

The Dazed Starling

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Founded in 2014, *The Dazed Starling* is the literary journal of the Department of Modern Languages & Literature at California Baptist University.

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The Department of Modern Languages & Literature offers a Master of Arts degree in English, Bachelor of Arts degrees and minors in English and Spanish, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and minor in Creative Writing. To learn more about the programs and professors in the Department of Modern Languages & Literature, explore www.calbaptist.edu.

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All writings in this issue were produced by CBU undergraduate and graduate students.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;
How we stole in, lifted a sash
And retreated, not to affright it;

and how our spirits

Rose when, suddenly sure,
It lifted off from a chair-back,
Beating a smooth course for the right window
And clearing the sill of the world.

from "The Writer"
by Richard Wilbur



Sigma Tau Delta

Members of Alpha Tau Sigma, CBU's chapter of the Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society, contributed to the composition of *The Dazed Starling* Issue 12. Two of the undergraduate journal editors are members of Sigma Tau Delta. They participated in various roles that were essential to the creation of the journal including advertising for submissions, serving on the editorial board, and finalizing design elements.

In addition, fourteen percent of the authors accepted for publication are members of Sigma Tau Delta. However, this data was calculated only after decisions in the blind review process were finalized and did not influence publication decisions in any way. Authors who are members of Sigma Tau Delta are noted with the initials $\Sigma\tau\Delta$ after their name in their entries and author biographies.

California Baptist University is proud to host its Sigma Tau Delta chapter and encourages its students to take advantage of the opportunities that Sigma Tau Delta offers, such as scholarships, internships, and conventions.



Editors' Note

Welcome Readers,

We are thrilled to present California Baptist University's literary journal, *The Dazed Starling* Volume 12. This year, our student editors sought out an assortment of genres, styles, and perspectives in the stories they selected. These pieces showcase the creativity of CBU students as they struggle with the emotions and challenges that many face in our college community. From exploring the importance of human connection through flash fictions, to diving into the beauty of art through poetry, and expressing personal struggles in navigating life changes through creative non-fiction, these pieces speak to truths we can all learn from.

So, we thank you for coming alongside us as we travel through the narratives between these pages. We hope the authors inspire you through their mastery of language and we look forward to celebrating CBU's talented students in the reading of this journal.

Aliya Beaupain

Jack Brown

Tirza Bustrum

Jeremy Cheng

Riley Devine

Lissa Gray

Rebecca Harrel

Zipporah Marse

Hannah Noel

Rylee Nyberg

Lydia Speas

Heavenlee Vaaj

Samantha Villanueva

Alayna Winans

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Creative Writing Contest Winners

James Lu Poetry Award

First Place

“The One Who Waits” by Aliya Aiko Beaupain

Second Place

“Lantern Bearer’s Creed” by Jack Brown

Honorable Mentions

“STRIFE” by Jacob A. Seavello

“I measure you in Januarys” by Tirza Bustrum

Prose Fiction & Nonfiction

First Place

“Stoneheart” by Heavenlee SuabNkauj Vaaj

Second Place

“The Sound of Endings” by Aliya Aiko Beaupain

Honorable Mentions

“I Love Dreams” by Ryan Reyes

“Perchance to Dream” by David Marshall

Poetry



Lantern Bearer's Creed

Jack Brown | ΣΤΔ

2025 James Lu Poetry Award - Second Place

Sacrifices must be made
to keep the lantern's fire lit.
Flames inside must never fade.
Burn the kindling you deem fit.

To keep the lantern's fire lit,
let the embers take your mind.
Burn the kindling you deem fit.
Leave the faithless ash behind.

Let the embers take your mind,
churn the loyal into oil.
Leave the faithless ash behind.
It will all be worth the toil.

Churn the loyal into oil.
The fire's call must be obeyed.
It will all be worth the toil.
Sacrifices must be made.

Before Dante's Death Mask

Michael Vass | ΣΤΔ

Beside the one sacred shroud of Turin
Exceeding all the five poets laurel,
As some saintly relics, you shine moral.
Theophany to Mount Sinai akin,
Rock, God inscribed from firm forehead to chin.
I, in the cleft, would wait without quarrel
Could I only see your face immortal
Etched in the firm basilical doctrine.
Very short the moment as I must leave.
From a new room, I cast my final glance.
Right there, I turn, torn deep within and grieve,
God knows when I shall see your face by chance.
In His foresight to me and you, did leave,
La Vita Nuova in advance.

Honey

Harley Schechter

Hallucination:

Honey drips from your lips

Into a cup of tea

Made by Tofana.

I listen to your poisonous words

Feigning self-importance, Again

For once, they will meet their match.

Anticipation, sweetens my soul

Thrumming freedom

Soon to unfold.

Comfort

Jack Brown | ΣΤΔ

Your eyes were red
that lonesome night,
running to bed
disgraced by sleight.

The room was dark
when I came in.
He'd left his mark
on your fair skin.

How could he taint
a soul so pure
without restraint?
With pride, I'm sure.

Unclench your fists,
my dearest friend.
Heartache persists,
but scars will mend.

I cannot spare
your tortured heart
from love's despair,
but I can start

to ease the pain
with simple acts
of kindness, plain
and free from tax.

The Ache

Eliza Friederang

They tell me it won't always burn
Someday I will escape from this wooden stake
And I will no longer be on fire.
The heat will cool
The bruises will fade
But what will never leave
Is The Ache.
It's like the feeling in my bones
I get when I'm sick
My body feels heavy
Sometimes I cannot lift it
Out of bed
And people point
And laugh
They can't understand
They have never felt
The Ache.
Everyone tells me it'll be okay
But how can it
If this will never go away?
Why do some people get by with paper cuts
While I had to be sliced open from top to bottom
Dissected.
Disemboweled.
And put together again?
They say their scars are annoying
The tiny white marks on their fingertips
But how can they complain?
They have never felt
The Ache.

My stitches constantly come undone
New wounds open every day
I have never had peace long enough
For the blood to harden
For the cuts to fade
My punishment for existing is a lifetime of burning
Oh, how I Ache.

Canvas of Life

Tiffany Brooke Soto

Art

Defines

Humanity.

Stylistic ideals,

Echoing the brushstrokes of life's tapestry,

Portraying creative footprints

Uniquely and subjectively perfected

By its Creator.

Art

Creates

Humanity.

Intangible DNA, Preserving

The curiosities of human qualities,

Guiding them on the path

To grow in Understanding and Sensitivity.

Art

Builds

Humanity.

To know Love is to hold the treasures of the soul

An abundance so rare,

Yet painted with hues so vividly achievable

A concept so morally complex,

But definably understood.

And still,

No single piece of Art

Defines love the same.

Writing Poetry

Michael Vass | ΣΤΔ

Rhyme reigns over
Proper pronunciation.
Vocabulary should
Provoke creation.

Order is ordained
By unerring ears.
Poetry is a work
Of days and years.

Meaning must only
Be overshadowed for clarity.
Where words remain
Sharpened in sincerity.

The muse is a
Lovely friend.
Write what matters
Before the end.

Song of the Erlking

Jack Brown | ΣΤΔ

Wandering the blackwood forest
I heard the Erlking call to me,
whispering words through murk and mist,
inviting in their mystery.

“Come closer, dear child, quell your fears.”
He ventured closer, beckoning
with a voice that brought angels tears.
Not those of joy, but of mourning.

Through gnarled roots and fog did rise
a phantom silhouette whose head
bore crooked horns and bone-white eyes.
“Come to me and sleep, child,” he said.

My tired eyes drooped at his decree,
but father’s voice pulled me away,
out from the haze through which I flee.
The Erlking waits another day.

Secrets in Scarlet

Tiffany Brooke Soto

I am the painter, and my face is the canvas,
I outline my lips to hold in the sorrow
Like a wall guarding secrets
From the battles within.

I paint my lips red
To cover the lies that pour out of my mouth
A smile on my face so there will be no question
The emptiness that is carved within me.

I am an actor, and my words are my deceivers
Rehearsing my lines
Refining my answers-
Yet beneath the guise, another role unfolds.

So, I am never questioned about the girl I wish I remembered,
But have long since lost-
All that's left but distant echoes,
The shadow of someone I used to know.

I measure you in Januarys

Tirza Bustrum

2025 James Lu Poetry Award - Honorable Mention

I measure you in Januarys
Because it was January when we met
The time when frost settles on nature
You were a winter flower I cannot forget.
It was January when I saw you again
You had grown leaves and vines
Just like your red cheeks
Your warmth
was my
spring
time.
The
next
January
I took you home
Spring, Summer,
and Autumn passed
Colors dimmed to faded gray
Your winter charm did not last.
The last January, I brought you back
And we stood in the same frosty cold
Your warmth turned to cold black
We're better off spending January alone.

Suits

Emma Black

The church that fills its pews today
is empty tomorrow.

The men who wear their suits will go
to use, not to follow,
the words that once were used for truth,
their meaning now hollow.

Dandelion Crown

Eliza Friederang

I'm still a little girl sitting in the grass picking dandelions
The other girls all made each other flower crowns
They pinky promised
To wear them till they wilt
And I watch from afar
While they twirl around
I've been here for hours
Trying to figure out how to weave the stems together
Nobody taught me how
Nobody made me a crown

And I finally
Knotted all the dandelions together
Though I ripped off some of the petals
And when I put the treasured ring on my head
The other girls all laughed and said
That my crown wasn't pretty like theirs
They skipped away
Toward the swing set
I sunk back down into the lawn
I took off my crown
And ripped it into shreds
I tried so hard to forget
But I never made a flower crown again.

Rosy Memories

Emma Black

I miss the days in dried-up streams
through town, a path of sand and green.

Following friends down bush back roads,
we'd whistle tunes and watch for toads.

No flow, or stream was as serene.

Now look back with a rosy sheen,
We replace pain with movie scenes.
Forgotten aches bring wistful odes;
"I miss the days."

A pirate bottle spilt on jeans,
paternal wrath, and old routines,
With one raised hand, her dreams erode,
So through the trees and weeds, we toed.
The creak, now flows but still I'll sing,
"I miss the days."

The one who waits

Aliya Aiko Beaupain

2025 James Lu Poetry Award - First Place

I am she,
the black wind spake,
that marrow, harrow, hollow ache
that chases you from sleep to wakefulness
on nights like this one.

I am she,
the church bell clanged
from empty pews where trumpets sang
and silver tongues from heaven rang—
but not on nights like this one.

I am she,
the one who waits.
You hid me with your better traits,
but they don't know the way you ached for me
on nights like this one.

You know my name.
You know me well.
I am not nameless—you can tell
them just how many nights you lay
enfolded in my branches.

You know my name
for I am she,
the hollow where your heart should be.
There is no drum, no crimson beat

To quell my soft advances
You know my name,
the one who waits.
The church bell and the raven spake

To you of me, but far too late—
No, do not cry “for heaven’s sake”,
The choice was always yours to make—
You chose to take your chances.

I am she.
I say to you
the debt of years is coming due.
The bell-struck day that sinners rue is dawning—

I will wait for you.



Prose

The Sound of Endings

Aliya Aiko Beaupain

2025 Creative Writing Prose Award - Second Place

I feel it coming then, when the sun goes down. In the California hills, I feel the desert air and the sound of endings. Sienna peach and blue and green. Blue like dirty broken shells. Green like life was supposed to be. I hear the sound of endings in the rustle through the palm trees, in the wink of electricity between the branches of a pine. I feel childhood's afterburn, running on life support, running from the yawning maw of what will be. It's like the countdown before the surgeon puts you under, the barely conscious smell of scrubbed air and machinery.

There is no IV in my arm, but there are cars on the road. I hear them screech and smell their smoke; I watch the sinking sun through smog, and know it could be me. In one day or a hundred years, I'll taste the sound of endings—

—but my mouth stays dry through the burned-out hours, dry like the green-tinged sunset. I wait out the dark through a Christmas-tree haze, and listen to December. The wind drags fingers through the palms, a clatter-scraping sweetness. A car backfires two streets over. Sirens smear the air, and the smoke-veiled mountains watch.

This place is not my home.

It's not my home, but it feels like home, and part of me can live here. This place was not beautiful to children's eyes, but that child long since dissolved into the peach, and blue, and green. I finally know what is beautiful about the California hillsides.

They're beautiful like the sound of endings.

Conference Kids

Zipporah Marse

Late in the summer every year, Oasis Media Group holds a business conference at the Renaissance Palm Springs Hotel. It was the most important conference they had, as it often led to decisions on staff position changes for the following year. It was also the most fun conference they had, as employees got the chance to bring their families with them on a quick weekend trip to Palm Springs. Most employees opted to only invite their significant other, but two families always brought a child with them.

Most summers, Nicole was found pouting at the deep end of the pool with her feet skimming the cold water. She could sit there for hours, watching the rings of rippling water circling her toes. The sound of glasses clinking against the concrete around the pool always mixed with the light breeze that rushed through the pool area. Her mother assumed Nicole's ability to sit with a stank face on for so long was proof of her vivid imagination. Really, Nicole was often in her head, reciting some practiced speech she planned to give her mother when she found the time. Her monologues usually started with, *Mom, I've been doing some thinking. Please have a seat.* She was eight.

Jeremy, conversely, was only seven, and as much as he caught Nicole's attention while she sat in her hawk's nest on one end of the pool, he barely noticed her. He was too focused on showing his exhausted mother how long he could hold his head underwater and how many somersaults he could do before he got too dizzy and had to cling to the side of the pool to stay upright. Jeremy was fitted out with a new swim shirt, which was made evident by the farmer's tan separating his brown skin into two shades. He sported matching blue goggles and arm floaties, a darker blue nose plug, and a green headband to keep his thick black hair out of his face. He looked like a dork, but he was free.

On the second day of the three-day conference, Jeremy's mom

went over to the bar to have a girl chat with her friends and told Jeremy to stay in the shallow end, as he always did. The instant she turned around, Jeremy paddled to the deep end. It took him a while, and Nicole watched him the entire time. She jutted her chin out to make it seem like she was looking at the palm trees around her.

Grabbing onto the sun-warmed beige brick surrounding the pool, Jeremy lifted his head out of the water with a dramatic gasp, droplets clinging to his cheeks. He took off his nose plug and looked up at Nicole.

“You used to have purple hair,” he said.

Nicole dragged her eyes down to him. “Yeah?”

“What happened?”

“Got bored of it.”

“Oh.”

