truck belonged to her grandpa, there was Phil’s car, and the third belonged to Ricky Voit, the man who grew a marijuana plant in her grandpa’s garden at the bottom

of the hill. Ramona swung open both back doors and skipped down the hall to the old gymnasium.

"Hiya, Mona." Ricky turned halfway in his chair with a cigarette between his lips. "You bring your harmonica?"

"Nah."

"She brought that attitude with her though, Rick!" Phil called from the little kitchen. The gymnasium had also been the cafeteria, back when the building was still a school.

"My grandpa around?" Ramona asked, plopping herself down in the chair across from Ricky.

"He's out front with the cart." Ricky gestured to the bag in her hands, "You brung those for him again?"

"Yep."

"Say, you got a light, Mona?" Ricky asked and held his cigarette out to the girl. Ramona squinted her eyes and held up her ring finger to him. Ricky laughed. "Did Bull know you were comin' again tonight?"

Ramona shrugged. She didn't always stop by on a church night, and her mama never liked when she did. "I expect you and your grandpa'll snooze right through judgment day," she'd say. Ramona's dad was working late at the factory, and she expected he'd swing through and pick her up on his way home. His coveralls would be smeared in grease and worn out at the knees, and they'd listen to his George Strait album, sharing a black coffee in a Styrofoam cup he'd grab from the kitchen. He'd sing a lot, but he wouldn't say much. Ramona hopped off the chair and headed to the front of the schoolhouse.

"Hey, Mona, see if Bull's got any matches on 'im!" Ricky called after her. The door swung shut.

The cool of the evening chilled Ramona's bare arms as she strode

down the sidewalk till she reached her grandpa's balloon cart. He sat on the bench beside it, skinny as a rail with long stick legs and a short torso. He wore blue jeans, a red flannel shirt, and his gray cap. A transparent tube ran under his nose and snaked on down to the oxygen tank at his feet. He was filling up another balloon with helium when Ramona sat down beside him, bringing her knees to her chest and tossing the bag at his hip.

"Ay! What took you so long, buster? I been waitin' here all day."

"Don't look starved to me, Grandpa," Ramona replied, sticking a gumball into her cheek.

Grandpa laughed to himself. "You're tryin' your hardest though, ain't ya? Helen give you trouble?"

"No, sir, just wanted to know who was buyin' 'em."

"Ha! Tell her that's none of her business. Ain't nothin' wrong with some pork rinds, Mona. They're almost organic." Grandpa crunched on the deep-fried pig skins and Ramona heard the wheeze in each breath he took in between. She looked up, watching the bundle of balloons bob and bounce against each other in the breeze. She popped another gumball into her mouth.

"Anyone buy a balloon today, Grandpa?"

"Not yet," he said and coughed into his sleeve. Ramona shifted the wad of gum to her other cheek, slurping the drool back into her mouth.

"They didn't yesterday either," she said.

"Nope, they didn't."

"Grandpa, what do you keep blowing up all these balloons for? Why don't you jus' blow up a couple? You never sell more than that anyways." She stood up and walked around the cart. Grandpa coughed

again, wheezing and pounding his chest. Ramona paused and held her breath until he started breathing normal again. He reached down for the beer can at his feet and took a swig.

"People like to see lots of balloons blowed up at a balloon stand, Mona. Would you stop and come up here if you saw an old fart with a couple balloons blowed up and hanging above a bench? Yeez…" He crunched on more rinds.

"Guess that'd be strange," Ramona replied. "You think people around here are jus' getting tired of balloons?"

"Why, are you tired of 'em?" Grandpa asked, taking another drink.

"Nah." Ramona plopped back down beside him and spit the wad of gum into the grass. The warm red evening had slowly transformed under a chill indigo sky. The only sounds were the crickets, Grandpa's wheezing breaths, and the little taps of the balloons bouncing against each other. Grandpa crumpled up the empty bag of pork rinds and stuck it under one of the wheels of the cart. He took another sip of beer.

"You bring your harmonica?" He asked. Ramona reached deep into the pocket of her denims and pulled out her little silver harmonica. There were black marks along the top where her fingers had rubbed away the metal sheen. She brought the instrument to her lips and played a fast crescendo.

"What you want?" She asked.

"Oh…" Grandpa sat thinking for a moment. "How 'bout 'I'll Fly Away'?"

"You always ask for that one, Grandpa," Ramona sighed.

"Come on now, Mona Louise." He started to sing, "Some glad morning—"

Ramona cupped her hands over the instrument and started to play along, sliding the harmonica back and forth and bringing a swinging beat into the melody. Her dusty shoe tapped against the concrete while Grandpa smacked his hand against his thigh. He sang along through the first chorus till his breath ran out. The wheezing had grown louder, and Grandpa started coughing hard into his shirt sleeve. Ramona watched him from the corner of her eye and continued the song. Grandpa leaned back against the cool metal of the building, eyes closed and head pointed up towards the sky. She played and watched him take three long, deep breaths punctuated by little coughs. He sat still for a moment, then reached down and took another swig of beer. Ramona flicked her eyes back to the road in front of her and finished the last chorus.

Grandpa smacked his leg in applause and gave a little whistle. Ramona kept the instrument to her mouth, sliding the cool metal over her closed lips without making a sound. Grandpa continued to softly hum the chorus.

"Why you like that one so much, Grandpa?" Ramona asked.

"Ain't you been hearin' the words? You been playing the tune so much you forget what yer even playin' for?"

"What's it mean then?"

"It means—" Grandpa paused and grabbed a white pouch from his pocket, pinching some tobacco between his fingers and holding it out to Ramona. "Here, ye want some?"

"Got my own," Ramona replied and stuck another gumball into her cheek.

Grandpa laughed. "Just a few more weary days, Mona. You hear that?"

"I know the words, Grandpa. I mean, why you like them so much?" Ramona sucked the sour out of the wad in her mouth.

"It means what it says." He spit brown juice into the yard. "I'll fly

away."

"You sayin' you wanna die, Grandpa?" Ramona asked, watching her shoe slide against the sidewalk.

"You git as old and tired as I am and there's nothin' sounds as good as flyin' away." He coughed.

Ramona frowned and brought her knees to her chest, resting her chin on her knees. A car slowed down on the road across the yard and the driver's side window rolled down.

"Ay, Bull! You gonna be in church tomorrow?" A man's voice called.

"Don't worry about it, you nosy old fart!" Grandpa hollered back.

"You bring yer guitar, hear?" The voice yelled back. The car sped off down the road, leaving a cloud of dust behind. Ramona shifted on the bench to lay down with her head against her grandpa's leg.

"Are you goin', Grandpa?" She asked.

"If I ain't sleepin'." He tilted his head back and drank down the rest of his beer.

"You comin' inside the church this time?"

"I can't breathe so good in there no more, Mona."

"You bringin' the balloons?" She asked.

"Yep."

"You bringin' your guitar?"

Crack! Grandpa stomped his beer can flat with his boot. "S'pose not."

Ramona sighed and fiddled with her fingers. It was darker now and she'd already smacked two mosquitoes off her legs. It wouldn't be too much longer till her dad's pickup would send the dust flying down the road and park by the back doors. She'd asked him once why she'd

never heard Grandpa play; everyone told her how well he played that old guitar. Her dad had told her that he'd only heard Grandpa play a few times with his buddies, but that was a long time ago. Ramona found the guitar against a wall in Grandpa's basement once, beside the wood stove and the counter where he cleaned fish. She'd trailed a finger down the strings, and they'd sung sweetly. There was no dust on the neck.

"Welp," Grandpa sighed and sat up higher on the bench. "Guess it's about time to shut 'er down."

