

A Viewmont High School Literary Journal

VIKING LEGENDS

Volume 2

Viking Legends is an annual literary and artistic journal that features various writers, artists, and photographers from Viewmont High School. The *Viking Legends* Staff is composed of Mr. Bartholomew's Creative Writing II students. Publications are chosen through a blind submission process.

Special thanks to Joshua Day and Ethan Baer for help formatting the cover. Extra special thanks to Lisa Bartholomew for help editing.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It's done. It's probably not perfect—there are likely some mistakes my students will inevitably discover and present to me like shining crucifixes before my vampiric pride in this work—but it is as good as I can make it, and I feel confident in saying that it's even better than last year's. I believe part of the explanation for this is a better handle on some of the processes involved in asking for, collecting, selecting, and compiling pieces; however, the most important difference is support from the wonderful Vikings who make this journal possible, for if nobody took a chance and shared their work with us, we would have nothing at all to publish.

So here's to you, Vikes. You are the reason we do this. You are the reason we put ourselves through the long hours and headaches that come from undertaking a work of this scope and magnitude. And you are worth it. We want you to know that you are valuable, that your voice is heard, and that you can soar just as high and as far as you want to—if you're willing to spread your wings and try.

Sam Bartholomew, Editor-in-Chief

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WRITING

A Message to Every Viewmont Viking

by Aaron Butterfield

To all of those who feel that their voice isn't heard,
The ones always told that when the winds don't blow, Vikings row—
But feel as though they are aboard a sinking vessel.
All around them are people pushing through, oars plunging deep—
Those who have proved themselves strong—
And amongst these people they feel completely alone,
Worthless,
Too weak to man the oar.
Seeing the vacant seat at the oarlock were they should reside,
They sit alone, feeling they have nowhere to go,
Wasted space on a mission doomed to fail.
To all those who feel as such, there is but one thing that you should
know:
We all have a place aboard this broken boat.
Even those who seem so strong manning the oars are just strokes away
from collapsing,
Silently fighting through the pain for the good of everyone else on board.
Know that even if you can't take an oar in calloused hands, there is a
place for you.
Though you may feel that nothing you do will keep the ship afloat,
An encouraging word to those manning the oars
Could be the only thing keeping those you deemed strong moving.
Everyone has a place here.
All Vikings. All in.

Untitled

anonymous

I've never really considered myself good at creating art. I remember specifically when I was younger I sat in on one of the painting classes my mom taught, and I tried to paint a portrait of my mom up at the front of the room. While all the "grown ups" sat around painting landscapes, I was honing my skills to make what I thought to be a beautiful rendering of my mother. When I went up to show her the dazzling masterpiece I'd poured my 6-year-old soul into she commented that "it's so beautiful baby, but why does your horse only have two legs?"

While it's unfair to pin all my insecurities as a creator on my sainted mother, I think that the idea of opening your art up to others can be daunting for anyone. For the things you put your own emotion and meaning into to be weighed and found wanting is scary, because it's really hard to think that you could measure up (or not) to the standards that have been set for art.

Which is ultimately, a shame.

Art is such a basic activity that all people engage in at one point or another. Do you ever judge a bird for being bad at singing? Or a plant for being bad at growing? No, because those are activities they were made to do, just like humans were made to make art. We celebrate birds singing and plants blooming the same way we should react to people singing, and dancing, and drawing, and writing.

So when we sing off-key, or draw poorly, or dance badly, or write cringy poetry, we shouldn't hide our engagement with making something that connects everyone. Although it's hard to not look back at your past efforts to take artsy photos or write "deep" lyrics and not feel a little bit embarrassed, I know that first hand, unfortunately. But art is something to be celebrated!

So I don't really need to consider myself good at creating art, because there's no clear way to be good at creating art.

Besides, my mom hung that awful horse-looking watercolor on the fridge anyways.

So here's to celebrating art.

Hero's Journey

by Gracie Cook

A ghost boy is lost
In grayscale dreams
And a clock that runs too fast.
A lion girl is searching
For courage to lead
And freedom to give.
A concrete boy is begging
Wanting to give and get
Sunlight laughs and star filled eyes.
A raven girl is waiting
For she knows it all will burn
But she'll smile 'til it does.
A sun cloud boy is running
To protect and give and laugh
Until he stops for good.
A fox girl is holding
To the family she creates
And the family that she hates.
Worlds meet with a hush
Fire is fought with a bang
And heroes breathe at last.

I Am the Critic

by Gracie Cook

I am the critic.
I think about your questions
And answer sincerely.
I am the critic.
I hope to help you learn
And give a new perspective.
I am the critic.
I want to solve your problems
By praising my own name.
I am the critic.
I abuse your passion
To hide my empty hands.
I am the critic.
I hide harsh words
Behind sympathetic smiles
I am the critic
I think my almost-talent
Deserves more than your effort.
I am the critic.
And I'm sorry.
I am the critic.
But,
Before I can be your critic,
I have to be my own.

Haikus

by Jaxon Lyman

The stream lives to give
And cares not who drinks from it
Or who passes by.

The stream breaks the field
Where the thirsty deer are met
They'll find water yet.