Nicole’s mom spent a lot of money on Nicole’s hair every year. The only rule was Nicole was not allowed to cut it shorter than her mid-back, claiming that her long hair was the prettiest thing about her, but she could dye her hair as much as she wanted, as long as it was reversible. The longest she ever got grounded was after she convinced a new stylist to bleach her hair. Looking close enough, the fried ends of Nicole’s hair were still noticeable. Nicole kept the slight wave of her face-framing strands past her shoulders to trail down her back. She wasn’t allowed to get her hair wet, anyway.

“Do you play mermaids? My girl cousins always play mermaids.”

Jeremy’s grip on the brick was unwavering. Nicole shook her head.

“I think you’d be good at it. You look like a mermaid.”

“Thanks.”

“I like playing Dr. Scientist. Where I search around the bottom of the pool looking for scientific things to study. It’s hard to do it over here because of my floaties.”

“You can’t swim?”

“My mom likes it when I wear floaties.”

“My dad threw me into our pool’s deep end when I was four.”

“Oh.”

“But I can swim now.”

“That’s cool. Why don’t you?”

Nicole shrugged.

The speech that Nicole had been working on before Jeremy swam up to her was about never wanting to come to Palm Springs for a work thing ever again. She was planning on saying, *Mom, there’s nothing to do here and there is no reason for both you and dad to come on this trip every year. I’m not allowed to swim or to walk around by myself so there’s no point in bringing me. I don’t care that you sometimes let me have a sip of your drink or that I get to wear my strappy sandals, I would rather be left at home so I can go on the TV.*

Jeremy was wondering when dinner was going to be.

He wanted to get Nicole’s attention back from the trees. “I have goggles you can borrow if you want. They’re green, but they don’t have to be for boys.”

“I used to have green hair.”

“That’s cool.”

She nodded.

“Do you want to play Dr. Scientist?”

“No.”

“...Okay.”

Jeremy swam away, going to find his mom at the bar. Nicole was still glad to get some time away from her mom.

Unknown to the children, the conference side of the resort had been hosting multiple meetings discussing the validity of their father’s stations at Oasis Media. Though Jeremy’s dad was a newer employee, he was a hardworking man who quickly gained the company’s trust. Nicole’s dad was a primary supporter of their stock chain.

The meeting where they would find out the company’s decision was at 3:40 pm on the third day, the last meeting of the entire conference. Neither man told his wife that their jobs were on the line until right before they walked in for the meeting, knowing that only one of them would come out with a job. Both wives waited on the

other side of the black double doors and talked quietly, their children behind them somewhere.

Jeremy had his toy plane meant for baths and skipped up and down the long hallway next to the meeting room. Nicole leaned against the cool, tiled wall, looking out of the giant window facing the golf course. Her eyes trailed the grass hills as she thought intently.

Mom, I've decided that dad can't lose his job. If he loses his job, then you will have to get a job, and then we won't be able to go shopping as much. I must say, it would be nice to have you not around as much to tell me bad things about my hair and my face, but I'm sure dad will be able to pick up the slack. I don't think you'd be good at working a job, anyways. That's why we have to make sure that dad doesn't lose his job.

Jeremy wasn't nearly as worried as Nicole was. His dad had been let go from jobs many times. He didn't notice the first few times, he was too young, but once he understood why his dad was sometimes home way more than other times, he started leaving little gifts for his dad under his pillow, like the Hersey's Kisses his mom left in his lunch, to encourage his dad not to lose hope. He hadn't had to do that in a while, though, since his dad was so serious about this job and even started taking Jeremy and his mom to Palm Springs once a year!

Nicole looked too sad to play his plane game with him.

"Why are you so sad?" Jeremy asked.

"Because my dad might lose his job," she replied, still looking out at the green fields outside.

"But then he can just get another job. Are you sad because you won't be able to come to Palm Springs anymore?"

"I hate it here."

"Why?"

She huffed.

"I really like it here. I like it when my mom wears flip-flops and walks around with me and lets me touch all the bugs I find."

Nicole recoiled.

"I've only found a spider once, though. Mostly, they're beetles.

That's spelled b-e-e-t-l-e."

"I know how to spell beetle."

"My mom thought it was spelled with an a. She's so funny. Why are you still sad?"

"If my dad loses his job, we might have to move."

"Moving's fun! You get to pack up all your stuff into brown boxes, and sometimes the truck mover guy will let you sit at his wheel while they pack stuff."

Nicole looked at Jeremy.

Mom, would you love me more if I talked like Jeremy did and always looked at the good part of things?

"What would you do if your dad got the job?" She asked.

Jeremy thought for a moment. "Ummm! I think I would hug him and then tell him I love him and then wait for my mom to hug him and ask her where we're going for dinner even though she already told me we're going to Five Guys since there's not a Five Guys where we live and my dad really likes their burgers."

Nicole smiled. If her dad got the job, her mom would probably nod her head approvingly and snap for Nicole to follow them back to their room since they had to fly out that night.

"I also really like Five Guys," she admitted.

"Me too!" Jeremy held his hand out for a high-five.

After a long pause, Nicole smacked it and smiled at his excited jump. "Maybe we can go to Five Guys together!"

Jeremy's mom called to him from the other side of the hall, "Jerebear, keep it down."

"Mom!" He ran over to tell his mom of his new plan to bring Nicole with them to Five Guys. Nicole knew her mom would never let her eat fast food, especially during the summer, but she wondered if Jeremy's dad was the one to get the job... maybe her parents would be too upset to notice her go with Jeremy and his family.

As Nicole's mom's eyes caught hers, suddenly, Nicole wished for her dad to lose his job just to give her a chance at a soggy, greasy burger.

She could deal with it, she thought, him not having a job. Maybe he would pay attention to her more. Maybe he would pay attention to her less, she didn't know.

Mom, I've decided to hang out with Jeremy, even though his dad might take dad's job. He's nice and fun and talks to me even when I'm doing my brooding thing you always say I do. I want to go to lunch with Jeremy and his family and ask them what they usually do when they come to Palm Springs. And I want to play Dr. Scientist with Jeremy.

Nicole paused. She wasn't sure if what she was thinking was actually how she felt, or if she just knew it would irritate her mom. She looked back at the field outside the window.

Mom, I—

Her stomach grumbled.

I want Five Guys.

Nicole's mom shot a glare at her daughter from down the hall. Nicole couldn't quiet her stomach, but she could stand tall. She would not let whoever comes out of that meeting room with a job dictate whether or not she can hang out with her new friend, Jeremy.

Saudade

Tirza Bustrum

Saudade is a feeling connected to the Portuguese culture's roots. It's present in every song, book, and relationship. It's ingrained in every Portuguese since the Discovery days when seas and boats separated families over the course of centuries. It is impossible to accurately describe saudade as it is a contradiction. It's a happy sadness, a form of longing, a thankful remembrance, a beautiful nostalgia, and a hurtful melancholy. It is a grief and a joy all at the same time. Saudade is the story of the person who sets off to find a new land, the person who stays behind, and the feeling that runs between them. Everyone has been separated from something, someone, or someplace throughout their lives.

For me, it all began with a goodbye I don't remember. My parents packed up my toys, sold my crib, and moved to Portugal. I didn't know I was American until I took my fourth-grade Portuguese National exam, and my citizenship card was pink, not blue like everyone else's. When I asked my parents, they explained that it was a residency card and that I was not, in fact, like all the other kids. The next year they dragged me back to America and placed me in the American public school system for the fall semester. When they recited the Pledge of Allegiance, I cried. They played games I didn't know. That year was the first time I understood saudade.

Saudade can define my life or be a part of it, but I can never be rid of it. Over the course of my life, it has taken many meanings. I have felt unwhole when compared to the people around me. I have felt happy about where my feet are one day and unhappy about it the next. I have lived in a state of rejection because in Portugal, I am too American, and in America, I am too Portuguese. I carry a weight and an emptiness in my heart because something is always missing.

On the other hand, it is impossible to miss something that isn't good. That is why saudade is a happy sadness; my heart is full of the life I have lived while I lament the life I don't get to live. I've gotten

to travel to meet amazing people, and eventually, I learned the Pledge of Allegiance and all the American games and learned to live in America with no hatred in my heart.

As I have talked to third-culture kids (TCKs) like me, who have lived in between cultures, I began to picture the TCK heart in three different ways. The torn heart, the unwhole heart, and the heavy heart. Torn because no matter where I am, I long for the other half of my heart on the other side of the world, and I am unable to connect the two pieces. Unwhole because my heart feels like it has never belonged anywhere and has no place that is truly home. Heavy, because it is so full of everything I've lived and everyone I've loved and will have to leave behind. Fortunately, just like *saudade*, life is a living contradiction, and even though my heart is torn, unwhole and heavy, it is also mendable, full and alive, and I wouldn't trade it for any other heart.

When the sad parts of *saudade* overpower the happy ones, I like to remember that my heart, feelings, and thoughts don't belong to me, just like I don't fully belong to any part of the world. Our hearts, our world, and our lives belong to God, and his authority and care are over all things. It doesn't matter if I feel like my feet are in the wrong place because God has placed me exactly where my feet need to be. Feeling *saudade* doesn't define me because God is everywhere, whether in the highest peak or the deepest ocean. I am not alone in this life; my home is wherever God places me, even when I don't fully belong. When I find myself torn between two countries, stuck between wanting to stay and wanting to go, afraid of everything that might happen once I move away from home, I find comfort in knowing that God does not change when I do. He is the same God that has guided me and loved me all this time, and he will continue to do the same no matter where I go.

The Laundromat

Samantha N. Villanueva

The laundromat's bright fluorescent lights nearly blinded Allison as she walked in. The small room had barely any occupants. There was a homeless man sitting on the bench in front of the dryers, a middle-aged woman at the washing machines, and a boy about her age at the vending machine.

Allison kept her eyes down and walked over to the washers. She plopped her basket of dirty clothes on the bench and filled the machine with detergent and fabric softener. As she piled her clothes into the washer, the hairs on Allison's neck tingled. She shut the washer door, put in her money, and glanced over her shoulder.

Her eyes met the young man across the room, who stared back at her, mid-sip of his soda. He looked surprised but lowered his drink. He smiled, crinkling his dark brown eyes, and waved back at her. Allison flushed but waved back. A washing machine buzzed. The boy glanced at the machine, tossed the can into the trash, and approached.

Allison quickly sat on the bench, watching her clothes swirl and tumble with soap and water. The boy opened a washing machine door next to Allison's and pulled out bedsheets and a comforter, dumping them into his basket.

"Hey."

Allison jumped, whipping her head to the boy. He smiled.

"Hi."

"You're in Professor Richard's class, right?"

She nodded.

"Ah, thought I recognized you!" he laughed. "I'm Wally."

"Allison," she replied, then paused before letting out a small, nervous laugh. "I'm sorry, but I've never heard anyone named 'Wally' before."

He shrugged and ran a hand through his tousled brown hair.

“It’s short for ‘Wallace.’ I was named after my great-great-great grandfather who died in the Civil War.”

Allison became flustered. “Oh, God, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disrespect you or—”

Wally let out a boisterous laugh. “I’m kidding. I don’t have a grandpa who died in a war. My parents are just huge *Wallace & Gromit* fans.”

“Oh.” Allison watched her clothes rotate in the washer, trying to calm her racing heart, yet she managed a small smile. “That was mean of you.”

Wally snickered and picked up his basket of wet fabrics. “Yeah, well, it’s funny seeing people’s reactions. Especially when they’re as cute as you.”

Allison fiddled with a stray strand of her blonde hair. “Th-Thank you?”

Wally smiled. He quickly turned on his heel and walked across the room to the dryers.

Allison returned to scrolling on her phone, her cheeks burning and her heart hammering in her chest. She occasionally glanced over her shoulder at Wally, who would also meet her gaze with a smile. Despite herself, she smiled back. She promised to talk to the boy in class the next day.

Devore Road

Zipporah Marse

I grew up in the High Desert of Southern California—named that way because the cities up here are nearly 3,000 feet above sea level, and when you get up here, you can’t look in a single direction without noticing a firmly planted Joshua tree sprouting from the dirt. Although I have never been far away from the rest of Southern California—making the trek down the Cajon Pass is referred to as going “down the hill”—I believe being raised in such a particular climate has given me a certain affinity to the beauty of the desert. I can hardly drive the stretch of the 15 freeway that leads to Barstow without being distracted by the magnificent vastness of the terrain around me. I also can’t help but get a swell of pride whenever someone mentions Roy Rogers around me, and I get to tell them that Roy Rogers and Dale Evens lived in my town of Apple Valley and are a big reason why it exists today—and why I have to drive on Happy Trails Highway to get to the grocery store.

I love where I live, though when I was a teenager and couldn’t make the trek down the hill myself, I found it boring. I always related to complaints of teenagers living in small towns across America. I, too, only had Walmart parking lots and random fields to loiter in. Except when I got someone to drive the 35 minutes to the nearest IMAX theater or bougie outdoor mall, of course. Now that I’m an adult, I can appreciate the nature of the high desert without being confined to it, and I regularly drive away from it to LA or the beach or Riverside, for whatever reason. Going to and fro, up and down the hill, has made me numb to the privilege of seeing the mountains of Cajon Pass. It’s never until I’m with someone who’s never seen the rising peaks and mismatched greenery of these mountains colliding together that I remember how magnificent the creation is.

At the bottom of the Pass, the freeway forks off into the 215 and the rest of the 15 freeway. Stay to the left, you go west and unlock

Fontana, Rancho Cucamonga, and Ontario. Stay right, and you go straight towards Colton and, eventually, Riverside. Growing up, I don't think I was aware that there was a 215, everything I ever went to was off the 15. Now that I go to school in Riverside, I find I'm staying right on that interchange far more often than I have ever stayed left. Other than finally being behind the wheel of the car myself, that is the main change between how I experienced the Pass as an adolescent and now as a young adult. I go straight.

The Pass is known for its traffic. Many people who live in the High Desert commute down the hill to work, so going down in the morning and back in the afternoon sucks. Many people also like to get dinner down the hill, so going down there in the evenings also sucks. More than anything, the Cajon Pass is how the majority of Southern California gets to Vegas. So, driving up on a Friday or down on a Sunday, you get caught in Vegas traffic. I'm very familiar with Vegas traffic, as it's exactly what I get caught in every single time I try to go home from school on the weekend. It can get maddening, especially if there's construction or a crash somewhere, and there's only so much a podcast or finely tuned Spotify playlist can do for me.