Ramona sat up and stretched her arms above her head. The light from the inside the schoolhouse shone through onto grass by the front doors, and moths knocked themselves into the windows. Grandpa scooted to the edge of the bench and pushed on his knees till he was standing. He cut two balloons from the bunch and tied them to the bench.

"Can't forget Ladybug and Cricket," he said. Ladybug lived over on the next road. She had long red hair and always wore ripped jeans and band T-shirts. Ladybug worked days at the restaurant in town. She wasn't married. Cricket was her son.

"What if they don't come by?" Ramona asked.

"Then I'll cut 'em in the morning. Ladybug's workin' late nights again, but I ain't gonna have her think I'd forget her." Grandpa picked up the empty bag of pork rinds from under the wheel of the cart and shoved it into his pocket. He spit out the wad of brown chew into the grass.

"All right, buster. What color?" he asked. Ramona hopped up from the bench and looked at the balloons bobbing overhead. The colors had faded in the dusk, but it didn't matter. She picked the same

color every night.

"Yellow," she said.

Grandpa laughed softly and coughed. "Yellow like the sun."

"Yellow like the moon, Grandpa," she corrected him. He grasped the string of one yellow balloon and cut it with his pocketknife. He held the string out to Ramona.

"Look up ther', Mona. That moon looks pretty white to me," he said. She noticed the wheeze in his breath.

"Well, they color it yellow in books and stuff." She tied the string around her wrist using her teeth. Grandpa bundled the strings of the rest of the balloons into one hand and pulled them tight. Then he pressed his pocketknife against the bundle and sawed through the strings. Ramona Louise looked up to watch each balloon float and sway up into the dark sky. She craned her neck until they were too far away to see their colors.

Ramona remembered the time she'd asked her dad why Grandpa spent every day trying to sell those balloons. "He ain't tryin' to sell 'em, Mona," he'd said. "He give them balloons to anyone who stops by. He keeps fillin' 'em for Bertie." Bertie was Grandpa's little sister. She got real sick when she was a young woman and was in the hospital for six months before she died. Every day, Dad said, Grandpa came with his guitar to sing with Bertie and to bring her a balloon. The little town in Virginia where she and Grandpa came from didn't have much wealth or excitement, but when Bertie was a girl she'd always sucker a penny out of her big brother to buy a balloon at the dime store down the road.

After a while, Dad had told Ramona, Bertie got so sick that the hospital moved her to the third floor and said she couldn't have visitors anymore in case they might've brought her a bug that'd make

her sicker. “It jus’ about killed him Mona,” Dad said. Grandpa kept bringing Bertie balloons, though. He’d come in the evening, stand right under her window, and let the string slip from his hand, sending the balloon up past her window and into the violet sky. Ramona was quiet after Dad was finished, and he told her not to ask Grandpa about Bertie. He also said, “The day she died was the day he quit answerin’ my questions. And was when I stopped askin’ ‘em.” That was the most she ever remembered her dad telling her about anything. Ramona looked up and searched the dark sky for the shape of the balloons, but they were gone. Grandpa coughed and lifted the handle of the oxygen tank at his feet.

“We better git inside now. Ricky’s gonna be out here any minute pesterin’ me about a game of cards.” He adjusted his cap.
“He was askin’ if you had a light.” Ramona stuck the last gumball in her mouth and started down the sidewalk.

“Hol’ up, Mona Louise. Here,” Grandpa said. He brought up his old tackle box and opened it. His fingers fished through poker chips and bottlecaps and pulled out a dollar bill and two coins. He placed them into Ramona’s sticky palm.

“Come on,” he said, grunting as he started pulling the oxygen tank behind him. “Let’s go wait inside for your daddy.”

Ramona walked slowly in front of her grandpa, listening to the sound of his staggered breathing blend into the song of the crickets and coyote howls in the distance. She pushed the wad of money deep into her pocket and pulled out her harmonica. With the balloon tugging at her wrist, she blew out a song and tried to think of lyrics she’d forgotten.

Serene Squirrel, Julia Jackson, Graphite, 8”x10”

Second Place for the 2022 Prize for Fiction

MATHEA TANNER

Standard American Bill

Bill had not left his property in three months. Not since returning from the hospital that night, but this would be the day. It would have happened sooner but since retirement, he had just been so damn busy. Standing before his bed in white boxers and black knee socks, he considered the outfit laid out: blue short-sleeved dress shirt, tan slacks. The errands uniform. The oscillating fan turned its face to him, and the gray fuzz of his belly trembled in the passing breeze. The slacks were troublesome. He flipped them over to inspect the singe mark on the right butt cheek left from ironing.

After forty-one years as the most heavily awarded regional manager of Blandford's Hardware and Appliances—the Midwest's largest family-owned hardware chain—Bill retired with a healthy 401(k) and lifetime discount of twenty percent on all Blandford items. Nearly every week since, deliveries arrived: shingles to replace those damaged by last year's ice storm, lumber to replace the fence and gallons of paint for the wraparound porch. He also worked on all the "honey-do" items. He removed every spare tire and lawnmower part from the garage, piled them up in the driveway, swept and sealed the concrete floor and replaced everything in neat rows upon new shelves. He finally cut down the hackberry tree in the yard—the one that always reached tenuous branches toward the electric line—and heaped it up for firewood. He even repaired the broken porch swing that Cathy had always loved. Though he never sat in the thing himself, he wished

she were here to listen to the grackle bird sound it made, to see it swinging like a dream.

The only reason he was going out this day was that he was out of food—even the pantry goods like canned tuna and dry pasta. Sure, he could order groceries from one of those services, but he wanted a good excuse to scrub up; the other day he caught his reflection in the hallway mirror and barely recognized himself in stubble and filthy work overalls.

With no other clean slacks in the house, Bill decided the burn mark on these was fine. He dressed, slipped on loafers, groaned on a belt, and moved to the bedside table for his phone, but it was not there. He spent a moment staring at the blank space. His wife had always moved from room to room, a purposeful magpie, collecting the displaced socks and paperwork forgotten in his work hastes and returning them to their proper spots. Shaking himself from the reverie, he began to search.

Navigating the rooms could be challenging these days, and Bill nearly tore a belt loop shimmying past the wall of hardwood slats that filled the hallway, destined to replace the creaking living room floor. The phone was finally located between boxes of ceramic tiles in the kitchen. There were two text messages from his son and a missed a FaceTime call from his granddaughter. Greg's first message read: *Hey dad, checking in. Sorry you couldn't make it last week. We're hoping to come down to see you Friday. Lemme know. We'll bring dinner!* The second had a more urgent tone: *Dad! All good? I'll call you tonight when I'm home from my shift, so please pick up. Love you.*

Bill checked the times. The first message was from two days ago and the second from this morning. Millie's FaceTime was yesterday. He must have had the damn thing on silent and now the battery was nearly

dead. As many times as he told the family he was coping fine, they still worried. Bill shook his head and plugged his phone into the charger on the kitchen counter. He promised himself that he would call them both back this evening, grabbed his keys, and walked out the front door.

On the porch, he noticed the lawn. That grass looked tall, and mice do nothing but breed in tall grass. And the flowerbeds. You could hardly tell what was planted from weed. That would need to be taken care of the moment he returned. Getting in the car, he instinctively handed over the grocery list to the passenger seat, where Cathy should be. He held it there, looking at the empty air, then tossed the paper onto the seat and pulled away from the curb. As he drove, a memory of that final grocery trip welled in mind—Cathy in her passenger seat, waving the grocery list for his retirement party.

"It'll be tapas style in honor of our trip," she'd said.

"Spain's a month away."

"It's a theme, Bill-Bill. It's meant to be a celebration of everything this means for you." Cathy flipped down the visor and gave her dark hair a fluff. "You finally get to go places—we get to go places."