Sometimes, if you're a Google Maps user like my mom, while you're on your way home, your phone will tell you to get off the freeway and take Cajon Boulevard—or, its more famous name, Route 66. Just like in the movie *Cars* (I love bringing that up), Route 66 follows the main freeway, but it's one lane takes many more twists and turns before eventually meeting back up with its older sibling. I have no idea if taking Route 66 during traffic saves time or not since it always feels just as backed up, but it offers me something I desperately need during my commute: A change in scenery. When taking Route 66, you get so much closer to the mountains. You drive right up to them like they're big, scary animals, and you soar by. Unless you're stuck behind one of the semis that also like to take Route 66.

For a while, I only took Route 66 if the traffic was so bad that I was bored out of my mind and would take anything, but soon, I

started taking Route 66 just because I could. With no traffic, it added less than ten minutes to my drive and gave me a break from the cars on the freeway. Once I was comfortable with that ten-minute addition, I eventually learned—and began liberally using—another one.

If you know about the town of Devore, you can assume what the Devore Road exit leads to. If not, let me explain.

Devore is technically a neighborhood in the city of San Bernadino but considers itself a town. A rural town, technically. Along the singular street that goes in and out of the place, signs at both entrances say, “WELCOME TO DEVORE,” and under that, say, “Rural living at its finest.” There is also a sign somewhere in there that displays the Devore population at 900. I don’t know much about rural living, having only lived in Apple Valley my whole life, but when I drive the winding, tree-covered, one-lane road through Devore, I believe that it is, in fact, rural living at its finest.

Driving through Devore transports me into another realm. Suddenly, I’m not in California, driving either home or to school, I’m somewhere *rural*. I’m in the middle of nowhere, searching for solace in the random roadside mom-and-pop shop that always has a child-manned lemonade stand outside of it. I’m in the eighties or nineties, no phone or GPS, using the road signs to find my way around. I’m off the grid. I’m safe. I have no idea how somewhere so distinctly not SoCal can exist right at the bottom of the commuter-heavy 15 freeway.

Last time it rained, months ago at this point, I drove through Devore, hoping my windshield wipers could keep up with the downpour. As I looked around at the moist dirt under the dripping trees, I felt myself shed a tear. I was alone, so I had too much space to be embarrassed. I just enjoyed my surroundings. In that moment, I understood the importance of a desert oasis. The High Desert, Apple Valley, Fontana, Riverside; there is a world outside of these places, they’re not all that is. There are these little pockets of people living a completely different—or maybe eerily similar—life to me. Call it a

late take on empathy, but this idea blows my mind every time I take my detour through Devore, my detour through a different life as I get back to mine.

It really does feel like an escape, and I find myself often taking purposeful long detours on my drives. I need a change, I need to see something I wouldn't otherwise see, I need a break from getting in the fastest lane on the freeway to get to my destination the quickest I can, I need to let go and let myself breathe in the pine smell of Devore. I love you, Devore, and your extremely fine rural living. I hope to join you someday or at least live somewhere that reminds me of you.

Goodbye, Green-Eyed Monster

Rylee Nyberg

I knew you were ready the day we said goodbye. I could see it on your sweet little face. Those big green eyes didn't shine the same as you laid your head down so sweetly on that cold metal table. And when I held you in my arms, I could feel the way you melted into me. You used to climb onto my shoulder and perch yourself there like a parrot. This time, you didn't. You were so warm, so soft, and I could feel you getting weaker with every breath. I knew you were in pain, and I couldn't stand to see you suffer. Just know, sweet boy, we were ready to do whatever it would have taken to save you.

So, when they told me your little kidneys were failing, the world stopped turning. I don't think I've ever felt so helpless. In an instant, my heart was shattered into a million pieces. I didn't want to believe it.

In the days leading up to that moment, I had this ever-present feeling that this could be it. I just knew you were in pain, and all I wanted was to take it away from you. When you spent the night on my bed, snuggling against my side, my heart sank. You hadn't done that since you were a kitten. I prayed and wished and hoped with every part of me that this gut feeling of mine would be wrong, that this would prove to be an easy fix, and that we'd get to bring you back home, but somehow, as I laid there with you in my arms, I knew this was goodbye. I knew it was inevitable.

I was so thankful I got to hold you as you took your final breaths. It was the one thing I prayed for. I wanted to be with you in those final moments, even though it was the worst thing I've ever had to do. I can't help but wonder if you were scared; I know I was. But I also know you felt safe with us because you purred and purred until your little heart stopped, and you laid your head in my lap and breathed your last.

It was the hardest thing I've ever done, walking out of that vet's

office without you, watching as they carried you away. When they took you from me, it broke me completely. You looked so peaceful, so content; it was like you were only sleeping. I spent the next week in total denial. I couldn't believe you were gone. I still can't.

Christmas came and went, and I remember how much you loved to "help" us decorate the tree. We couldn't put up a single ornament without you testing to see just how much force it would take to knock them off the tree. And then you'd get into the ribbons and wrapping paper and tear at the corners of all the presents. It was like you needed to be the first to unwrap all the gifts. You were always meddling, always getting into things you shouldn't. I can't believe how much I miss the mischief you'd cause.

You loved the fireplace, too. I remember how you used to cuddle with Shelby in front of the warm flames. Even as she got to be so old and frail, you'd lay on top of that dog and purr and knead till she was sick of it. I hope you're snuggling with Shelby in heaven. I'm sure she's happy to see you again.

I can't help but feel like something's missing when I sit on the couch to eat. I miss how you'd pester and knock the fork out of my hand, and how you'd constantly meow to get our attention. I couldn't be on my computer for more than two minutes before you'd invite yourself to lie on the keyboard. I miss the way you'd let me pick you up and pet you, and how you'd want me to hold you upside down. You were the silliest, most lovable cat ever, and you've left a hole in my heart that I don't think anyone, or anything, will ever be able to fill.

I miss how you'd follow me to the bathroom, and how you'd roll over like a puppy. No cat has ever loved belly rubs as much as you did, and I miss how soft your tummy was. I miss your silly bug-eyed stare, and the way you'd play with the balloons, and jump on the dinner table, and run amok around the house. I never thought I'd miss all the messes, spilled drinks, and shredded cardboard, but it's just too quiet without you.

In brief moments, I catch myself looking for you. I keep

forgetting you're not coming back. I see you in shadows and in the silhouette of your brother. He looks for you now, too. I think he understands now that you're not coming back. I think he knew it before we did.

You were so soft, so sweet, so mischievous. But you were cute enough to get away with anything, and you knew it. You were wicked smart. I've never seen another cat open so many doors, turn on so many faucets, weasel into so many nooks and crannies, or steal so much food. I don't think it's possible for another cat to love anything as much as you loved when I'd sweep you up with the broom and dustpan. You were the clingiest little baby, and you knew exactly how to get our attention. It was impossible to sit on the couch without you immediately appearing on someone's lap. I think I miss your cuddles more than anything.

Eight years wasn't nearly enough time with you, my sweet, sweet bubbas. You were still a baby to me. I still remember how you laid on my chest when we brought you home the first time. You fit in the palm of my hands back then; who would've thought you'd grow to be one of the biggest cats we've ever had? You always had the biggest eyes and the goofiest stare. I only wish we'd gotten longer with you, baby boy, but there's no one I can be angry with. Nothing I can say or do will change the fact that you're gone, but I have peace knowing I got to say goodbye. There was really nothing we could do. I'm just devastated. Yes, life goes on, but why does it have to move so painfully fast? I miss you. You were everything to me. I miss you so much it steals my breath. I only wish there was more I could have done to ease your pain in those last few days. Believe me when I say we really did try everything. We weren't gonna give up on you.

My green-eyed monster, my little swamp potato, my favorite weirdo, I hope you know how deeply you were loved.

I miss you so much, my sweet boy. I'm grateful for every second I got to spend loving you.

I Love Dreams

Ryan Reyes

2025 Creative Writing Prose Award - Honorable Mention

It was cold. The world, a blur from the rain. David awoke in a place that he was quite familiar with. It was the old orchard that he used to pass all the time in high school. He sat up in his bed. No matter how many times he had this dream, the feeling of the rain was always bitter. David surveyed the surroundings, but as usual, there was nothing among the cherry trees. He ventured into the tree line, figuring it better to be among the inviting smell of cherries rather than the rain.

He pushed through the thick branches. David contemplated his dream; if it were similar to the other he'd been having, then she would be somewhere warm. He walked blindly, hoping his feet would carry him to his promised land. His feet sloshed in the rain puddles and mud of the orchard soil as he tried to make himself small. He hoped it would bring comfort to his body, but it did not. As David grew tired of his trek, he stumbled and fell face-first. However, he hit not the muddy soil but a hard surface. The surface was cold, but it was different cold than that of the storm. Regardless of the soreness of his face, he was grateful not to be covered in muck.

As David gathered to his knees, he took in his surroundings—the orchard was gone. The rows of cherry trees were replaced with a hallway. It was familiar, reminiscent of the one from his high school, but it certainly wasn't natural. The hallway from his alma mater certainly didn't look as if it would go on forever in either direction. Before he could think about why his dream picked this location, He felt a tap on his shoulder. It was a familiar tap. David's heart rate spiked as he whipped around to find himself face-to-face with a woman extending a helping hand. The sight of the woman made his body tense. She appeared to be talking to him, but her voice was inaudible. After a few moments of staring at her, David finally took

her hand and let himself be helped up. Everything about her was just as he remembered. She had pale skin with deep brown hair that was cut short and bleached at the tips. On her left wrist was an expensive digital watch, which was funny, as it contrasted with the baggy sweater that looked two sizes too big and sweats that made her look like the most comfortable woman in the world. It saddened him to think that this would always be how she looked in his memories. Unable to age and grow with him. Despite all of that, she was still as beautiful as David remembered. The girl that changed his life.

Looking back to the hallway, it shimmered and shifted. David knew that this memory would soon be over, and he would need to find her again—find Amy again out in the orchards. Every passing day grew longer in anticipation of seeing her in his dreams. He needed to make them last. David attempted to clear his mind and focus on the memory of their first meeting, the details of the hallway, anything to make the surroundings more *real*. However, the effort was in vain, as the hallway gave way to a white void. Devoid of any character except for himself, Amy, and a door. The girl seemed unbothered by the sudden change of environment and was carrying on with her muted conversation, though that was soon interrupted by something that attracted her attention. When she turned back to him, she had a sheepish smile and a blush across her face. Even though her voice couldn't reach him, he could tell that Amy was talking over herself before she abruptly stopped and ran through the solitary door.

David feared that this would be the end of his dream, that he would need to face another day of high school. Where no one understands how much she meant to him. Where almost no one talks about her anymore, not even those she used to call friends. He just needed more time, and with those fears fueling him, David ran through the door.

The rain pelted his face again as David passed through the doorway. He found himself back in the cherry orchard. Looking back to where he had come from, the door and the white void were

nowhere in sight; all that was there were just rows unending of trees. The dreams always seemed to bring him back here. To be back in the godforsaken orchard frustrated him, but he trudged on through the muck and bramble. It did not take long before he knew where to go. David could see through the heavy rain a silhouette of Amy passing through the underwood, and followed that until he was led to a metal door that stood slightly ajar.

Sticking his head through the small opening of the door, David could see the memory of a bustling diner. The furniture's colors were constantly changing—every blink of an eye led to a new floor plan. It was strange. All of them felt right, but none of them were how he remembered the old diner. It didn't matter, however, as he saw Amy sitting at the countertop. This was supposed to be their first date. David pushed the door fully open to the sound of a bell and briskly made his way over to Amy as she stared at the menu. She was a ball of tensed muscle and nervous energy. She had already ordered herself a milkshake but hadn't touched it as her mind was elsewhere and didn't notice his approach.

“Sorry for being late. I hope you weren't here for too long?”

The voice that left his body sounded happier than his regular voice as if more full of life. The sound of his voice caused Amy to jump in her seat. Her head turned instantly to face him, her annoyance melting to a soft blush. Her mouth opened, but her voice sounded muffled, as if it were miles away. It didn't matter though; just being in her presence was enough for him. Eventually, two sets of plates slid in front of them despite never ordering. They were the usuals that Amy and David would order every time they came to *Joey's*. Their appearance, however, perplexed David, as they were different from everything else in these dreams. They were unchanging, with no signs of shimmering.

As David went to grab the burger from the plate, he saw that his hand had completely passed through it. It was a strange sensation to have his hand completely pass through something. David barely had enough time to ponder why he was able to phase through his burger

before he fell through the floor of the diner into an inky void.

The darkness that shrouded his vision came to life with a loud crack of thunder and a flash of lightning. David was freefalling in the heavy rain, miles above the ground, plummeting at incredible speeds. David braced for the worst as he fell straight into one of the cherry trees, but the pain never came.

He slowly opened his eyes to find himself seated in one of the plastic chairs, found outside the principal's office. David was in the middle of a memory of school—strange, as he didn't have any fond memories of school. He was just one of the sophomores at Independence High who would get into fights with the upperclassmen over stupid reasons. For him to have a memory of him waiting for the principal, and for it to be related to Amy in some way made David wish he had crashed into those cherry trees. David looked up at the digital clock on the main office wall and saw the date, insignificant to any other man, but one burned into every crevice of his mind. If every memory were to leave David, that day would still haunt him. It was February 29, 2018—a vibration came from his jeans. David's hand trembled as he reached for his iPhone. A new message from Amy's mom was emblazoned on the screen.

Did Amy make it to school?

Lifting his head from his phone, David found himself in his old house. It was dark and devoid of color. Before him stood his mother, who looked at him as though he was dying fire. Her eyes held silent concern. His mom trembled slightly, speaking to David once more but never truly reaching him. She didn't need to, as this memory was as clear as day to him. Amy's mom had called, informing his mom that Amy was in a car accident. The doctors weren't sure if she was going to make it to the next week. David tried to leave and head for the door, to try and beat the clock, but with every step, the door appeared farther and farther away. David sprinted after it in the hope that he could close the ever-growing distance. Just when he was about to reach the doorknob, within a blink, he was back in the orchard.

The storm was raging above, thunder was rolling in hard, and no minute went by without lightning. This was the worst storm ever seen in this version of the orchard. Something about tonight's dream was different than the ones in the past. David decided to start walking again, hoping that a new hint would appear to lead him to his next memory—his last memory. It did not take long before he noticed a figure in the distance by a tree that stood out from the rest. He trudged through the thick mud, and as he approached, he saw that the figure looked like him. It was the lithe and lonely kid that was David Vienna, who was lost, wandering amongst his memories.

“Are you ready to face her again?”

The echo of his voice was hollow. The look-a-like was nothing more than a shell. Every night when he would eventually come to this moment, it was always the same song and dance. He had hoped to have more time with her, but all dreams must end.

“Yes, I need to see her again.”