"Mostly you get to go places. I get to take you." He had said that, but her giddiness was contagious, even if he felt sure he would get some foreign stomach bug and unbearable sunburn.

"And we'll have date nights, movie nights, late night porch swings. Once you fix it, that is." She had reached for his hand and curled her forefinger around his thumb. It was the sort of practiced gesture you saw in mated pairs—those entwined swan necks or lemur tails.

Three days later, a weak spot on an artery in Cathy's brain, a section no larger than a fifteen-gauge nailhead, ruptured. When Bill came home alone from the hospital that evening, there were still leftovers from the retirement party in the refrigerator. For a long time,

he stood staring at the plastic wrapped cold cut tray and half-eaten shrimp wheel, unable to reconcile their presence in a home without his wife.

Did he put cold cuts on the list? Bill came to a stoplight and checked the list. He had not. He grabbed a pen from the console and scribbled *smoked turkey* and then also thought to write down *Millie's popsicles*. Whenever his granddaughter visited, the first thing she did was to run to the freezer for one of the orange and vanilla popsicles he and Cathy always stocked for her.

Inside the grocery store, it took a moment to adjust to the people and bright lights and sounds. Bill looked at his list, which he organized by store section. Cathy would never have done that. Her lists were disorderly and full of little quirks. There would be *that cake Rachel loves*, or silly nicknames for things like toothpaste (smile cream) or bananas (monkey fruit). As Bill moved about the store, adding to his cart, he found dusty irritations crackling to the surface of his consciousness. Produce bags were flimsy, clung to his fingers, his shirt, anything to avoid the actual produce. People blocked his path at every turn with their carts, engrossed in the nutritional information or comparison pricing. The cart wheezed forward on a bum wheel and Bill wished he had a can of WD-40 and a crescent wrench.

The next item was chili beans, and he had just turned into the dry goods aisle when a laugh cut through the din of the store. Bill looked up to see the retreating back of a woman turning out of the aisle—just a flash of bouncy dark hair and a pink sweatshirt, but it was enough for his mind to fill in the blanks and make her into Cathy. The air in the aisle expanded and, reflexively, he pushed his cart away. Cold cement filled his legs and he gripped the nearest shelf where packages of black-eyed peas stared, suffocating, in heat-sealed plastic. He leaned

his forehead on the shelf, tried to breathe, to refocus. He spotted a torn corner of linoleum on the floor by his left loafer. The claw hammer in his chest slowed just a little. A wipe down with some lacquer thinner and a dab of seam sealer would take care of that.

"Are you okay?" Bill turned. A boy of about eight was standing a careful distance away, watching him.

"Yes, I'm fine," Bill said. From disuse or panic, his voice was sandpaper. "I just need a minute."

The boy frowned. "Are you diabetic?"

"What are you, a doctor?"

"No. My grandma is diabetic and sometimes she gets dizzy. Oh hey, do you want some juice? They don't mind if you open these as long as you pay for them at the checkout." He lifted his left hand to show the bottle of juice he was holding.

"No. I'm not diabetic." Bill tried a step toward his cart and hit the shelf with his shoulder, knocking down a few bags of beans. The boy's eyes widened.

"I'm going to find my mom."

"No, that's not necessary," Bill called after the boy, but he was already around the corner. Reaching down to pick up one of the bags on the floor, a wave of nausea hit his gut and he crouched, bracing. A young man slowed his cart and Bill gave him a preemptive wave to move along. Relieved for the dismissal, the man made a tentative grab for a box of Rice-A-Roni near Bill's right ear and hustled his cart away. Bill closed his eyes and tried to picture ordered rows of mown green lawn.

There was a hand on his shoulder and the heat of someone leaning close. The proximity was so foreign it startled him. It was the woman in the pink sweatshirt. "Sir, I'm a nurse. What are you experiencing

today?"

He held his breath and studied her face. How silly he was to have imagined her as his wife. This woman was much younger, her features sharper and darker, the eyes unfamiliar. But there was something in the voice and—of course—that laugh. He closed his eyes again and listened.

"... shortness of breath? Chest pain?" She was holding his wrist, taking his pulse. Her fingers were cold and her nail polish was the same cat's tongue pink as her sweatshirt. Some perfume or shampoo of hers, a false ocean smell, made his head feel thick, full of fiberglass insulation.

"No, no. Your boy... I really am okay. I think it's just that I haven't eaten today, is all." After saying it, Bill realized it was true.

"Alright, then let's get you a rest and some sugar. Come on." Her tone was cheerful, but the arm lifting him was resolute. He felt he had no choice but to let the pair walk him and his cart to one of the benches at the front of the store. The woman sat down next to him.

"Artie, why don't you let the gentleman have some of that juice." The boy cracked open the bottle, looking pleased to have been right to offer it earlier. Bill took several long drinks. It was one of those bright, sugary juices made for children and he grimaced. The woman laughed to see his reaction and the grimace deepened.

"Sorry, I guess it's not—" She leaned over to inspect the contents of his cart. "Frozen grapefruit concentrate. Jesus, that's not even pink grapefruit. How do you drink that?" She batted his arm before he could respond. "I'm just teasing you. It's a generational thing. I get it. Older folks like bitter stuff." She was watching him intently. When he returned her gaze, he noticed that she was probably pretty, though in a hip, youthful way involving winged eye makeup and glossed lips that

he did not understand. She gave a meaningful look at the juice bottle in his hand. He took another sip.

"So what's your name? I'm Marissa." She gestured to the boy, who was rhythmically slapping the cantaloupe in Bill's cart. "My son, Arturo. Artie."

"Bill," he said, eyeing the contents of his cart for anything fragile.

"What's that short for?" Artie asked. Bill blinked at the boy.

"William." He looked between the two, their faces identically curious, guileless. He would have thought them siblings, not mother and son. "What else would it be short for?"

Artie shrugged. "All kinds of things, probably."

Marissa nodded her agreement.

"I doubt that." Bill said.

Marissa shifted in her seat. "No, like, okay, Artie had a Muslim boy in his class last year. His name was Billal. They called him Bill, right?" She looked over at her son.

"Yeah, and there's Billie Eilish," Artie added.

"Oh? And what's his name short for?" Bill asked.

"She's a girl singer," Artie said looking at his mother in amazement at this question. "I don't know what it's short for."

"Right, well, I'm just a standard American Bill, which is short for William."

"Well then, Standard American Bill, how are you feeling now?" Marissa's tone was the same, he imagined, when she spoke to patients.

He said he was feeling better and looked around for his grocery list. It was crumpled against the juice bottle in his hand, stained red. He stared at it in dismay.

"Well, I should really get back to my shopping now. Thank you for this." He gestured at the bottle in his hand. "I can give you a few

bucks for it."

"Oh please." Marissa swatted the offer away and searched his face again. "Are you sure you don't need more time?"

"No, no," he said quickly. "I've lost a lot of time already and I'd really like to get home soon. Things in the cart will get warm. And the lawn needs mowing."

"Okay, then how about me and Artie help you get the rest of your groceries?"

As he watched, Artie picked up a jar of pickles from his cart and shook them like a magic eight ball.

"Oh, I don't want you to go to the trouble."

"Come on," Marissa said, "you'll get it done sooner with our help." She didn't wait for a response and again her determined grip found his arm. "Anyways, we're way more fun than shopping by yourself."

"Don't you and your boy have your own shopping to do?"

"We only came for movie snacks." She showed Bill her basket, with its microwave popcorn and screaming bright candy packages.

"We're watching all the *Nightmares on Elm Streets*," Artie said.

"Okay, let's see what you have left." Marissa pried the sticky grocery list from Bill's hand and scanned it, frowning. "What the hell, Bill."

She turned the list to face him and he read. Yes, there was each store section labeled, in his neat handwriting, still legible despite the fruit juice.