The reflection nods to David as he steps aside. Embedded in the large tree was a carved wooden door with a heart in the center that surrounded a date—3/5/2018. Moving past his reflection and shifting through the branches of the giant cherry tree, David opens the carved door to reveal a small white room. It had all led to this. It usually did—every time he had this go around, the world would always bring him to this point at the end. The sound of an electronic beep broke the silence of the room—it came from a little monitor next to Amy's bed. David sat down in the sterile and uncomfortable chair that the room provided and looked over the face of his girlfriend. She was pale—she had lost a lot of blood in the accident. It should have been a sign, but he was young. When she had finally registered that he was there, her face tried its best to contort into a smile. It looked painful, but David knew she was doing it more for herself than for him.

Something soft and cold wrapped around his hand. It was barely a feeling. Yet a feeling David was all too familiar with, he reciprocated Amy's faint grip. Her smile was like that of a sunset,

vibrant right before the end. It was one of the most beautiful events that he had ever witnessed, but this left him hollow. Everything in his life since had been in comparison to this smile. David feared what it would mean when something eventually eclipses that beauty. Will he remember her smile?

“David, you know that I love you.”

It was the first time her voice rang out. That was never the case. To David, his dreams were always a silent walk through memory lane. His eyes darted to her as the memory of those words still lingered at every waking moment in his mind—now, even sleep couldn’t shield him from it.

“...Yes, Amy, I know you do.”

The words were caught in his throat; every word was like bile, and it made him nauseous as he knew what was next.

“Then live. You never failed me, David, so don’t start now.”

“How am I supposed to live when you’re all I’ve ever known.”

There was silence between the two of them. She looked at him with a softness that was ill-befitting, someone who was slowly and painfully dying. Her eyes were looking for something in his. It was strange, as David never remembered her doing that.

“Live knowing that we will see each other again... and when I see you in the next life over, I want to hear the life that you lived for the both of us.”

His body grew tense from her words. This was moving beyond the territory of memories. This Amy seemed so different from the one in all his previous dreams. In the past, they all repeated what David remembered her saying at the time, but this was the first time any of them said something original—something that Amy would say. A smile crept onto his face as he finally had the chance to say something to her.

“Rest easy, Amy. You brought me joy for the short time that you and I were together. You gave me courage and companionship. For that, I am eternally grateful to have been your listening ear and your boyfriend. I am glad you couldn’t stay away even for a little bit, as I

get to say this, unlike the first time. Goodbye Amy, I love you.”

David’s eyes fluttered open as he awoke. He was staring at the ceiling as tears streamed from his eyes. What could he say? He loves dreams.

The Purest Form of Love

Sarah Murphy

I sank into a bench at Citrus State Park, my prayer journal in my lap, and looked up. Orange groves surrounded me. Towering palm trees dotted the blue sky. The green in their leaves was so prominent, and the sweet aroma of oranges filled the air. I could hear the twittering of birds as they chased each other, flying from tree to tree. Seeing these birds reminded me of my grandma, who deeply loved nature. She taught me the names of the birds when I was a child. We spent countless days in her garden together, picking flowers to make beautiful bouquets and naming every living creature that scurried by. I sat alone in a different garden only a few months ago, behind my grandma's hospice home. It was butterfly season at the time. There was a flurry of vibrant colors as the butterflies darted from flower to flower, each reminding me of my grandma and her dwindling time left on earth.

Suddenly, the rustling of the pages sitting on my lap brought me back to the present. I began writing in my prayer journal. I was honest with God about how I felt in that moment: burdened by my humanity. I was oddly aware of how my grandma was in heaven with the Lord, experiencing Him and the pure, unfiltered beauty of His Creation, but my own body bound me to earth, and it felt so heavy.

To ease this feeling, I wrote down a part of Psalm 103: "As for man, his days are like grass—/ he blooms like a flower of the field; when the wind passes over it, it vanishes / and its place is no longer known." Although the time until I see my grandma again feels unbearably long, my days will vanish like a blade of grass, and then I will get to spend eternity with her. Until then, I will live each day as she taught me: in constant awe of the beauty that surrounds me. I will name each bird that flies by and decorate my home with beautiful flower bouquets.

I know that at the end of my life, I will think of my grandma with

anticipation of seeing her again so soon. I reflected on her love for me while she was still living. It was the purest form of love—in the way that a grandma ought to love her grandchild. With this thought, I wrote down my concluding sentence: “I will love my children and grandchildren in the way that she loved me.”

Overboard

Alayna Winans

The black waves thrash against the ship. Pounding like an insistent thief, begging to be let inside. I steer in vain as the wind tugs the sails in its own twisted direction. I have done much for my crew, led them through tumult and turmoil, but I fear my efforts will amount to nothing. The threatening crack of thunder mocks my inability to save my men.

The heavy liquid drains down my brow, blurring my eyes with its thick, sticky nature in an attempt to mask my vision with splashes of hopelessness, weighing me down deeper into the deck. The boat creaks under the pressure of the rain, taunting me with its heavy load. Laughing. Louder and heavier with every passing moment. I know well enough that the sails will hold from the wind, but the hull will never last against the endless threats of the deluge. It will break under pressure. The only hope is to lighten its load.

Yes! That's it. I must lighten the load. That will save them. I scavenge the ship, my eyes darting from port to starboard, searching for that which goes unneeded. That which can be forgotten. I come across a crate of oranges that I know are close to rotting and order the men to toss them overboard. They hesitate, then concede, but it is not enough; the rain drags us down deeper. My eyes land on the barrels of gunpowder, which I motion to be cast off. My crew questions why, trying to find a reason to hold on to their precious black dust. How could they be so blind to its heavy load? But I scream above the laughter of the rain for its removal.

This takes a weight off the hull, though I know it will not contend with the level of the clotting ink that has latched onto the floor, growing higher with my isolated search for a solution. I must relieve the ship of more to catch up. I spot a crate of apples alongside one of flour and another of meat. All rotting from the downpour of mildew, which I command to be thrown. The questioning of the

crew begins to rise, unaware of the water level, imitating their increasing remarks, but I see the truth.

I remember a crate of gold that was purged from an island off the northern coast, which I demand to be forgotten into the sea, but their insolence halts my progress, the water grasping their feet in place. *To doubt me!* I know I must take matters into my own hands. I leave the wheel and begin to unload the ship myself. The rain attempts to drag me down, but I do not succumb. I throw the barrels over despite the protests. Why can they not see? Have they gone mad? I am grabbed by one of my men, whose hand weighs me down further. I push him away, but he slips and falls into the side of a staircase, splitting open his skull. His body flows with the same heavy liquid that pulls the ship into the sea, pouring out across the ship. In desperation, I know what I must do.

There is no way I can unload the ship fast enough to keep it afloat. The falling liquid weighs heavier than any solid source I can remove. But with fewer bodies weighing it down—they must be quite heavy, after all. Too lazy to help. Too weighed down by doubt. And so very full of that heavy liquid. A liquid that now stretches across the ship, pulling it down. The sailor not even attempting to drain it over the side.

I raise my pistol at the man who dared defy me and shoot him, the bullet piercing his chest. I grab the body and toss it over before its dense outpour can weigh down the hull any further. The crowd is stunned by my brilliance. They too must already feel the ship lightning. I aim at another and take the shot. But before I can lighten the ship of its heavy weight, I am grabbed by the men. I plead with them to see what they must do to survive. Lighten themselves of the heavy liquid inside. But they pull me to the edge.

I am thrown from the creaking wood and land in the cold depths. Its thick waves curl around me and drag me down. Filling my pores and darkening my vision. How I tried to save them. But might I still be the hero after all? Maybe my weight was enough. I drift off, lowering into the thick darkness. And though I may be forgotten like

the rotting oranges and barrels of gunpowder, the memory of my sacrifice will live on in the rain, knowing that it failed to sink my crew. I, the Sailor's Savior, am proud of my sacrifice.

The Cabin on Wendigo River

Jack Brown | ΣΤΔ

Manitoba was always cold in winter, but I'd never really understood the meaning of the word "freezing" until I'd been out there myself. We hardly even knew what it meant to be chilly until the moment we hopped off Ted's plane onto the sleet-covered landing strip. What happened in the following week taught me to fear the hunger that gnawed at our insides far more than the icy wind clawing our faces.

The cabin was about three miles out from the airstrip but getting there meant hiking through the forest. Ted knew the way, but between the whiskey in his flask and the sea of black spruce trees blotting out the horizon, I wasn't sure we'd make it. I was about ready to snatch the map from his hands when we found the river. The crystalline water wound through the dense tree line, cutting a path for us. Kyle nearly fell in twice, but Matt and I managed to grab hold of his backpack and keep him steady. We laughed it off, trying to ignore the water seeping into our boots. Matt finished an entire bag of trail mix I'd packed for the three of us, but I decided not to give him a hard time about it. We marched along the riverbank until the rhythmic crunch of snow beneath our boots became nothing but white noise.

The river led us through the forest until it opened into an Arctic muskeg. There, in a patch of solid earth, sat a decrepit log cabin. A stone chimney jutted from its weathered roof. Wood planks barricaded the door and windows shut. According to Ted, they were there to keep the animals out whenever the place was empty. Whoever stayed there was responsible for tearing it open when they arrived and sealing it back up when they left.

"Here she is! Your own little home-away-from-home," Ted announced, stomping the snow from his boots on the rickety deck.

By the time we had reached the first step, he was working away

with the crowbar from his pack. The cabin shuddered as he pried the boards loose from the doorframe. Matt and I narrowly dodged the falling icicles shaken loose from the patio cover.

“Hey, watch it!” Matt snapped.

Kyle chuckled as Ted sent another gnarled plank sailing across the deck. “Relax, man. The sooner he’s done the sooner we get inside.”

“I know, I know. I’m just not big on getting skewered today.” Matt shifted the backpack on his shoulder. He flinched whenever Ted snapped a board off the door.

“Can I have one of those Slim Jims you brought?” Kyle reached for Matt’s bag and unzipped one of the bulging pockets.

“What? No. Eat your own.” He scowled, brushing Kyle’s hand away.

“You two won’t be seeing next week if you keep bickering like that,” Ted scoffed, prying off the last board and casting it aside.

When he flung the door open, the musty scent of rotting wood wafted from inside. He heaved a contented sigh and strode into the dark interior.

The entrance led straight into the kitchen. A large wooden table took up most of the space in the center. It made the room seem small by comparison. Ted squeezed past the old iron stove and tossed a log onto the empty fireplace across the room. A Remington 870 hung crooked over the mantle.

Kyle beelined for the composting toilet the moment he saw it. Matt shimmied up the ladder into the loft above it, disappearing over the ledge without a word.

Ted poured lighter fluid over the log. “Some friends you got there, Danny.”

“They’re just tired from the walk.” I shook off my pack and laid it on the table.

With the scritch of the matchbox, the log burst into flames. Ted wobbled to his feet and rubbed his hands together in front of the crackling hearth. “Think that wilderness survival merit badge’ll be

worth all this?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Ted unscrewed the lid of his flask and threw back a shot. “Well, this place has a history of getting to people. Even the natives used to steer clear of it back in the day. Thought it was cursed from all the tribes that went savage in those woods. Evil spirits and whatnot. What, you thought they just pulled the river’s name out of a hat or something?”

“You waited until now to mention this? Did you even tell our parents when they signed us up?”

“Listen, son. Would you pay a guy like me to dump your seventeen-year-old and his squirrely friends out in a frostbitten hellscape?”

“No.”

“Then why would I shoot my business in the foot by telling ‘em an old ghost story?”

I stared at the grizzled pilot in disbelief.

“Relax,” Ted continued, starting for the door. “You’ll have enough food to last you till Friday.”

“What if we run out?”

Ted gestured to the shotgun above the fireplace. “Use your imagination.”

He slammed the door shut, leaving me in stunned silence. Kyle emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later and climbed into the loft. I grabbed my bag and followed him up, figuring unpacking would distract me from Ted’s cryptic rambling.

The loft was pretty spacious, even with the slanted ceiling formed by the roof right above our heads. We found Matt curled up in his sleeping bag in the corner cot.

It took about an hour for us to unpack. Most of the extra clothes and blankets were stuffed in my backpack. Matt woke up at one point to unload the cooking supplies and snacks from his bags. Kyle had stocked up on board games, so we ended up playing Uno until nightfall.

The wind's dissonant howls joined the river's muffled gushing in lulling me to sleep that night. The sounds might've terrified a city kid like Matt, but not me. Growing up in the mountains taught me to respect the quiet madness of the wilderness. Still, the chill of the winter evening penetrated my thoughts and entered my bones. I shoved my clammy hands under my armpits and rolled over in my cot. I could have sworn I heard cabinets opening and closing down in the kitchen at around three in the morning, but I chose not to think about it too hard.

We set out on our first hike Tuesday morning, laying snares in the underbrush near burrows we found along the trail. We assigned cabin duties when we got back. Kyle volunteered to chop firewood if I opted to check the traps every day, leaving Matt the task of cutting a three-foot hole in the frozen river for clean water with the flimsy little ice saw we found. He wasn't terribly thrilled, but he agreed to do it.

Our snares bagged us a few rabbits when I checked the traps on Wednesday. Matt and I used the bucket of river water he brought in to boil them into a stew. We almost ran out of firewood, though. Kyle snoozed his alarm instead of dragging himself out of bed like the rest of us. He mentioned seeing Matt rummaging around in the kitchen the night before when we were out splitting logs.

"He must've had a serious case of the munchies, man. He emptied like five whole snack bags." Kyle laughed.

"Think he's okay?"

"Yeah, I get 'em all the time."

The bitter aroma of coffee woke me up Thursday morning. Light streamed through the cracks in the boarded windows. After dressing, I slid down the ladder to find a pot boiling over the fire. Kyle sat at the table with a steaming mug in his hands.

"Morning!"

"Hey." I glanced around. "Where's Matt?"

Kyle shrugged and sipped his coffee. "No clue. Haven't seen him."

“Did you check outside?” I said, filling my thermos to the brim with the molten dark liquid.

“Nope.”

“You’re killing me, man.” I sighed, slipping out the front door.

Ice shards crackled beneath my feet as I stepped out onto the deck. The forest around the cabin was covered in a fresh blanket of snow. My eyes stung looking at the powder under the morning sun. Despite the temporary blindness, I noticed snowshoe prints trailing toward the river.

I found Matt sitting on the bank, staring out into the ocean of trees. He looked thin, even with the two layers beneath his parka.

“You alright?” I asked upon reaching the bank.

“Kyle didn’t bring the extra food,” he muttered. His eyes remained fixed on the forest ahead.

“What?”

“He didn’t bring it. I checked.”

“Wasn’t that your job?”

“Yeah, but didn’t you tell him to bring more just in case?”

I took a swig of coffee. Warmth radiated through my body as it slid down my throat. “I did.”

“Well, he didn’t...” Matt trailed off as his eyes swiveled to the thermos in my hands. “Can I have some?”

I extended it to him. He gulped down about half of its contents, leaving me about a quarter of what was left. I didn’t have enough energy to fight him over it.

“Thanks,” he said, wiping his cracked lips.

“Don’t mention it. And don’t worry about the food thing. Ted will be back.”

“Yeah...” Matt turned his attention back to the scenery.

I stood next to him for a few minutes, listening to the echoes of birds chirping in distant branches, before trekking back to the cabin.

Surprisingly, Kyle busied himself chopping firewood while I was gone. He had amassed a large stack of splintered logs by the time I trudged up behind him.

“Find Matt?” He lodged the hatchet in the snow and wiped his brow.

“Spaced out by the river. Says you didn’t pack the extra food.”

“I put it with all the stuff he brought. I’m not an idiot.”

“Not according to him, I guess.”

“You’re free to check. I’ve got nothing to hide.”

I searched the kitchen cupboards where we stashed the food, but I couldn’t find any items from Kyle’s bring-it list. I called him inside to show me where he put the stuff, but he couldn’t find it either. That was about when Matt barged into the cabin, shivering. He was drenched from head to toe, save for his parka. Frost clung to the tips of his curly brown locks.

I rushed to him. “Matt! What the hell happened?”

Kyle scurried into the loft and tossed blankets and extra clothes down onto the table. I planted Matt in front of the fire and helped him peel off his partially frozen clothes. He was changed and swaddled in minutes.

“What’s wrong with you?” Kyle scolded. “You could’ve died!”

“It... told me to...” Matt jittered. He refused to say anything else. Every time we’d ask, he’d just lick his chops and stare off into nothingness.

Thursday and Friday blurred together as Kyle and I rotated between the usual housekeeping tasks while Matt recovered. Despite rationing our supplies, the food vanished overnight. Kyle and I would take stock in the mornings before heading out, but when we returned in the evenings, we’d find entire cabinets emptied. We assumed Matt was the culprit, considering he had the cabin to himself most of the day, but we were never quite sure. He lost so much weight that we could see his ribcage. Blue veins throbbed beneath his greying skin. His spine bulged beneath the pale flesh between his shoulder blades. It was getting hard to even recognize him.

When Saturday morning came, the three of us packed our things and waited on the porch for Ted’s plane to come soaring over the

trees. We watched the sun peak through the morning mist and vaporize the ice crystals drifting in the wind. We sat on those steps listening to the branches rustling till noon, but the only thing in the sky was the occasional turkey vulture.

“Think he forgot us?” Kyle smirked, elbowing my arm.

I shot him a scornful look. His smile melted as he tilted his head back toward the sky.

“We don’t have any more food,” Matt murmured.

“Well, whose fault is that, Matt?” Kyle jabbed.

“Yours. You didn’t bring your share.”

“I did! Maybe if you weren’t so busy stuffing your face, you’d remember that.”

“Shut it!” I barked. “Ted’s coming. He’s just late.”

“Whatever, man. Let me know if he shows up.” Kyle got up and slammed the cabin door shut. A few silent minutes passed before Matt spoke again.

“I found ammo for the gun.”

“Really? How many shots?”

“One.”

“Better make it count, I guess. I’ll take Kyle out hunting.”

“No. I’ll go with him.”

“You sure you’re feeling up to it?”

“Yeah. I owe you for looking after me.”

Matt stood and stretched his back. His spine crackled as he leaned backward. He looked taller than before, but you could never tell with all his slouching.

Kyle wasn’t fond of the plan, but he laced up his boots and grabbed a skinning knife from the kitchen all the same. Matt snatched the shotgun from the mantle and slung his backpack over his shoulder. I watched through a boarded window as they marched into the trees and vanished into the thicket.

The cabin was quiet without the two of them. The wind kicked up again about half-past two, whistling its ominous tune through the cracks in the walls. Something about the noise made my stomach

sink. I busied myself with the usual chores to fill the silence. We had plenty of snow to melt and enough firewood to last us a few days, but all the snares were empty.

I spied some rabbit tracks during my short hike back from the trail. I traced them from the log pile beside the porch to a small lump of disheveled snow around the back of the cabin. I brushed away some of the white slush with my foot to find a ball of brown, blood-soaked fur. Its small hindlegs were crumpled into the cavity where its stomach used to be. All the flesh had been stripped away, leaving only masticated bones and tattered hide. I looked around to find similar lumps scattered in the snow around me. I didn't bother digging them up.

Nightfall came early, and with it, a fresh layer of sleet. I dozed off in my cot, fully clothed. The river's muffled rumbling lulled me to sleep. It was all I could do to fight the growing pit in my stomach. Every train of thought led back to food. My mind was haunted by visions of juicy tri-tip steaks and spare ribs drenched in barbeque sauce. All I'd eaten in the past week was garbage. I wanted something that gushed when I sunk my teeth into it. Something tender and succulent.

I woke to drool dribbling down my cheek. A thick, savory odor flooded my nostrils. I wiped the crusted spit from my lips and clambered down the ladder to the kitchen, where I found Matt stirring a large pot on the stove with his back to me. His bulging backpack sat lopsided on the table next to the shotgun.

"Hey. You get anything?"

"Deer," Matt said, gesturing to the pile of bones charring in the fireplace. The flames licked at the cartilage clinging to the femur resting on top.

"Where's Kyle?" I glanced around, half expecting him to come chattering out of the bathroom.

"Got separated."

"Wh—You lost him? How'd that even happen?"

"One minute he was next to me. Next, he wasn't."

“So, you came back without him. Great. Just great...”

I turned for the door, but Matt lurched across the table and grabbed my wrist. His bony fingers clamped down on my sleeve, pinching my skin.

“Eat first.”

“What? No.” I tried to yank my hand free. Matt tightened his grip.

“You’ll die out there if you go now. Sit down.”

My eyes darted between the snow falling beyond the frost-coated plexiglass and the steaming pot on the stove. My intestines betrayed my thoughts, gurgling loud enough for Matt to hear.

“I know you’re hungry,” he continued, “just stay for a bit. Then we can go look for him.”

Against my better judgment, I sat. Matt poured a generous helping of the chunky stew into his bowl, then a smaller one in mine. My mouth watered as moist slivers of meat slipped from the ladle into the dish. I grabbed my spoon and was about to dig in when my eyes drifted to the bag on the table. It was open just enough to see inside. It was an elbow.

I sat petrified while Matt wolfed down his portion. His spoon went untouched. His slurping made my skin crawl. He licked the bowl clean, smearing globs of gooey residue on his face before slamming the bowl down. He grimaced at my full bowl.

“Something wrong?”

“What’s in the bag?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Leftovers.”

“Did you...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. I narrowly sealed my lips in time to swallow the hot bile threatening to spew from my mouth.

“I did what I had to. There’ll be more for the two of us this way.”

I lunged across the table and grabbed the shotgun. I racked the slide and pointed it at Matt’s head.

“Dan. Put the gun down,” he soothed.

I pulled the trigger. Nothing came out. I pumped the slide and

squeezed again. Nothing. My heart sank as Matt grabbed the barrel and pulled it from my limp hands.

“Sit down.”

My legs refused to move.

Matt pulled Kyle’s skinning knife from his pocket and plunged it into the table. “Sit!”

I scrambled back to my chair at his command.

“Eat it.”

“Please... Don’t make me do this,” I whimpered.

“Eat it. Or you’re next.”

My hand shook as I raised the spoon to my lips. It was delicious.

One-Way

Caroline Zamudio | ΣΤΔ

The rattling of the train tracks breaks me out of my stupor. I try my best to shake the sleepiness away and take another sip of coffee. The train is late, and if it was another day I would be irritated, but not today.

There is something in the air today, something that pulls me forward with a smile on my face as I bounce on the soles of my feet. My ticket says I'm headed to a place called Hadley. The ticket seller asked me if I wanted a one-way ticket or roundtrip. I told her coming back to this curse of a town was the last thing on my mind.

I tug my small backpack closer to my body as an older lady tries to stand closer. I give her a tight smile and move away. I'm not a talker; never have been. She can find a nicer person to befriend on the train. Behind me, I can feel the crowd of warm bodies releasing steam on this chilly day. She has plenty to choose from.

Finally, the train shows its face and blows a powerful horn. I step up to the red line and feel my body release all the tension it's been holding in for the past twenty-three years. I've been waiting for this day ever since I can remember. I'm free. I can do whatever feeds my soul and I never have to walk on eggshells again.

I enter the train and decide to sit in the back of the third car. Three is my lucky number and I cannot abandon it now. I make myself comfortable and stretch my jean-clad legs in the seats in front of me. I'm about to plug in my headphones and drift off into a blissful nap when I hear a quiet, but determined voice speak.

“Is this seat taken?”

My eyes flutter open and the same old lady from outside the station is now here. Did she follow me? I look around the car and all other seats are available. Why does she want to share a seat with someone else when she can have one all to herself?

“Um, yes, but there are other open seats available. Do you not

want some space to yourself?” I ask, traces of hope lace my voice.

To my dismay she shakes her head and gives me a smile. “No, sweetheart. I’ve been alone long enough. I would rather much enjoy your company. If you don’t mind?”

I can feel my body tense. I don’t have the guts to be rude to this little old lady. I sigh and drag my feet off the seat in front of me and gesture for her to take a seat.

“Well, aren’t you nice.” She drawls as she settles down her handbag, fixes her posture like if she’s had years of practice at being a good Southern belle, and then stares at me.

I look away awkwardly and begin to play with my thumbs.

“So, sugar, tell me about yourself. Oh, how mighty rude of me! What is your name, darling?”

I close my eyes in frustration and force uncomfortable feelings all the way down. I hate talking to strangers. I hate talking to strangers.

“Calico, and yours?” I’m not particularly curious to know her name, but it’s the nice thing to do.

“What a beautiful name that is. I’m Mabel, darling. Mabel Wilson.”

I nod. I pretend to shuffle around my bag to kill some time. Yes, in case you’re wondering, this is how socially awkward I am. I look at my phone. Five hours and I get to Hadley. Five hours.

“Are you going somewhere special?” Mabel looks at me expectantly. I think she’s in the mood to hear a fabulous story. Unfortunately, I don’t have a fantastic story to tell. Not yet.

“I don’t know yet, but any place is better than here.”

“Mm. Have you been there before? Visiting your family perhaps?”

I choke on a laugh. “I don’t have any family.”

Mabel’s eyes turn on me and I recognize that look—its sympathy mixed with a touch of pity. I still remember the first time someone looked at me like that. It was after mom passed away, and then years later after my teacher realized that dad was gone for weeks at a time leaving me alone to fend for myself. That look followed me

everywhere in that god forsaken town. It became a second skin.

“Don’t feel sorry for me, Mabel,” I say, almost defiantly. “Not everyone who is alone is lonely.”

Mabel nods but presses her lips together. I think she was about to release some elderly coddling. I can’t have that.

“I’m visiting my son. I haven’t seen him in quite some time.” Her voice cracking right down the middle.

I nod and smile. I don’t know what else to say.

“This place I’m going to... the internet says it’s nice. There’s this beautiful lake and a small little inn with a view of the water. Maybe I can stay there for a few days.” I don’t know what possesses me to say that.

“Maybe?” Her eyebrows raise.

I nod. “Yeah, maybe.”

I close my eyes and lean back in my seat. I can feel my eyes drag down to a close and I try my best to stay awake to hear Mabel’s response, but it never comes so I let myself succumb to sleep.

I wake up to a loud, nasally voice booming through the speaker. I shift around in my seat for a minute and try to catch the delicious sleep that dared slip away, but it’s no use. I’m wide awake. I sit back up and see Mabel staring out the window quietly as she wipes away a silent tear.

“Your stop is coming up in a few minutes.”

I jerk up. “Did I really sleep for five hours?”

Mabel chuckles. “Oh, to be young again.”

I check the route status on the screen and sure enough, my stop is in thirty minutes. I gather my things before using the restroom. When I return, Mabel is still quiet. Her eyes focused on the view outside the window. I guess I should be glad that she’s no longer in a chatty mood, but something gnaws at me.

“Are you okay, Mabel?” I ask tentatively.

She finally turns to face me. “I’m fine, sugar. Don’t you worry about me.”

Five minutes to go and I’ll be in Hadley. I can already see myself

in a quaint little room with a comfortable bed, soft-pink flowered wallpaper, cable tv, and a warm room service meal. I could almost squeal in excitement, but I keep it to myself.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Mabel. Bye.” I say quickly and move towards the exit.

“Calico?”

I look back at Mabel. Oh no, now she wants to chat? I have to exit in two minutes.

“You be careful, you hear? Take a map everywhere you go and look out for yourself.”

Her warm eyes crinkle at the ends and it’s comforting to think she’s had the privilege of living a long life. Whether it’s been a happy life, I can only hope.

“I’m not lost, Mabel,” I whisper, “Not even close.”

The Porcelain Tea Set

Alayna Winans

To my knowledge, the porcelain tea set had never been used. It sat pristine on its shelf, hidden inside the cabinet I was dutifully instructed never to touch. But that did not stop little fingerprints from initialing my desires on the frosted glass barrier. The teacups were a simplistic ivory, their handles gilded by a single leaf. The plates were adorned by golden vines that snaked around their edges, the same of which were found on the pot. But my favorite had always been the creamer, on which bloomed a single rose. I would step inches away from the cabinet where it rested, my nose leaving an exhaled imprint on the glass, hoping that if I looked hard enough, I could see myself pouring the creamer in its reflection. Yet all I found was a naive girl begging to play tea party with her established guests of bunnies and bears.

When I open the cabinet now, my reflection is powdered with dust. I rub the side of the creamer as though it were a genie's lamp to reveal a woman, her cheeks streaked with tears, wishing for the days when she had someone telling her not to touch the porcelain tea set.

The Display

Ashley Russell

A woman crafted a world with care. Plastic trees, wooden houses, cotton bushes, all arranged and applied with intent. The little town came together. It all started with a house. The woman had bought a wooden house from a craft store, painted it a baby blue, used small pieces of sandpaper plastered to popsicle sticks to create roofing, and glued it onto the top of the house. The windows and door framing were given a Swiss coffee accent, and the wood windows were cut out and replaced with thin pieces of plastic. The woman had taken a sponge and chopped it into pieces, and then scrunched the pieces up and kept them that way with super glue. The sponges were green, which was useful when wanting to add foliage to the window seals. The art didn't stop at the house; it carried on to the front yard. Using a mix of clay and aluminum foil, along with a plain board, the woman added texture to the land, manipulating the materials thoughtfully to achieve rolling hills at the house's side, topped off with a quaint little red mailbox at the front of the house's walkway. The piece was an art, that's what people called it, but to the woman, it was much more.