"This thing is almost a spreadsheet." She read, shaking her head, and looked up at the signs for each aisle. "Do you have the whole store layout memorized?"

Bill shrugged. "We've been coming here for forty years or so. They've changed things around a few times, but—" He stopped when

he saw Marissa's face, eyebrows raised. "It makes everything much smoother this way."

"Whatever you say." Marissa began pulling items from the shelves while Artie explained the plots of both *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies he'd already seen.

"—and the birdcage starts shaking, and one of the birds gets out and starts like, pecking everybody in the family, and then whoosh! the bird catches on fire in the ceiling light—"

"Hey, Artie," Marissa interrupted. "How about you get all of Bill's canned fish stuff?" She read out four items for him.

Artie stalked off in search of the canned fish aisle.

Marissa read the list, pulling macaroni from the shelf. "I send him off to get things when we shop all the time and he always comes back with the right stuff." As she said this, they spotted Artie running back across the aisle. "And it helps him burn off some of that energy."

She took a moment to regard him. "So do you work, Bill?"

"Just retired, actually. I was at Blandford's for over forty years." He pulled a package of egg noodles as Marissa burst into laughter, causing him to flinch and crush the bag.

"Well, I think it must be fate I met you, then," she said.

"Oh, why's that?"

"Because I need some advice from a handy guy. Tell me: is it normal for a dishwasher to come out from under the counter?"

"Sorry, what? As in, is it meant to be removable?"

"No, I mean I put dishes in it, and the soap—I had the wrong soap the first couple times but I figured that out—and then I turn it on. A few minutes later, it's vibrating and I can hear the dishes rattling and by the time it's done, the dishwasher's halfway out of the cabinets and the dishes aren't any cleaner. First time it happened it scared the

crap out of us." She sighed. "Anyways, does that seem normal to you?"

"Well, I wasn't an appliance installer, but no, I'd say that's definitely not right."

Marissa's shoulders sagged.

"Where'd you buy it?" Bill asked.

"My husband's a truck driver. He gets to keep things that get damaged or whatever sometimes. He had a delivery of dishwashers somewhere in Missouri and one just fell off the ramp when the crew was unloading it."

"Ok, well that one is a dud, I think."

"You don't think it could be fixed?" Marissa asked, hopeful.
Bill considered. "I really doubt it. We always wrote those damages off at the stores. Tell your husband to be on the lookout for another one."

"Damn. It's just—he knew I wanted one so bad. And he's going to stop long hauling after the next couple runs are done, so I don't think there'll be another chance."

"Oh yes?" Bill said, pulling two, three, four packets of taco seasoning from a bin and tossing them into his cart. "Found something else he wants to do?"

"Not really. He's going to move down to local runs. For grocery stores, actually. He doesn't like them as much and they don't pay as good, but he's had some health issues and being away so long from home ..." She picked at the corner of a box of Hamburger Helper. "It takes a toll. I think he really needs to stop driving altogether, but he just won't."

"Well, that seems silly. If it's hard for him to do the driving, he needs to do something else. Or go on disability. Can he do that? Disability?"

"I don't think he'll ever do that." She shook her head and began

moving things around aimlessly in Bill's cart. "As it is, when he's home, he's up in the middle of the night pacing and talking about medical bills piling up and what we are going to do about college for Artie someday ... I tell him I'll take extra shifts at work—we're always short staffed in ER—but he just won't hear it. He wants me home for Arturo." She turned suddenly to Bill, and for the first time she looked old enough to be a wife and mother. "It's like, he thinks all that matters is that I'm there. Like all he's good for is the money he brings home and—and janky dishwashers. When all we really want is him to be there with us, you know? Watching bad horror on the couch."

"Sure, sure," Bill said quietly. For some reason, he thought of his porch swing, swaying empty and alone in the fading daylight.

"Oh man, that was an overshare." Marissa buried her eyes in the grocery list. "What else we got in this aisle?"

"No, no," Bill said, and was struggling to think of something more to say when Artie ran up, his thin arms full of cans.

"Hey, hey, I was thinking," Artie said, unloading into Bill's cart. A can of tuna fell and, dented, rolled unevenly to the other side of the aisle. "I have this school project, and we all need to write letters to people in an old people's home." Bill's eye twitched. "But I don't like my pen pal. She's super mean."

"Artie!" Marissa gave Bill an embarrassed look.

"Well, you said it too. Anyways, I think maybe my teacher would let me trade and you could write to me instead. I think she would." He looked at Bill expectantly.

"But I'm not in an old people's home. That's a place for people who can't take care of themselves."

"Okay," Artie said slowly. "Then maybe you could just be an extra pen pal? Maybe for extra credit. I could use extra credit."

"Sure, maybe," Bill said and pushed the cart ahead, with some relief, into the last aisle. He placed the final items from his list, a six-pack of ginger ale and a liter of seltzer water, into his cart.

"What's that on your butt?" Artie asked.

Bill turned back, confused. Ah yes, the burn.

"I'm not much of an ironer," he said, and tried out an embarrassed chuckle.

"Why not? Didn't anyone teach you?"

"No." He kept pushing the cart forward, gauging which checkout line would move the fastest.

"Then who does it for you?"

"My wife used to do it for me."

"But she doesn't want to iron anymore?"

"No." Bill considered for a moment before continuing. "She died. Three months ago."

Marissa stopped. Bill looked over and was surprised to see her hand on her chest, her eyes somehow already shining, as if tears sat behind them at all times, awaiting the signal.

"Oh Bill," she said, "I'm so fucking sorry."

He swallowed hard at the word fucking. For these last terrible months, he had heard an endless stream of I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. The stale apologies stacked up in his mind like unopened mail. But somehow, this—

"Yeah," Bill said, his eyes narrowed with the effort of keeping an even tone. "I'm fucking sorry, too."

Out in the parking lot, they said their goodbyes. Bill thanked them again for all their help and their company too. Marissa hugged Bill and he found himself patting her back and whispering his hopes that her husband felt better soon. She mouthed a thank you and, in

that moment, the decades and circumstances that stood between them were inconsequential.

A few paces away, Artie squealed and they both turned to where, a row over, he had spotted a parked car with a Border Collie inside. It had its nose poking from a crack in the passenger window and Artie and Marissa ran to it, sailors to the siren. Bill took that as his queue to move along. As he passed them, the dog gave the glass a lick and Marissa laughed. Bill found it didn't bother him now. No, in fact, he was glad of it. He imagined Cathy's laughter filling up movie nights with bowls of microwave popcorn, the lights from the screen flickering on Marissa and Artie, their open faces rapt and joyful. Yes, she would like it there with them.

There were footsteps running behind him, and Bill turned around to see Artie holding out a slip of paper. It was their grocery receipt, but on the reverse and written in barely legible handwriting, was an address:

Arturo Ocampo

15 Mariposa Lane

"Here, so you can write me," he said, and then he hugged Bill.

He put his palm to the boy's head and thought of his granddaughter. Her little face would rest at just the same place on his chest. Artie ran back to his mother, who waved with keys in her hand.

"Take care, Bill," Marissa called, and he waved back.

Bill watched their SUV pull out and turn away from the store in the opposite direction from Bill's house. He opened his trunk and thought of the porch swing with Artie and Millie in it, fast friends with popsicles in hand, kicking their feet, laughing. Then he frowned, sifted through the cart for the bag containing the popsicles. The box was wet

with bright orange seeping in one corner. Looking back at the store, he thought of his lawn at home and the mice frolicking in the waning daylight. No, the yard could not wait. He would text Greg; he would tell him another week would be better for the family to visit. Besides, he needed more time to get the house ready.

Tonight, though, when he finished with the lawn, he would sit on the porch swing with the fireflies and admire it.