Visitors, often friends and family, would enter the woman's apartment and notice the table where the little house lay, and they would shower the woman with compliments, commenting on her artistic ability and imagination. She would accept the compliments humbly, but couldn't help but feel annoyed. Their politeness and quality of being easily impressed reminded her that they lacked creativity. They lacked deep meaning, and to some degree, that made her feel alone. But they would go on to talk about how cute her display was.

Nevertheless, the woman was truly talented, and not just in regards to building miniature worlds. She flourished in school, had an admirable reputation, and never struggled to pay the bills. But none of these things mattered to her. What mattered was coming home,

gathering her supplies, and adding to her world. It started with a house, then two houses, then three houses, then an ice cream parlor on the corner, a library, and a bakery. She would gather dirt in cups, toss it onto spray-on glue, and form dirt paths. She bought miniature fountains, fridges, beds, desks, ovens, and all sorts of furniture or public utilities and added them to her world. She got thin pieces of plastic tubing, went over them with metallic spray paint, deconstructed small Christmas lights, and strung the wire through the tubing, leaving the small bulb sticking out from one side. She had drilled holes into the board so that the wires could slip through the board, leaving the switches at the bottom. She glued the plastic tubes upright along the dirt road, and when she flicked the switch on the controls underneath the board, the bulbs would glow and her little world would be lit up by little street lights.

People would come in and see that her display had gotten bigger. A real, genuine talent, they would say to each other. And mothers would joke about having the woman come over to their house and decorate their daughter's doll house as a surprise. Her work was done so meticulously, so steadily, it was all so charming. They would think, what a quaint display, and ask how much money goes into the hobby.

The woman never stopped. She went on to create a flower garden. She bought fake, baby breath flowers from a craft store, cut the stems off, and arranged the flowers with a pair of tweezers onto a green, felt-covered surface. She took the inner part of Mason jar lids and stuck them onto cooking skewers, then covered the lids with white linen and built on the skewers with air dry clay to make fancy table legs, and with that, she had a set of tables for a tea party in a garden. She would even go on to melt candle wax off a needle to resemble water droplets, or more specifically, the morning dew.

The woman's heart and soul went into her craft. She only went to work so that she could buy supplies and pay the bills, and when at work, all she could think about was the amount of hours left between her and the moment she could go back to her little world. She lost interest in trying to interact with people. She only did so when

someone approached her. She wasn't one to eat either; her stomach would growl, but the paint on her palms and the clay between her fingertips was much more satisfying than any meal. In most cases, she would forget to eat entirely. She only slept when she didn't realize that she was and she had lost her phone but never minded it enough to try to find it. Still, when she walked into the room, people smiled dumbly and acknowledged her as the woman with the display.

But then there was a shift in her craft. The shift first began when she started running out of room. The table that held her world with multiple houses, an ice cream parlor, library, bakery, flower garden, antique shop, children's park, cafe, and grocery store had run out of space. So she bought another table from a second hand shop and shoved it against the original table so that she could continue her craft. But as time went on, the more aware she became of something that she hadn't been before. Desperate to ignore it, she devoted even more time than she already had into her world. She found sticks about the size of her forearm and stuck more of that spongy foliage to its sides, creating a trail of great Redwoods. She molded aluminum foil into a half cylinder, spray painted it blue, took tiny pebbles meant for fish tanks, and sprinkled them into the foil. Then, she poured resin into the foil mold and created a river. Over the river, using pencils she had sliced into equal pieces and painted brown, she constructed a bridge. The world she made was beautiful, but never enough.

Her grave mistake came when she convinced herself to invest in plastic characters, the kind parents buy in tubes for their children's school projects. This entire time her world was vacant, purely architecture without any inhabitants. But now things would change, now little people were inside her world, the one she had built. Suddenly, she was angry, but truthfully, she was sad. The little characters were in the life that she wanted to be in. They get to spend the rest of their never-ending lives in a perfect world, while she, the creator of it all, has to walk away from the table and carry on with her real life. But that part of her life just wasn't satisfying. That part of

her life was just an equation that had to be completed in order to get the product, but the product didn't really matter.

The day came when the woman couldn't take it anymore. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or the lack of food, or perhaps the chemicals from the spray paint and glue that got to her head. But it was most likely jealousy. Jealousy is what caused her to take a match and burn her little world with all the little characters to the ground. Jealousy is what made her feel connected to her little world when the fire spread from that world, to her own. And while no one knows for sure what happened to the woman, her visitors would say in her honor, "It's so sad, we lost her and her little display."

Weight of Consciousness

David Marshall

Wake up.

As you find yourself grappling with the heavy, yet final, vestiges of slumber, your body heaves until you're on your back. Face the northern hemisphere in all its early morning glory, for what is a bedroom if not a microcosmic world within worlds, each one according to its own kind? Where, as your eyes come into focus, you drift between the few accrements, some say, that led to your formation. These are the few celestial bodies within your orbit. With desperation, you wheeze pitiable protest against the darkness swelling within and around you. The perverted good inhaled with the bitterest poison exhaled. Shaking the excess melancholy from your face, you rise from bed.

Wash your face.

As you stand in front of the mirror of your dorm bathroom, you come to see what fourteen million, twelve thousand, six hundred-forty minutes add up to. The pops and creaks of your joints are all too familiar, you know the slope of deterioration grows with each passing year, the number of invalidators rising. Are the invalidators right? Deterioration began with childhood injuries that didn't heal quite right, growing into little devils manifesting themselves in the ebb and flow of weather. Some of your injuries remain unobservable due to prosthetics, but you remember the time and place you lost each member.

Get dressed.

You drift into your walk-in closet, rub the crusted sleep away; your choices are: dingy, holey, baggy, tacky, and homely. You choose the iconic blend of tacky and baggy, the ultimate illusion of comfortability. You look in the mirror and consider the billboard that you have crafted, despondent gaze reflected back at you. You plaster on a smile to complete your semi-socially acceptable appearance.

Reflect.

Your reflection asks if you can bear the weight of consciousness, knowing the person that you turned out to be and who you are becoming. Or does your conscience prick you for each compromise made in hopes of clawing towards the idealistic future your younger self crafted out of impractical visions of the indecipherable? Are you satisfied with the result of each slippery slope spirally traversed to sate your elusive goals? How far does the receipt of internal broken covenants run? The well of regret runs deep.

Fate.

To be inextricably linked to a future event, some new destiny, steeped in the not-so-subtle sensation of dread. To tread the rock-ridden soil of the infamous unknown, equally perilous and beautiful. From the meticulously spackled ceiling of your bedroom, to the dead spider you crushed in the corner of the ceiling last month, you choose to take in all that encompasses living. Soak in the mundane. You choose to take your first steps every morning into the bright and brilliant. You make this choice as a great refutation against the darkness within. For, while you cannot supplant the beast, the insurmountable, you courageously stride unflinchingly before it. Unafraid to wrestle with the sleep of your existence, you are wakeful and lucid.

The Contemplation of an Early Trip to Eden

Ty Manhart

Where do I start?

Maybe that it's a dark, calm, and quiet night. Hums of the fans make the silence louder but not deafening. Though I wish it was, for my thoughts are all too loud. I lay motionless, feeling the sheets rest against my skin. My chest rises and falls with each aching breath. The breeze of the fans ever so often lands upon me.

My mind is that of a vast ocean that swells and roars. However, there is no lighthouse in sight tonight. I could cry and scream but why? What difference would this make?

Slowly I become more restless, moving any which way to find the slightest comfort. I can't tell if I'm doing it for my body or for my mind. Thoughts of any and every worry and stress fill my mind. So much to think of, yet so little thoughts can come about of this. Can I ever escape the prison walls that is my skull?

My mind grows weary and tired. I begin to doubt how much of this road I can continue to trek. The doubt turns to worry, then to fear, and finally, nothing short of the deepest endless void of sorrow. I feel guilty. What is so terrible that my mind decides it wants to turn against itself? Through the busy and loud day, I can find peace within. Yet when the silent night falls, it's inside that war continues and rages on.

I have no excuse to think or feel this way. No origin of trauma or painful experience worthy of this distress. Nothing is so terrible in this little life for me to desire an escape. Yet I yearn to walk out the door. Run away. Escape all of this. Then what would follow? Would I ever see Eden for the actions I committed?

The dark only grows longer. The sun will rise, sure. But will there be growth or progress? I've never felt so alone before. Despite all the

people in my life and the enjoyment of my own time with myself, it's now I feel truly alone. Yes, I'm aware I'm not fully, yet the thoughts that I feel this way are all too loud in saying that I am.

I wish to describe this harrowing truth. I wish to run and hide.

I yearn to have an ear that will listen. I yearn to be of no dependence.

I think someone may help me and comfort me. I think, no matter another's words, will it truly change anything.

As the dim morning sunshine dances between the blinds, my eyes creak open stiffly. Birds sing their own songs, and the morning glow radiates off the walls with a warming reprieve. The ocean's waves crash dully and with little threat at the shore of the lighthouse. Dimming to nothing, the beacon takes its rest for the day, as the sun lights the horizon.

Slowly, a recollection of last night fills my mind, like slowly putting a puzzle together piece by piece. Only, this time, the memories come back blurred and dizzy, like trying to remember a dream. No, I know it wasn't a dream. It was all too real. Did I really want to do those things? Commit acts of treason that would forsake me forever from the Garden I seek? Countless questions flood my mind and soul, growing ever weary at the thought of being on the edge between the past and a tomorrow.

Though my mind desires to seek Eden so soon, my soul, my spirit, knows to remain patient until it is my time to enter. While my wish to stroll along the river in a lush and lively promised land surges deep in my subconscious, I am aware that this paradise is not yet lost.

So, on this page and in this ink, I can escape my Babylon and know that there is a lighthouse that will be there through any storm, I just have to embrace Its light.

Perchance to Dream

David Marshall

2025 Creative Writing Prose Award - Honorable Mention

If you must know, I am a bitter man who has deserted sleep. With my weariness, I have bought clarity that can only be obtained through experience. This hard-won clarity has also taken a toll on my heart, but I cannot expect such a good gift to come without some physical demand. A gift such as clarity proves to be the greatest ally in the midst of bad luck, for I am nothing if not unlucky. Through my shoddy work apron, calloused hands, scuffed shoes, and array of stains on my pants, my experience is displayed: it is the only experience the world truly acknowledges. Why would the broken and world-weary tradesmen need nostalgia, sentiment, or empty platitudes? Let all idealistic poetry and literature of the past and present die with the men who wrote them; a few lines in iambic never fed a starving family, and Romance is the little-death that ebbs the weak-hearted. You may very well wish to take me in, to prey on my hardships, but any attempt is ill-conceived as I know that any attempt to “help me” is only an attempt to preserve the lifeblood of dead poets. With this acknowledgment, I bid farewell to fears of the loss of culture; for it always remakes itself, and I am always staving away my own undoing. I have committed myself to the truest expression of life, which is the preservation of one’s family. It was not always so, for I had dreams. Little dreams. Big dreams. Yet I settled for an average dream, which is nothing more than a practical prayer for my most basic needs as I run down the clock in this grand event we call the human experience. All that remains are ashes of everything I built with these hands, broken promises, and the thought of what could or ought to have been.

The first mistake was being born in the same age as the Happiest Place on Earth. My naivete did not allow for the conclusive fact that most do not obtain their dreams, let alone the possibility that I would

not win my dream. How could I? My friend, we are a people entrenched in competition to be our own Solomon, to be our own Queen of Sheba. The highest accolade an individual could obtain is reserved for those who are equally ruthless and utilitarian in mind and body. Yet, I ask you to find for me one who strove for such status and did not bring ruin upon themselves. Do not be so boring as to tell me that this is not the case for all men, or else I might find you wholly uninteresting. For I am only one of the many who have fallen into such ill repute, and tell you that experience dictates that it is true. I was among the top of my classes. I dared to think. To hope. To dream, and in dreaming, I lost everything. In this heartache, I learned dreams are for children who do not know better. For in dreaming, one exposes themselves to harsh realities flying unbidden from harbingers of chaos.

Even so, this was exactly what happened. I hoped, I laughed, I loved, and opened my heart to a world of pain. I weep for those long gone but do not mourn my former self. For he was unworthy of such pity and paid justly for his folly.

But friends, these things are of the past, I shall not be unmade. I drink in the delight of cynicism and it delights in drinking me up. I earlier staked my claim to clarity and here is what I have learned. In the end, all one really wants is to not look back in regret. In this case, I concluded that it would not do me any good to dream, but the only way to not dream was to forgo sleep. I shall not be the Orpheus daring to love Eurydice. Better to have never loved, forgoing the slings and arrows of Cupid's assaults. I shall forgo the call of Odysseus, I do not wish to be as broken as he. Forsake Beowulf's glory, for such tales always end in terrible deaths. What I have spoken of is the result of dreams. For what are dreams if they are not ethereal and intangible, they never present themselves as what you once imagined.

I have told you the result of dreaming, I pray you heard me well. However, one cannot help but wonder if that is not the purpose of dreams. For, while we cannot will our dreams into existence, we may

yet be faced with a grander thing. Perhaps experience alone is worthless? Perhaps the dream sustains the soul in a way that only hope could do? I do not know. Is it worth knowing before I end all capability of dreaming? I may dream a while longer while my breath may still pass through my lungs. I will inhale the spirit of hope, resting deeply for a while. Perhaps it will lessen the toll clarity has brought upon my heart. Who knows, perhaps I may dream.

This Baffling Mechanism Called Existence

James Welch

Today, Azaria saw thirteen thousand people die.

This wasn't unusual for Azaria. Meeting the dead was part of her duty. Thirteen thousand deceased souls were far from uncommon. In the following week, she would meet another hundred thousand souls. And in a year, nearly five million would have felt her embrace.

Each soul passed in a variety of ways. Many of them died in their sleep. Some died from an illness. Others were beaten, stabbed, burned, or drowned. Some wished to meet death head-on. Hundreds were killed in far-off lands fighting gory battles, their final deeds performed in a patriotic fervor. Dozens offered themselves up to death, finding no hope left in the living world.

Most of them had friends and family. They would mourn the dead, gather in feasts held in their name, or cry as they lay their bodies to rest. Azaria wondered what that felt like.