No letter arrived from Bill, but a week after the grocery trip, a delivery truck with *Blandford's Hardware and Appliances* written on the side pulled up to the Ocampo house. One man knocked on the pink door while another slid open the back of the truck. Artie ran over from the yard, circling the second man and asking him questions as he made his way up the driveway, pushing a dishwasher on a hand truck. When Artie spotted his mom at the door, and when he saw her face crack into a wide, disbelieving smile, he hooted and waved his arms high in the air.

Winner of the 2022 Prize for Poetry

MARIJEAN WEGERT

to my daughter, when you're trying to decide

The question haunts me at first:
what was this body made for?
Is it a warrior, lean and brown, shaped
for moving swiftly and light over forest floors?
(My eyes and mouth both
aim arrow-sharp, true in the dark.)

Or am I mother?
—goddess of nurture and breast
cornucopia of gifts,
curve of hips and the steady longing
to make a home out of myself and
every place I touch.

Then I remember the mountains I climbed
with you tight against my chest,
so pervasive, I sometimes
forgot you were with me.
You weren't a burden, you
were part of me, and with each footstep

I built you a home.

My body is shelter
and storm.
Now, you howl with delight and
point to the crescent moon
in every daybreak sky,
and ivory beads still spring onto my areolas
long after you've stopped drinking from me.

Winner of the 2022 Prize for Nonfiction

MATHEA TANNER

Elias's Table

Fresh pasta reminds me of the Gestapo. This is thanks to my grandfather. Like any good Greek girl, I never call him "Grandfather," though; he is *Pappoús* to me. *Pappoús* doesn't speak English well, and I know very little Greek, so he and I found our own language. Being Mediterranean, exaggerated gestures and facial expressions are easy body language cues, but to my mind, the most important way we communicate is through food. *Pappoús* cooks for us on Sunday visits to the Chicago apartment he and my grandmother (*Yia Yia*) share.

"Eat, eat, *koula mou*," he says, gesturing to the plate he has just put before me. It smells of the faraway places in the stories he tells.

My *pappoús* has dozens of stories of his travels. Born in Greece in 1913, he did not emigrate to the U.S. to settle down and marry until he was 40—that means decades of recipes and anecdotes from wandering the European continent.

Today's story is about the time he was a young man living in Italy, apprenticing to become a tailor. He is carrying fabric from a textile factory to the shop where he works, when two Gestapo officers stop him.

"What are you carrying?" They ask him.

"Just bolts of fabric. I am a tailor," he responds.

"Unroll them. Now."

They are searching for weapons. I do not know what sort of fabric

he carries, but in my imagined version, he shakes free a bolt of white muslin. I think of this as he rolls out the fresh pasta dough. In the story, the muslin waves like a peace flag, and the soldiers are satisfied. My *pappoús* walks free. Here, at his kitchen table over forty years later, he gestures in his usual, exaggerated way as he tells the story to me, his rapt, nine-year-old granddaughter. His hair is sparse on top, wild and frizzy at the sides, which adds to the drama. When he gets very excited, all English disappears. My mother is there at his side, chopping tomatoes and translating. Soon there is a lush pile of pappardelle with fresh mussels in front of me, finished with a drizzle of shining olive oil. Fresh pasta, white muslin, and the Gestapo for dinner.

Photo credit: Mathea Tanner

The first surviving photo of him is from this time. He has thick, wavy black hair swept back from his forehead, a pencil mustache, bright eyes, and the first of many beautifully tailored suits in photos over the years. In his hand, a final stylish detail: A pair of dark leather gloves. I imagine this time as one teeming with life and excitement—terrors, too, as Mussolini propels the region towards war.

The Italian recipes he makes are rich in romantic imagery. There are crisp Milanese veal cutlets prepared in dim light after a night toiling at the sewing machine, salty fried capers and mushrooms on good crusty Italian bread at the café while reading of invasions, and tender gnocchi heaped with cheese and shared with an Italian girl in a wine-red dress. There is often still a nod to his Greek roots in his dishes—a dash of cinnamon, fresh dill or a squeeze of lemon that brightens and adds complexity. I wonder now if perhaps he was homesick there and looking for ways to remember the farm and family he left behind. Or, perhaps he did this as a signal of fidelity to his country. Christian Goeschel, who writes of the rise of fascism in Italy at the time, shares that Mussolini's wars extended beyond alliance with Germany. He also waged war on Greece. The food you place at your table can be a defiant gesture when you live in the enemy's house.

Tragic events led my *pappoús* to Italy in the first place. In the summer of 1918, when *Pappoús* was just five-years-old, the influenza pandemic reached the borders of Greece. His family survived the first, relatively mild wave unscathed, but they would not be so lucky with the second. The CDC reports that the second wave that crippled Europe that fall was a new, more virulent strain. The soldiers roaming the country, returning home from the final throes of World War I carried home not only battle scars, but also a deadly virus.

By the winter of 1918, the flu claims *Pappoús'* father and three older brothers. Still a very young boy, he is now the family's patriarch. Pulled from school before he learns to read, he works the fields with his mother, sisters, and younger brother. The family learns to survive on humble foods: The offal and vegetable scraps that do not go to market. He teaches himself to read after long days of toil, curled up with the

family's few books and bowls of porridge made with stale bread, garlic, and soup bones.

For him, these are the foods of childhood, and he brings their preparations with him to America. As a little girl, my mother came home from school to delicious smells in the kitchen, only to find a grinning sheep's head in the oven, *Pappoús* beaming at her. I myself well up with tears when *Pappoús* plucks the eyes from a freshly roasted fish and tries to feed them to me on a spoon.

"Is good for you," he says, puzzled at my distress.

He leaves the skins on potatoes and the ends on onions in stews. He boils green tops from every type of root vegetable imaginable and dresses them with olive oil and fresh lemon. He picks dandelions, too, and boils them up. Some of these preparations remain with me now, a little changed, perhaps. I think of him every time I save peelings or onion tops to make stock. The boiled dandelion greens, called *horta vrasta*, are a favorite of mine. The first time my partner saw me bending over a steaming pot of greens, he backed away with confusion in his eyes. He reminded me of myself, ever an American child in *Pappoús'* kitchen, so often perplexed at the strange Old World I stepped into every time I sat down at the table. Sometimes my eyes would go wide at a pile of squid tentacles or lamb hearts on the countertop, and I would run to find my mother to ask her to translate what was happening. Then the food and the stories would follow. That was how I learned that *Pappoús* had left his village for Italy in order to make a better life for himself and a family wracked by war and disease. As a tailor, he could save money and send some home.

After his apprenticeship and the war ended, *Pappoús* set his sights on Paris. On his journey there, he spent time in Germany. Auschwitz,

the most terror-inspiring concentration camp of World War II, was recently converted to a museum and *Pappoús* was one of the first to walk through the infamous gates reading *Arbeit macht frei* ("Work sets you free"), as a patron. The museum was set up hastily, as Erin Blakemore of the *Smithsonian Magazine* says, before vandals could do more damage than they already have to the site, but the haste seemed to lend a sense of urgency to the place. *Pappoús* tells us of the piles of abandoned glasses and shoes. There was a room filled with children's clothes and playthings, and when my pappoús saw it, he wandered out into an open area to weep.

Germany is the only place he travelled, to my knowledge, to have no recipe to remember it. In my mind, my pappoús left without a recipe, like an empty plate at our table to grieve the loss of those men, women, and children. The absence of a meal saying more than any food ever could.

When he finally arrived in Paris, *Pappoús* found a city on its knees. Michael Kelly, author of *War and Culture: The Lessons of Post-war France*, writes of the city's struggle to rise from over four years of Nazi occupation and the considerable scars left behind. Parisians found themselves not only grappling with how to rebuild their damaged architecture, but a new national identity. When Elias arrived looking to establish himself as a master tailor, it was a city of dirt and depression. The food reflected the desperation of the times. *Pappoús* always refuses to eat venison later in life.

"Too much like horse we ate in France," he says.

Parisians have a long history of eating horse during hard times, Catherine Bremer of *Reuters* shares. It was a common practice as the city struggled to pull itself from aftershocks of wartime. It continued to

be popular, to some degree, well into the late 20th century.

Unable to find work as a tailor in those first few years, *Pappoús* had few choices. He did not arrive speaking French, so found work as a *plongeur*—a sort of garbage boy and dishwasher—in a restaurant. At night, he taught himself French from library books, much the same way as he learned to read Greek as a boy. I still have his worn copy of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, in the original French and stolen from a Paris library. It is marked everywhere with the Greek notes used to teach himself after long hours in the restaurant.

He hated the work, but what he learned from observing in the kitchens influenced his cooking for the rest of his life. From watching the chef, he learned to cook his fish *en papillote* using parchment paper. The method, as recipe writer Danilo Alfaro of *Spruce Eats* shares, steams the fish delicately, so that it stays moist and delectable and allows the cook to infuse it with aromatics.

Pappoús serves his fish *en papillote* with fresh herbs and lemon slices, olives and crushed garlic tucked inside. He also learned to perfect his techniques for the French "mother sauces." Shane Mitchell of *Saveur Magazine* calls these sauces the keys to unlocking all of French cuisine, and *Pappoús* used them to connect France with Greece as well. Two quintessential Greek dishes, *moussaka* and *pasticcio*, rely on one of the French mother sauces: *Béchamel.*

Nine-year-old me watches *Yia Yia* and *Pappoús* work together in the kitchen to make *moussaka*—my *yia yia* sautés the lamb and slices potatoes and eggplant for the base while *Pappoús* slaves over the perfect *béchamel*. Once the meat, sauce, and vegetables are layered in a casserole dish, he folds rich yellow egg yolks and fresh shredded parmesan into the sauce that makes this version unique to Greek

cuisine. *Yia Yia*, who loves garlic so much she is beginning to resemble a bulb of it (papery white skin and all roundness), sneaks slivers of it into the sauce as he works. The final bubbling mass is poured atop the dish and baked until golden. It tastes better than any moussaka anywhere thanks to that impossibly rich top layer.

My *pappoús* dies when I am just ten. He leaves a handful of recipes behind, penned for my mother and me so that we could carry them on. He wrote them on now-brittle notebook paper and behind a veil of Greek characters and a shaky, Parkinson's hand. While my mother does her best to decode them for me, I rely mainly on what is not written down to guide me—the stories he told and the scents and scenes of his kitchen—to reproduce them. On one, there is a jittery dolphin inked in a corner of the page. I remember that day very well—the day he told me of the ship that brought him to North America.

"They race the ship," he says, but he does not know the English word *dolphin*, so he draws this shaky image for me—an otherworldly creature swimming along the margin of the page.

I see this drawing and imagine myself standing next to him at the bow of the ship, sailing to meet my *yia yia* for the first time. I wonder if he takes the dolphins as a sign of good things to come in his new country. They will have a marriage that lasts the rest of his life, and two children. It is not always joyful—they lose a third child, struggle to keep a tailoring business alive in the tumultuous 1960's, and often fight in their old age—but in my memories of their kitchen, they always manage to find peace in the food.

In a life that spans nearly an entire century, *Pappoús* found a way to distill its purpose to simple things that bring joy. For him, those things were the hum of his Singer sewing machine, lifting his only

grandchild into his arms, and keeping his kitchen vibrant with good food and memories.

The recipe with the dolphin on it is for lamb with artichokes. It was his and my mother's favorite dish. They are both gone now, but that day is alive in the roasted haunches of meat and fresh oregano in my own kitchen. I litter my countertop with garlic cloves and discarded artichoke petals—they are not unlike the flowers we leave on graves, symbolizing the living that carry our legacies forward. I am bustling back and forth, laughing and pouring wine for gathered friends. My partner is there to chop the tomatoes. I have added my own elements to the dish now, and my stories join up with his. I sit at my table with my guests and begin to tell them about dolphins, white muslin, and the Gestapo.

CAMMA DUHAMELL

An Interview with Mary Elizabeth Pope

Photo credit: Sharona Jacobs

Tributaries Fiction Editor Camma Duhamell sat down for a virtual chat with novelist Mary Elizabeth Pope, this issue's literary juror, to talk about her new book, *The Gods of Green County* (Blair, 2021), and all things writing.

Q: What motivated you to narrate *The Gods of Green County* from multiple perspectives?

A: The motivation to write *The Gods of Green County* from multiple perspectives is a pretty organic one: that's how the story came to me. I often "hear" the voices of characters, making their cases to me, explaining themselves, and that's what gets me writing. With the character of Coralee, I had the advantage of twenty years of listening to my grandmother's voice, but I had no sense of her inner life. I had to wait for that to come to me every bit as much as I had to wait for my grandfather's voice (who died when I was four), or Leroy's, who is a fictional character. Once I have enough of those snippets of their

voices, then I know who they are and what they'd say or do when faced with any circumstance.

Q: For this novel, what research did you have to do about mental illness and the societal institutions to treat it in the 1920s?

A: With regard to mental institutions, I was lucky to have access to my grandmother's mental health records from the state asylum where she was incarcerated for seven years. I know what her medications were and her treatments, and I know things she said to the doctors, as well as testimonies by family and friends who talked about her odd behavior, because those are all in her records too. As well, my father remembered things he saw when he visited her there. I did do some research, however, into electroshock therapy in some detail, because although it's still used today, the form of it my grandmother would have been exposed to in the 1940s would have been very primitive. I also watched *Titicut Follies*, which is an incredibly depressing documentary about the state hospital system here in Massachusetts, where I live. But it's filmed not too long after my grandmother left the state hospital, so it was probably a pretty accurate portrait of mental health treatment at the time.

Q: How starkly does the novel differ from your grandparents' reality? Is it a loose adaptation?

A: My novel is a loose adaptation of my grandparents' experience. Coralee and Earl were based on my grandparents, and many of the major events in their lives are true to my grandparents' experiences. But

once you throw another major character who is almost entirely fictional (Leroy) into the narrative, that's where things get tricky. My standard answer to this question is that Coralee and Earl's stories are based on true events until about two-thirds of the way through the story, but almost any time Leroy appears, that's where the story deviates from what I know of my grandparents' experience.

Q: How do you write a novel? Is there a storyboard, do you write chapters in order or skip around, do you draft character sheets, is there a folder for research, paper or computer, etc.?

A: I'm not sure I can tell you how to write a novel, even after writing one. What I can tell you is how NOT to write a novel. For instance, don't waste time editing until you have a full draft of the novel. I would often have a good run of days or weeks, and I'd think, "Well, that's done. Now I can clean that up and move on to the next part." But the truth is, I was wasting my time, because so much of what I thought was done, early on, ended up getting tossed. Also, another thing not to do is not be too wedded to a particular idea about what is going to happen in your novel. Your characters can surprise you. A minor character might end up being incredibly important, but when that character first appeared, he might just have been there to flesh out a scene. This was true with Lewis Hopkins' character. He was just a deputy sheriff behind the counter answering Leroy's questions when he first appeared. I had no idea he'd become so central to the unfolding of the story. This is also true with Sonny. He was just one of a list of examples of Cole's hiring practices when he first appeared. I'm still sort of amazed at the lives they took on as the story unfolded.

Q: Which do you find more satisfying, writing or editing?