But she would pay no attention to these feelings. The gods focus on their duties, dismissing all outside their domain. And the Reapers were the most dutiful of them all.

Azaria traversed the world as an invisible presence. Once a soul was prepared to depart, she materialized in the invisible realm, projecting herself as an imposing yet comforting human form. On this day, she appeared in a small cottage. The room was violently disorganized, filled with apparatuses, instruments, and machines. At the end of the room, an elderly man sat in a chair, head slumped over a desk. His eyes were closed, and his face was pale. Azaria stood over him as he took his last breath.

His soul hovered over his body. His eyes widened, and he flailed his arms. Azaria placed her hand on his shoulder and steadied him. He looked up at her, processing the imposing deity before him. She

looked human but much taller. Her head nearly scraped the roof. She had at least a dozen eyes, but not on her face. They were embedded into a ring that hovered around her head. Its gold color contrasted with the deep tones of her skin. Feathered wings spanning twice the length of her arms melded into her black cloak.

“Mr. Stephon?” She said.

“Yes?”

“You have died. I am a Reaper and have come to collect your soul. I will open a door to the place between life and death. From there, you must find your way to your next life.” Azaria recited her speech perfectly. She had repeated this information innumerable times before.

“I’m dead?” Mr. Stephon’s voice shook.

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh...” He looked down at the floor, quivering.

Azaria was silently thankful for Mr. Stephon’s relatively subdued reaction. She placed a gentle hand on Mr. Stephon’s shoulder. “It will be all right, sir. Death happens to everyone.”

“I suppose so.” He looked around his room, catching a glimpse of his body. He tried his best to avoid looking at it.

“Why do I feel so tired?” He asked.

“Newly deceased souls tend to feel tired. It is completely normal.”

His eyes struggled to remain open. He now seemed to be in a daze.

“Are you ready to go?”

He nodded.

Azaria reached out and opened a door to the space between life and death. There was no physical opening, no physical passageway. The space in front of the pair became distorted and foggy.

“Go on, Mr. Stephon.”

The old man took a sleepy step forward. As he walked, his form slowly disappeared through the distorted doorway. Azaria prepared to dispel her visible form and move on to the next soul.

“When will he return?”

The voice surprised Azaria. Her eyes spun on its ring, searching for the source.

“Who said that?”

“I did. When will he return?”

Despite her efforts, Azaria could not find the voice’s origin. Even if she could not physically see someone, she had an innate awareness of every spirit around her. The voice came from a collection of machines leaning against the wall, but no one was there.

“Where are you?”

“You are facing me.”

Azaria finally noticed. When the voice spoke, one of the machines lit up. She had heard tell of mortal devices designed to record and play audio. Could this be one of them?

She walked up to the machine and examined it. It looked like a statue of a human. It was made of bronze and copper plating and housed ticking gears. It had a simple face, two holes for the eyes, and a slit for a mouth. The eyes held small light bulbs glowing a soft, warm yellow.

“What are you?” Azaria asked.

“I am an automaton created by Mr. Stephon. I am named Seer.”

“Seer?”

“Yes. I was given the name due to my unique attributes. I can see into the invisible spiritual realm and speak with its denizens.”

Azaria examined Seer. This machine was definitely talking to her. It had a face, a voice, and an awareness of itself. Yet, it had no soul.

“How interesting,” Azaria said.

“It is. Now, where has my master gone? I am aware that his spirit has vacated his body. Is there a set date for his return?”

Azaria was initially unsure of what to do. She had never spoken to a living being before, if you could even call Seer “living.” This level of interaction between a physical creature and a Reaper was unprecedented. Let alone one who was completely unaware of the concept of death.

If she had asked other deities for advice, they would have told her to leave right then and there. “Only certain deities should communicate with mortals.” They would say, “It is best to remain within your vocation.”

However, for the first time, Azaria’s curiosity overwhelmed her.

“Your creator,” she began, “Has died. Meaning he cannot come back. His spirit has left this world and will not return.”

“I see. I was unfamiliar with this ‘died.’ Thank you for informing me.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The automaton stood up. Parts from other machines clanked on the ground as he moved. “Do you have any orders for me?”

Azaria was unsure of what to do now. Seer fascinated her, but she was at a loss for words. She wondered if she should ask it questions or give it some form of guidance. This whole situation was far out of her comfort zone.

She sensed death encroaching upon another soul. For a moment, she had forgotten about her duties. She had never done so before.

“I am sorry, machine. I am needed elsewhere.”

“Understood,” Seer said, “It was a pleasure talking to you.”

“You as well.”

With that, Azaria dissipated her form and vanished from Seer’s view.

Years passed in the mortal realm. Azaria went about her duty. Occasionally, she thought about the strange machine she had met. Had it stayed in that old cabin? Had it wandered off into the surrounding forest? Though questions permeated her mind, she could not dwell on the topic for long. She could not be distracted.

She finished delivering a soul, reaped from a sick man lying in a bed. A chill overcame the stone building as nurses rushed around the body. Azaria stood over them. Invisible to the living eye but present all the same. Her eyes glanced around the room. There were often multiple deaths at a time in these houses of healing. The god Salute’s

work was flawed in mortal hands.

She gazed out at an open window. A reflection of light caught her attention. Walking across the paved roads, carrying a large bag full of food, was Seer. He looked the same, but he was wearing a simple tunic. He was following a short, stout man. A halfling, most likely. The crowd around him shot odd glances at the machine. Many looked at him with disgust, others with a hint of fear.

Azaria's eyes shifted toward the sick souls upon their beds. She glanced back at the machine. She wondered if she would ever get another opportunity to see him again.

Perhaps these souls can wait.

Azaria spread her wings and flew out the window. She hovered in the air, quietly observing Seer.

The halfling turned a corner and entered a store. He motioned for Seer to wait by the door. Azaria took her chance. She swooped down near the ground and perched near the automaton.

Azaria cleared her throat, "Hello, Seer."

Seer glanced over, "Hello, Reaper! It has been a while. What brings you here?"

"I was reaping a soul." She pointed toward the hospital behind her.

There was a moment of silence. Azaria couldn't remember the last time she had a non-duty-related conversation with someone. How do these work again?

"You have not changed much," Seer said.

"Oh, I suppose I haven't. You've changed quite a bit."

"Have I?"

"Definitely. For one, you wear clothes now. You also seem to be following someone." She peered through the shop window. The halfling was making pleasant conversation with the shopkeeper.

"Oh yes, that's Mr. Arwilder. He took me in when I came into town. He has a fascination with strange commodities like myself. Yet, he treats me like family."

Azaria continued to watch Mr. Arwilder. She thought he looked

very kind.

“We’re quite a long way from that cottage. How did you end up out here?” Azaria asked.

“It’s quite a long story,” Seer said.

“After you left, I remained where I was for months. Eventually, I explored the cottage, examining my creator’s other inventions. I read his books, looked through his sketches, and examined his wardrobe. I was designed with a desire to receive instructions, but in that lonely house, I would never have any. So, I decided to leave the cabin and explore the outside world in search of a task.”

“For weeks, I traversed the forest and grasslands. I discovered many fascinating things. I spent my time observing the animals and watching the slow development of plants. I encountered many spirits, though few were interested in conversing with me. Eventually, I came across a small town. This town’s residents were hesitant to interact with me. Many grew fearful and attacked me. They drove me out of their village. When I found a new village, the same thing occurred. It occurred again and again. However, upon entering this town, the first person I met was Mr. Arwilder. He calmed the fear of the townsfolk and allowed me to stay in his home. While the other denizens of this village still look at me with suspicion, I now have a home.”

Once Seer finished, Azaria noticed the passing townsfolk’s faces.

“They do look at you strangely,” she said.

“From their perspectives, I am talking to nothing. I am sure that does not help.”

Azaria wondered, does everyone else believe Seer to be mad? Do they see him as a person or just a broken mechanism?

Does she see Seer as a person?

Azaria hadn’t considered it until then, but she treated Seer like a human. She knew very well that he was artificial, a soulless automaton, yet it was hard not to see him as sentient.

Seer interrupted Azaria’s contemplation. “Would you like to see the Arwilder’s home?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never been to someone’s house outside of duty before.”

“I think it will be all right. I can tell Mr. Arwilder all about you. He’s fascinated with the spiritual. Mrs. Arwilder may be a harder sell, but she’ll come around.”

Azaria considered it for a moment, but then the panging sensation of death overcame her again.

“I am sorry, Seer, but I must go.”

“I understand. Will I see you again?”

Azaria hesitated for a moment, “Yes if I am able. I did enjoy our conversation.”

“I, as well. It was good to see you.”

“You as well.”

As Azaria dispelled her form, Mr. Arwilder came out of the shop. “Who were you talking to?” He asked Seer.

“An old friend.”

Azaria couldn’t help but smile.

Weeks turned into months. Months turned into years. Seer never left Azaria’s thoughts. He was unlike anything she had ever encountered. Whenever a death occurred in his town, Azaria would take the opportunity to visit Seer. Their conversations grew in length and scope.

As the years passed, Seer continued to change. His speech refined, his mannerisms adapted, and his questions increased. Azaria scarcely knew how to answer his questions.

“What happens to the dead?” He asked one night. The stars stretched for eternity overhead, and the moon shone brightly upon the town. The goddess Nos’ work was gorgeous, as always. Azaria pondered on how to phrase her response.

“Well, my job is to bring them to the place between life and death. A sort of ‘world between worlds.’ If I do not, they will end up as lost souls.”

“And what do they do from there?”

“It’s rather complicated. There are many fates for the souls of the dead.”

“Like what?”

“I am not entirely sure.”

Seer looked at her. “Not sure? Isn’t this part of your duty?”

“No, there is no reason for me to enter the world between worlds. My duty with souls ends at their transportation. Anything after that is outside of my domain.”

“Why is that?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because it is what I am called to do.”

“Called by whom?”

The question surprised Azaria. “I don’t think there is a whom. A long time ago, I woke up, and I knew deep within myself that I was called to transport the souls of mortals. That was that.”

“And you never wondered why?”

“I don’t see any reason to. This is the case with all deities. We simply are, and we simply must.”

“That’s strange.”

“You’re one to talk about being strange!” Azaria chuckled.

There were a few moments of silence.

“Azaria.”

“Yes?”

“Will you transport my soul when I die?”

Azaria remained silent. She attempted to keep her facial expression neutral, but inside, she felt her heart drop to the pit of her stomach. Seer has no soul. Does he not know this? Why would he? Everyone else does; of course, he would assume he had one, too.

But he doesn’t.

Azaria had no idea what would happen to him after he died. It might be nothing, or it could be something entirely out of the realm of her imagination. Out of the realm of a death god.

Azaria took a deep breath. “Seer, I—”

A sensation overtook the goddess. Death was approaching the village.

“I... Must go,” she stammered.

Seer seemed disappointed. “Will I see you again?”

“Of course,” she said.

She vanished.

It was weeks until Azaria met Seer again, as her time in the village was tireless. A plague had swept through the countryside and had begun to spread from door to door in Seer’s town. It was a plague like none had seen in centuries. Nearly a third of the town’s population were struck by the disease. Azaria caught herself cursing the god Sâl and whatever devilish craftsmanship he had put into this illness. But, since when had she cared about the number of dead? She shook off the feeling and continued her duty.

She came upon a single house. A house just like the many others among the crowded village streets. She crept inside and headed toward the master bedroom. The presence of death grew stronger throughout the home. A couple lay huddled in their bed. They were pale white and sickly thin. They shivered even under their heavy blankets. Azaria stood over them as they took their last breaths, and their souls rose above their bodies. A look of relief fell upon their sleeping ghostly faces. She took their hands in hers and began to open a doorway into the world between worlds.

“Azaria?”

Azaria’s eyes turned on their ring. Her stomach churned. It was Seer.

“Sir... Ma’am... are you...” He looked between the souls and the bodies in the beds.

Azaria studied their faces for the first time. It was Mr. and Mrs. Arwilder.

“Oh gods, Seer I—”

“Put them back.”

“Seer, I can’t do that.”

“Put them back.” Seer’s voice began to rise.

“Seer! They are dead! They couldn’t go back even if I tried.”

“Try! At least try!”

Crying filled the room. A small cot in the corner of the bedroom gently rocked with the sound. Azaria stared at it with horror.

Seer went to the cot and picked up an infant. He placed the baby in his arms and gently rocked it, shushing it.

“I didn’t know.”

“How could you? You never bothered to get to know them.”

Seer hissed.

“I did not cause their deaths, Seer. Besides, they wouldn’t have been able to talk to me. You know that.”

“I could’ve talked to them for you!”

The baby began to cry again.

“Talking to mortals is outside of my vocation.”

“Yet you talk to me.”

Azaria snapped, “You’re not a mortal! You’re barely even alive!”

Silence.

Seer stared at Azaria. His face plate showed no emotion, but Azaria could feel his rage brewing.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“Go with them.”

“What?”

“Go with them into the place between life and death. At least do that. Please. Tell me what you find. Tell me that they’ll be all right. Go and tread where none of them can return from.”

Azaria stared blankly.

“Please.”

She closed her eyes.

“Okay.”

She turned and opened a door. The space in front of her became wavy and distorted. With the Arwilder’s souls in hand, she walked through for the first time.

She stepped into an inky blackness. Space stretched for infinity in all directions. This space was not void. No, it was not empty. It was

full. It was filled with everything.

Behind her, a bright glow emanated from a pulsating orb of trillions of smaller particles. Somehow, she knew that this was the world. In front of her was a sea of souls. The souls of every type of human, tall-men, elves, dwarves, and halflings, floated like a river into a vast luminescent sea. They faded off into the horizon and stretched on into the next world.

For the first time, tears fell from Azaria's many eyes. She let go of the Arwilder's hands, and they floated toward the river of souls.

Then, It came.

A giant red creature swam through the inky black everything. It headed straight for the sea of souls. It opened its jaw wide, wider, and yet wider. The Arwilders and a million other souls were consumed in an instant. The light of the remaining souls flickered, and they swam, panicked in all directions.

The giant thing swallowed, and It grinned—a grin of rancid malice.

Azaria was frozen in terror. The thing, this indescribable but disgustingly red thing of a trillion different forms, broke her. She felt fears she had never comprehended.

She felt mortal.

Then It turned, and It looked at Azaria. Azaria, who was but a speck compared to the size of the thing. Its thoughts radiated throughout the inky black everything, and she felt It say to her...

“Well done.”

Without hesitation, Azaria opened a door to the living world and ran inside.

She appeared back through the doorway in the master bedroom. She collapsed before Seer.