A: I definitely find writing more satisfying, especially on the days it's going well. Editing, though, has its rewards too, in that it's sort of like sculpting your draft. You have this big, messy story that's too long and cumbersome, and with editing you get to shape it and make it really move. It's like watching your novel grow up, lose the rough edges, become more polished and presentable. I love that too.

NATHAN FROEBE, DMA

The Psychology of Final Fantasy: Surpassing the Limit Break
Edited by Anthony M. Bean, PhD
Leyline Publishing, Inc., 2020

Terra. A young girl of untold magical prowess marches through the biting blizzard in her giant anthropomorphic Magitek tank. Chimes ring out as deep strings swell and a harp glissandos like a snow flurry. A steady rhythmic thrum takes control as her machine lumbers forward and a sorrowful flute intones a plaintive melody. This is the opening scene of *Final Fantasy VI* for the Super Nintendo. It was also my first experience with a *Final Fantasy* title, and that game and its soundtrack have left an indelible mark upon me, as both a gamer and as a composer. Even today, Terra is present in my life as my dearest companion: a ten-year-old black Labrador who bears her name. *The Final Fantasy* series as a whole remains one of my steadfast favorites to engage with when gaming, and the treatment of its storytelling and music is a large part of that love. When I happened to chance upon a book that took a deep dive into the various psychological aspects of the series, I could not resist grabbing my magic staff and embarking on another quest in the realms of crystal-laden fantasies.

The Psychology of Final Fantasy: Surpassing the Limit Break is a collection of twelve essays from a variety of authors that examines the long-running video game franchise from a myriad of angles. Each essay focuses on a specific topic, and sometimes even a specific character or title in the *Final Fantasy* series. Despite this specificity, the book has been crafted by the authors in such a way to be accessible to anyone, regardless of one's education or experience with psychology. Even then,

if you have not played every (or any!) game in the series, you will still be able to easily understand the concepts laid out in the character study presented. There does seem to be a specific emphasis on a few entries in the series, namely *Final Fantasy VI, VII, IX, and X*, which likely stems from those being some of the most well-regarded and influential entries in the series.

Rather than giving brief synopses on each chapter (and being that I am a musician), I am choosing to focus on two specific sections of the book and how I found their relation to music as a whole. I'll give a quick overview at the end of this review about other topics that are covered in this collection. The two chapters I will focus on are:

- "The Storytelling of Final Fantasy" - Rachel Kowert
- "And So It Goes, On and On: Repetition in the Music of Final Fantasy" - William Gibbons & Julianne Grasso

The very first essay in the book, "The Storytelling of Final Fantasy," outlines something critical to understanding any analysis of these games: While there are many prominent Western influences, they are ultimately created by an Eastern company (Square Enix), and as such, are rooted in Eastern cultural philosophies and storytelling. This chapter outlines a common Eastern form in stories: *kishōtenketsu. Kishōtenketsu* is comprised of four parts: Introduction, development, plot twist, and conclusion. For me as a composer, this is an intriguing notion. Music also has multi-part forms in its construction, but they mostly tend to be binary or ternary in nature (AB or ABA, and endless variations thereof). The quaternary nature of *kishōtenketsu* intrigues me as a new way of creating music, one that I am excited to employ in upcoming projects. The chapter also covers the concepts of *bushidō*

(the way of the warrior, embodied by loyalty, duty, and honor), where it provides examples of conflicted characters who struggle when the concepts within *bushidō* are in conflict. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the women presented in the franchise, emphasizing the number of lead roles and other prominent roles given to women throughout the series, which often eclipses traditional representation.

Hearkening to the beginning of this examination, the music that plays during *FFVI's* opening (Terra's theme) is brought back numerous times throughout the game, often with various transformations tailored to the scene or mood being depicted. This repetition is a crucial factor in music's overall influence, but as the chapter "And So It Goes On and On: Repetition in the Music of Final Fantasy" points out, this repetition has another layer beyond the game itself. It also explores the repetition of the music outside of its given game in other entries in the series, or even outside of the games entirely.

The authors discuss research regarding the repetition of music, its correlations to memory, and what effects they cause in the listener. They argue that the repetition of musical themes within a specific game and musical themes that reappear consistently across the franchise (such as the introductory Prelude) creates a unique cohesiveness and experience for the listener. It was interesting to see how they examined the music not just inside of the game it may appear in, but they examined the recurring musical themes across the franchise and the effects those particular themes have. They also highlighted how the music survives outside of the games, as the music of *Final Fantasy* is often presented in concert halls, subverting a traditionally "classical" space. As someone who has attended these concerts before, I noticed memories flooding my heart when hearing the music out of context, drawing me back to the stories, characters, and moments.

Summary:

I would highly recommend that any fans of a Japanese-role playing game or a similarly styled game pick up this collection as it will offer you insights that will enrich your gameplay experiences, and not just within the *Final Fantasy* series. With the chapters being standalone essays, it makes it much easier to digest and process each one, and there is truly no order you need to read them in either. Each essay offers insightful viewpoints into the ways these games have been crafted and the various ways psychological tenets are employed to masterful effect in their storytelling. A chapter revolving around the symbolism of crystals and spiritual attunement was endlessly fascinating. It educated me on more Eastern philosophies that I had already been experiencing and could now re-experience with a deeper understanding when I revisit various titles (as I often do). There are further examinations of memory, identity, gender subtypes, parasocial dynamics, processing trauma, and so much more, each with excellently-detailed descriptions of how they are explored in the games.

Now, pardon me as I log into *Final Fantasy XIV* to mount up in my own Magitek tank and search the world for adventure while listening to the melancholy tones of Terra's Theme. I'm armed with new knowledge that will allow me to appreciate and embrace these fantastic fantasies.

MARY ELIZABETH POPE

POETRY

Winner: "to my daughter, when you're trying to decide," Marijean Wegert

The two options presented in this poem—is the narrator a warrior or a mother?—become one in this poem using beautiful visual cues to show us the long and circuitous pathway the poem's narrator travels. Tenderness and toughness coexist in this poem and in this mother's consideration of the purpose for which her body is made.

Second Place: "Yelling at Cars," Terra Orndorff

This poem captures the innocence of childhood, haunted by all that is always circling on the periphery of our atmospheres, threatening harm. Adults' directives, never explained, give this poem the dislocated feeling of an unnamable terror and demonstrates that errant adult behavior can cause harm to children, but well-intended adult behavior can cause harm just the same. In this way we are left with the sense that harm to children by adults—regardless of their motives—is simply an unavoidable part of life.

FICTION

Winner: "Espadas y la plaga/Swords and the Plague," Mya Whaley

This story, in Spanish and in English, captures the sense of fear and confusion we've all been living with too recently not to recognize. At once, it captures both a contemporary moment and a historical one. It is similar enough for us to feel as if we've traveled through time and space to a place where characters experience what we know so well ourselves. We, too, have grappled with the mystery of how an illness travels, the fear that perhaps there is no way out, and the terrible choice between prioritizing our own wellbeing, or risking death to help those we care about.

Second Place: "Standard American Bill," Mathea Tanner

This story is exceptional in its use of dialogue to reveal the feelings and motivations of the characters. The details, too—the "grackle" sound of the swing Bill wishes his wife could hear—the way memories of cold cuts from an earlier time can intrude on the present and make it onto a shopping list—allow the reader to visualize and experience the story. Bill's appreciation of Marisa's take on the stale "I'm so sorry" that Bill has been hearing for months is a terrific moment, as is his own take on the standard response. Both cut through the propriety that is meant to be respectful but has the effect of distancing people from one another. The resolution, too, is lovely, arising organically out of details present in the story, so this sweet encounter at the grocery store has a natural touch to it that feels just right.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Winner: "Elias's Table," Mathea Tanner

This beautiful essay brims with such specific and visual details that allow the reader to follow the meandering life of the narrator's grandfather. Despite the many countries through which he has wandered, the reader never once feels confused in the telling of these stories. The world "Elias's Table" creates is one in which food is a language, recipes are memories, and meals are a recreation of history.

Second Place: "In the Land of Drag," Richie Schenck

This vibrant essay accomplishes two things at once. It not only shines a light on the fascinating sub-culture of drag, but simultaneously gives us the vocabulary to understand it. Moving and funny by turns, the reader learns these lessons of vocabulary so well that by the end of the essay, we understand completely the final pointed line. In this way, "In the Land of Drag" does the good cultural work of lifting the curtain on a widely-known but less understood sub-culture, so that we finish the essay feeling, if not necessarily like insiders, then no longer like outsiders.

MARY ELIZABETH POPE grew up in Michigan with roots deep in the Missouri Bootheel and Northeast Arkansas. She is Professor of English at Emmanuel College in Boston. She is the author of *Divining Venus: Stories* (The Waywiser Press, 2013) and the novel *The Gods of Green County* (Blair, 2021). Her work has appeared in *Arkansas Review, Florida Review, Fugue, Bellingham Review, Sycamore Review, Ascent*, and many others. She lives outside Boston with her husband, Matt Elliott. (From www.maryelizabethpope.com/aboutme.)

NATE KUZNIA

VISUAL ARTS

For creatives, the challenges of the past two years proved to be either stifling, motivating, or a grand limbo of middle ground involving a huge gray blob of an unidentified something that we were all trying to define. With so much to process, we were reminded that the arts can be an outlet. The arts can be therapy. Without a doubt, the arts are essential. During this period, perhaps more than ever, I admired the tenacity of the students that continued to adapt and persevere in their studies while guided by an outstanding faculty equally determined to both provide encouragement and facilitate their growth as artists. My sincere congratulations to all who submitted work in all forms to this year's *Tributaries.* Please continue exploring, making, and sharing your gifts and voices.

Winner: "Analogous Egg Nest," Julia Jackson

My choice for First Place is "Analogous Egg Nest." Whether it is reflective of this time of year, or my own interjection of symbolism upon the nest and egg eliciting concepts relative to birth or new beginnings, this painting is impressive on multiple levels. The thoughtful execution involved with the mark-making and color choices make this image particularly striking. The rendering of the nest creates a dynamic portal quality that simultaneously captures the delicacy and strength of the structure while utilizing a palette that falls just outside our brain's usual frame of reference. In turn, this relays a sense of peace, calm, and safety so necessary at this very moment on our pale blue dot. Congratulations, Julia Jackson.

Second Place: “Oscura the Sun Goddess,” Stephanie Velazquez

Though always a difficult task, I’ve chosen two pieces that stood out from this group. My choice for Second Place is "Oscura the Sun Goddess." I was initially drawn to this ceramic sculpture in reaction to its bright colors and carved patterns but soon turned to its mysteries. The glaze is applied in such a way that it mimics a faux aging or weathering on its surface. Upon further consideration, it continued to hold my attention as I created my own stories about its cultural references, true age, and purpose as an object. Congratulations, Stephanie Velazquez.

Thank you to *Tributaries* for giving me the honor of judging this year’s submissions. I look forward to enjoying yet another quality edition that highlights the creativity of the individuals central to our mission—our students.

NATE KUZNIA currently serves as the Gallery Coordinator and Studio Technician for IU East. He earned his BFA (cum laude) with concentrations in Printmaking and Sculpture from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan and his MFA in Printmaking from IU Bloomington. A draughtsman and illustrator, his artwork has been exhibited both nationally and internationally.

CONTRIBUTORS

DERIAN DALTON is a Technical and Professional Writing major with a minor in Anthropology. She spends all of her free time with her toddler or with her conglomeration of emotional support fictional characters. She has been writing for as long as she can remember, but poetry is a newfound love!

NATHAN FROEBE is a composer and Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at IU East. He is an avid gamer and collector of Transformers, many of whom have cheekily infiltrated his bookshelves. He resides in Richmond with his husband, Jeremy, and their queen, Terra the black Labrador.

MARGARET GRAVES is an undergraduate student majoring in English, Technical and Professional Writing at IU East. She enjoys reading and writing both fiction and nonfiction stories. After graduating, Margaret hopes to become a published author.

BRENDAN HARRIS is studying graphic design at IU East. He loves to write poetry, short stories, and even the occasional cryptic message, sprawled on the corridors of buildings long abandoned by things not quite human.

SCOTT HOBBIE is a senior at IU East studying English. He is a poet who enjoys a wide range of poetry. He writes in his free time and rides bicycles.

CLARISSA HOGESTON is a senior at IU East pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English, with a concentration in Technical and Professional Writing. She has been writing since she knew it was an art and wants little else than some spare time to get everything she sees, feels, and experiences down on paper. Clarissa considers any talent a gift from God and He, along with her loud and loving family, has supported this gift since she first expressed a desire to nurture it. Clarissa will continue to write, no matter where she finds herself in the future.

JULIA JACKSON is a Junior at IU East, working towards a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. Inspired by music, literature, and horror films, she likes to explore the oddities of free imagination through her work, as well as copying from life.

ANGEL JUAN-LAMB is an undergraduate student majoring in elementary education at IU East. She lives in Richmond, Indiana, and enjoys hiking and cooking.

TRAVIS LANG is a junior Communications major and sports broadcaster at IU East. He is also enlisted in the United States Marine Corps and will head to basic training in December 2022.

KATELYN LAWSON is an undergraduate at Indiana University East with a major in Psychology and minors in Women's Studies and Neuroscience. In her free time, she enjoys writing, pottery, and watching films. After graduation, Katelyn hopes to become a guidance counselor at a high school level.

ALEXANDRA DUKE is a second-year student studying in the Science department at IU East. She is pursuing entrance into a naturopathic medical program. She hopes that focusing on her writing will serve her in pursuing advocacy for legislation on complimentary medicines.

TERRA ORNDORFF is a Communications Studies major with a minor in Creative Writing. With a life-long love of writing, she currently regales her husband, dog, and parrot with fiction and nonfiction stories and is learning to take the parrot's laughter as a compliment.

MARIJEAN WEGERT is a lay scholar of theopoetics, wrestling at the intersections of head and heart, truth and paradox, wonder and work, marrow and magic. She's a mama of two, grad student, and amateur Latin dancer who currently resides in northern Indiana. Find her on Instagram @regressada.

RICHIE SCHENCK completed his Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies at IU East in December 2021. Richie enjoys using writing as a way to explore the human condition, and looks forward to exploring his voice more in future pieces. He currently lives in downtown Indianapolis and works as a sales and training executive for L'Oreal USA.

MANAV TANEJA is a second-year student majoring in Psychology at Indiana University East, as an online student. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, he spent half of his life in India and now resides in Huntsville, Alabama. His argumentative essay, "Violent Video Games and Aggression: Alignment Change" was included in Indiana University's 2021 Celebration of Student Writing.

MATHEA TANNER is originally from Chicago, Illinois. She is a technical project manager by profession and spends her free time blacksmithing, welding, and raising chickens. She is a senior at IU East, completing a minor in Creative Writing, and has only been writing in earnest for the past year. Prior to *Tributaries*, she was unpublished in the area of creative fiction.

STEPHANIE VELAZQUEZ created this unusual vase based on Mayan and Aztec sculptures. She has always been interested in the archaeological finds discovered in Mexico.

MYA WHALEY is an undergraduate at IU East working toward a major in Biology and minors in Chemistry and Spanish. After graduating in Spring 2022, she plans on earning a Master's degree in Marine Science and Climate Change at the University of Gibraltar in Europe.