“Azaria! What did you see?”

Azaria sobbed.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.” She repeated the apology over and over.

Seer said nothing. He stared down at Azaria. The baby continued

to cry.

Years passed, and the plague continued. The town requested aid from the state, but it never came.

The disease, with its tinge of rancid malice, came upon Seer's home once again. It took the baby. Azaria appeared before the girl as her soul separated from her body. Seer didn't look at her. He sat quietly in the corner, looking at the floor. He slowly stood up and walked out the door. He was never seen in that town again.

Azaria looked at the soul of the little girl. Her eyes were closed, and her face was peaceful. She did not bring her to the world between worlds. She couldn't do that to her. She couldn't leave her with that thing.

She dissipated her form and brought the girl with her. They reappeared on a beach far away from the village. She sat the little girl down in the sand. Here, it would be sweet and calm. Nothing could hurt her. She was already dead.

From then on, Azaria never took another soul to the world between worlds. She couldn't bring herself to do it. She would still visit the dead. She would comfort them in the ways she could, but she would not bring them anywhere. The world became filled with wandering souls. And while some caused trouble for the living, Azaria found this to be a better fate than whatever awaited them between life and death.

Years passed. Decades followed. Azaria was in a forest. In the distance, she saw a cottage. Through the window, she saw an automaton.

He had changed much with age. His clothes were worn, his skin had rusted, and he was covered in dents. There was a layer of dirt on him. Perhaps he had been gardening. Azaria took a deep, shaky breath. She walked into the cabin.

“Hello, Seer.”

Seer looked up. “Hello, Azaria.”

There was a moment of silence.

“I like what you have done with the place,” Azaria said. Seer had cleaned up the cottage. He organized his creator’s old machinery and repaired his over-stocked bookshelf.

“Thank you.” Seer said.

Another silence.

“Seer, I—”

“I’m dying, Azaria.”

Azaria felt her stomach churn. “What? How?”

He pulled out a book from the shelf. He turned to a page with a diagram of him. Each of his parts were labeled. He pointed to a small mechanism on his back. “This part gives me power. It’s what allows me to move, to talk, and to think. Without it, all those mechanisms shut down. And now, it’s failing.”

“Can’t you have it replaced?”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t want to. If it was removed for even a moment, the processes that keep my mind active would cease. I would lose my memory. I would lose my personality. I would lose me. Either way, I die.”

“How long do you have?”

“I might not last the night.”

Azaria was hit with dread.

“Seer, I have to tell you something.”

“Go on.”

Azaria swallowed and took a deep breath. “You don’t have—”

“A soul?”

She stared, stunned. “You knew?”

“I’ve known for a long time. I might have always known.”

Azaria sighed. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to you when you die. I don’t know what you will experience or if you will experience anything at all.”

Seer nodded.

“Are you worried?”

“I’m terrified.”

Tears began to well up in Azaria’s eyes.

“But,” Seer continued. “It’s pointless. I’m barely even alive.”

“No. No, don’t say that. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“For saying you aren’t alive. You are. You’re just as alive as anyone. You might not have a soul, but there is something in you. I don’t know if it is some type of soul I can’t sense or some other thing I can’t comprehend, but you are alive.”

Seer looked at the floor. His voice shook. “I don’t want to die.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

She sat down on the bench.

“Ever since I visited the place between life and death, I’ve reconsidered my duties. Before, my duty was irrefutable. It seemed like a natural part of the world, my part to play in this baffling mechanism called existence. But what I saw in there... That’s not how it should be. There is something wrong with the world. Something wrong with death.”

She looked up at Seer. “I made fun of you for questioning things when I should have been the one asking questions. There was a time when I believed my purpose was to comfort the dead, not simply lead them to the beyond. I don’t know where, when, or how I forgot that, but I did. You helped me remember.”

“I did?”

Azaria nodded. “Your life was influential. Even on the dead.”

Seer walked over and sat next to Azaria.

“Will you stay with me? Until I go.”

“Of course.”

They sat there on that bench for hours.

Day turned to night. Azaria put her hand on Seer’s. Though she was a spirit and could not touch the material, she swore she could feel his hand, a warm metallic sensation.

“Will I see you again?” Seer asked.

“Of course.”

After a few moments, there was silence. Azaria looked over at Seer. His head was slumped down, and there was no light in his eyes.

Tears streamed down Azaria's face. She had never mourned before.

She kissed his cheek.

“Goodbye.”

She disappeared.

Stoneheart

Heavenlee SuabNkauj Vaaj

2025 Creative Writing Prose Award – First Place

I once enjoyed being looked at. *Flash.* My presence alone demanded the eyes of a crowd. *Flash.* Pose in three, two, one... *Flash.* Yet there were rules on what I could and could not do. Do not move. Make your smile wider. Do not speak. Do something, but not everything. My mouth, stitched in high corners, remained in a smile of perfection. I fixed my gaze to be kind and engaging, but their fascination would last only a minute. I did not understand the temperament of ill-mannered people. I was adorned in a pleated skirt and frilly sleeves—was I not eye-catching enough? The bronze crown on my curly bangs was tilted—did they find that displeasing? I was “pretty”, they all sighed dreamily. But what else? I did not lack intellectual ability. Master told me I could not move, and I obeyed. I stayed quiet, never have used my own voice. It dawned one evening, when only the rich were invited and their endeavors were set on desiring my hand.

“Why, you’re gorgeous!” A woman would gasp, “How did you get here?” But the hallway would be filled with murmurs and laughter. They all knew. They were mocking me.

“He can’t talk.” One would answer.

“At least he’s handsome.”

“How much did he cost?”

The room would chuckle and I was regarded as another dumb existence. I made sure my smile never faltered while comments stung. When I felt a cramp in my leg or a kink in my neck, I was still. I promised to be. The rich pointed and took pictures, unconcerned with my discomfort. I eventually grew disgusted at this relationship formed between whoever dared to stare across from me. Insolent watchers. No one attempted my release.

I was somewhat grateful to Master. He was my creator, an artist

of some kind who practiced illegal arts and studied dark magic. I did not know his name, and he was hardly home. Once, I tried to leave the residence, but I was struck with immeasurable pain. Upon touching my cheekbone, there was scourging flesh. It was because I broke one of Master's rules, and that was to not move. On private occasions, I entertained the dream of freedom, desiring other company. My answered prayer roamed the hallways in the form of a young woman.

The housekeeper.

She walked right past me without a word. The only piece of control I had was drawing the attention of strangers, however, this housekeeper was distant, hard-working, and dirty. She would dust the fireplace and organize the bookshelf, despite the webs catching on her lashes. I noticed the bruises on her knees after she spent hours scrubbing the restroom floors. The housekeeper was not disturbed by filth. Black, oily hair bristled down her back like straw. Her teeth decayed, not quite yellow, but not white. The shape of her jaw was crooked, and her dull eyes were lopsided.

She was beautiful. Thus, began my infatuation.

I was not to meddle with lower citizens, given her clothes were of poverty. But I recognized the flame in her soul as she danced and sang during her daytime chores. I was flustered by the theatrical plays she set for her own amusement and when the sun set, golden petals kissed her skin. It was then I realized that this commoner challenged the beauty of Aphrodite. I found her enthralling.

One morning her eyes finally met mine. I introduced myself, which was a failure since my voice croaked for never exercising the right. The housekeeper was not offended by my silence. Her fingers grazed my forearm, leaving my mind dizzy. She smiled. I blushed. The housekeeper quickly retracted her contact, and curtsied. Then she read the plaque underneath my pedestal.

“Hello, King Elias,” her hands positioned to imitate the lifting of a skirt, “I am Neveah.”

I wanted to open my mouth to speak, but it was sore from

smiling. Upon my lack of response, the housekeeper sauntered away to her evening duties and prepared for dinner.

I cautiously tore away from my display to the kitchen where she was cooking. I was captivated, but envious. She was so alive. Poor, sure, but free. I wondered how that would be if I were not stuck in one place all the time. If the polished strokes on my body were not so heavy and my vision were not ruined with flashes of light. I sighed, pressing a palm into my aching chest. I had no pulse, but as I studied the curve of her lips and the pinkness of her cheeks, that curse was challenged. Neveah danced around the stove's fire, completely harmless. I longed to escape with her, but my entire being was plastered in stone and cement.

I paused in awe, watching with a fervid heart. *Ba-dump*. Then, there was a beat. *Ba-dump, ba-dump*. Warmth returned to my cheeks. *Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump...*



Author Biographies



Alayna Winans

is a junior and double major in history and creative writing and she is very excited for her works to be featured in *The Dazed Starling*. To her, writing is a way to experience that which you could not otherwise. Once out of college, she aspires to be a high school teacher and author. Her biggest dream would be to see one of her books on a shelf at Barnes and Noble.

Aliya Aiko Beaupain

is a junior pursuing a double major in theatre performance and creative writing. She sees poetry and prose as the ultimate act of generative sub-creation, and hopes that her pieces “The One Who Waits” and “The Sound of Endings prompt deeper thought about what it means to face personal failures, and the fleeting nature of existence.

Ashley Russell

is a junior majoring in health science. She aspires to work in the medical field, but enjoys writing fiction as a way of expression and as her way of leaving a creative mark or putting her thoughts on paper. She hopes to one day write a complete novel and dreams of it being published while she makes a life for herself and helps others in the medical field.

Caroline Zamudio | ΣΤΔ

is a graduate student in the English literature master’s program. She has been writing since elementary school and has always dreamed of becoming a published author. Her piece “One-Way” is about self-discovery, adventure, and the courage to start over again.

David Marshall

is a senior majoring in English and pursuing his Ph.D. David's work has consisted of plays such as "Greener Pastures," "At Pharaoh's Feet," and a published nonfiction titled "A Lullaby in Silence". His writing revolves around monster literature, which confronts the inner self and explores alternative reality games as disarticulated narratives. David dedicates his pieces to his dear fiancé, Michelle.

Eliza Friederang

is a senior, finishing a double degree in English and biology with a concentration in environmental science. Writing poetry is an essential creative outlet for her, helping her to relieve stress and process emotions without fear of judgment. Besides being a poet, Eliza is also a registered lifeguard.

Emma Black

is a junior majoring in English with a creative writing concentration. Emma writes because she believes writing is the medium where she can best articulate her thoughts and ideas, therefore uses it to better understand the world around and within her. Her dream is to one day be an author of her own novel.

Harley Schechter

is an online student in her second year. She is majoring in English and minoring in creative writing. She has chosen writing in hopes that her words and the worlds she will create will be a safe place for people who may think or feel they are alone in the world. She is currently developing two books of poetry and hopes to open a bookshop with her sister in the Temecula Valley Area.

Heavenlee SuabNkauj Vaaj

is a junior at majoring in creative writing and Christian studies. Her short fiction “Stoneheart” explores the revival of a cursed statue who cannot escape his romantic feelings for an unsightly housekeeper. Storytelling is one of many ways Heavenlee expresses her love for complex characters, and she hopes readers are captivated by their little quirks.

Jack Brown | ΣΤΔ

is a senior creative writing major minoring in film. He believes that words possess great power, and that storytelling demonstrates their ability to move people. When he’s not busy typing up whatever random ideas pop into his head, he’s either editing videos or pursuing his voice acting career.

Jacob A. Seavello

is a 39-year-old junior is majoring in creative writing and illustration and a US Army Veteran. His poem “STRIFE” is symbolic of the struggles of stress, anxiety, and depression. When he graduates, Jacob dreams of becoming an independent author and artist; to inspire the next generation through the beauty of the world despite the ‘strife’ we must endure.

James Welch

is a junior majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. He believes that writing is an opportunity to explore worlds beyond our own. He also views it as a chance to smash characters together like a toddler playing with dolls, much to the dismay of his readers. He aspires to become an English professor and transfer his curse to the next generation. He also likes boba.

Michael Vass | ΣΤΔ

is a sophomore seeking a dual degree in accounting and creative writing with a minor in Christian studies, (which inspired the short story “The Wounded Healer”). He primarily writes fantasy, and has explored formal poetry (which led to the poem “Dreams”). In his free time, he enjoys reading various subjects from classics to books on church history. He aspires to become a CPA and help others through accounting and writing.

Patrocinio Ryan Reyes III

is a senior, majoring in creative writing. His approach to storytelling centers on evoking one specific emotion throughout his stories. Ryan’s short story “I Love Dreams” and his flash fiction “Stranger” showcase this by evoking sadness and fear in each story respectively. Ryan is a giant TTRPG nerd and hopes to create his own game in the future so more people can create memorable stories with their friends.

Rylee Nyberg

is a junior majoring in English and minoring in digital studies. For her, writing is a joy and an outlet. Her piece “Goodbye Green-Eyed Monster” explores the realities of grief. She is honored to be featured again in *The Dazed Starling* with this talented community of creatives. Rylee has a passion for literature and hopes to inspire a new generation of readers, writers, and thinkers as a future professor.

Samantha N. Villanueva

is a senior majoring in creative writing. She believes everyone has a story to tell, and writing, from poetry to nonfiction, allows others to express themselves and tell their stories. She loves to write about various types of human relationships (especially romance) and aspires to help and encourage young writers to find their voice and strengthen their prose.

Sarah Murphy

is a junior majoring in English and minoring in Christian studies and Christian behavioral science. She enjoys being outdoors, playing the piano, and reading. These hobbies were inspired by her grandma, who appears in Sarah's piece, "The Purest Form of Love". Her grandma's presence in her life brought great joy to Sarah's childhood, which she considers a gift from God.

Tiffany Brooke Soto

is a recently graduated alumna who majored in English and received her MBA. She writes as a form of self-expression and aspires to continue writing, hoping to one day publish a collection of poems. She believes that words are the expression of the soul, that portray emotions in a powerful way.

Tirza Bustrum

is a sophomore majoring in creative writing. Her piece, "Saudade," is an expression of what it's like to be a third culture kid and the feeling of not knowing where you belong. "I Measure You in Januarys" is a poem that connects the month to the pattern of birth and loss in January and in life. She grew up in Lisbon, Portugal, and has lived in California for a year and a half.

Ty Manhart

is a sophomore majoring in aviation science. He started this as a late-night journal on the notes app that he thought would never see the light of day. However, the more it was shared the more excited he grew about the writing connecting to people as it opened conversations about mental health with those that read it.

Zipporah Marse

is a junior creative writing major and film minor. She hopes for her stories to reach those with open eyes and open hearts. Her nonfiction piece “Devore Road” explores how her childhood setting shaped her view of travel and nature, while her fiction piece “Conference Kids” reflects on adolescence through a child’s perspective on adult issues.

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