The parched deer hurry
Longing for an end to thirst
They walk past the stream.

Droplets in a rush
Don't choose where the river runs
They accept their fate.

Count Them

by Ally Mills

My parents tell me to loosen up.
They say, "This is your childhood.
Enjoy it before you grow up.
It's only high school."
My teachers say:
"You need to invest more time.
This is what makes your future.
Don't screw it up.
Do you want to work at McDonalds?"
And the colleges.
They say, "This is what we require:"
And they count.
They count my service hours,
AP, CE, and Honors classes,
extracurricular activities,
absences,
missing assignments,
ACT and AP scores,
and my grades.
They count and they count and they count,
and the numbers all add up.
They will calculate my future, and
I'm so afraid that they will say:
"We've counted them and it's not enough.
You should have tried harder."
My parents say, "Please try to make friends,
please go have fun.
Please don't grow up too fast."
But I grew up in 6th grade
when I learned that your teenage years
dictate how well you do for the rest of your life.
And it feels like I have the world on my shoulders,

because someone decided that it belongs in my backpack.
And I'm drowning in this neverending "to-do" list.
Shower. Sleep. Study. Smile.
"hang out with us, we're your friends."
"spend time with us, we're your family."
"it's your night to make dinner."
"clean your room."
Have fun.

Write your essays.

My friends say: "Why do you do this to yourself?"

And I think: How can you not?

I'm so afraid.

I'm sick and afraid that life will take me and say:

"You are not enough.

You should have tried harder."

And I count and I count and I count.

One, am I smart enough for my teachers? For the colleges?

Two, am I beautiful enough compared to the other girls?

Three, am I fun enough for my friends?

Four, am I kind enough to my family?

Five, do I look "happy" enough? Because people like "happy girls."

Six, am I happy?

Everyone says "Your teenage years

are when you figure out who you are,

and what kind of person you want to be."

But when will I even have time to figure out who I am,

let alone how to become this person?

And I wonder. Who will I be when it's all over?

All I know about myself is this:

My name is homework.

I am exhaustion

And I live in a constant state of anxiety.

My days are spent at a desk in a daze.

And my nights spent at a computer in a stupor.

Not living any life.

Just surviving.

Isn't that enough? Can't that count?

But, no! You can't put absent sleep on a college application.

And question four doesn't ask how much you've sacrificed.

Can I count all the times I couldn't do what I love,

and count them as service hours towards my uncertain future?

The daily mental,

physical,

and emotional breakdowns.

COUNT THEM!

I count my tear drops.

And friends lost.

And sleep loss. Count

them.

Blinking Cursor

by Ally Mills

I am a blinking cursor on a blank page.
Full of potential energy,
unrealized potential,
endless possibilities.
Sometimes I am hope.
The beginning of something new.
A new story,
letter of love,
a poem.
And sometimes, I am dread.
When no words come to mind,
and inspiration has left you.
My incessant blinking annoys you and
leaves you feeling more empty and hopeless than before.
Feeling like a failure.
Sometimes, my blinking looks like disdainful laughter.
Or just a haunting, pitiful sob.
Screaming for you to wield my power.
But other times, the silence of my blinking strangles you.
You want for me to offer up your long lost inspiration.
But, I stay silent, just waiting.
I want to hear your story.
Not my own.
I stay silent.
Just waiting.

Isolation Mine

by Ally Mills

Who would have thought that emptiness could be heard. That the absence of sound was indeed a sound of its own. That is all I hear anymore. The silence. Absence of life. Everything is dead, gone, you can't even hear the wind anymore. It is like Earth has exhaled its last breath. I am left in the last place on Earth not breached with radiation or polluted with death. The last fleet of ships left Earth's soil over 2 years ago. So. POPULATION OF PLANET EARTH: 1.

Everything in my life I've held so close to my chest is meaningless now. Those government secrets, childhood memories, lost loves. Secrets aren't really secrets anymore when there's no one left to hear them. So, here's the biggest secret of my life.

I first discovered the damaged Illuviate about 114 years ago. I will never forget the power that ran through my fingertips and all throughout my body. Vibrating my soul. I knew instantly that this was what I was made for. I was considered the expert on Illuviate from then on. Illuviate was a foreign and broken technology to the human race, but together there was so much potential. Illuviate was a portal. An entrance to the whole of the universe and beyond.

For years coming, our precious planet Earth had been on the brink of destruction. Just one final weight and it would crumble. Reduced to the dust it started out as. In the early stages of repairs, I realized that the power of Illuviate was especially damaging. I was faced with an impossible decision: give up on access to the cosmos and give Earth a few more decades, if we were lucky; or, continue with our initiative, speed up the process of our inevitable demise, but create a backdoor exit in the process. If it worked. I was the one to decide whether risking our only known habitable planet and place of survival, for the survival of the entire human race was worth the risk. But Illuviate didn't work like I had planned anyway. So, in the end, I destroyed Earth all for nothing. Leaving all of humanity with no place to go. It wasn't pollution or radiation from wars that left Earth desolate in the end. It was the coming forth of Illuviate. It was me.

So now? Now, I'm like the captain, going down with the sinking ship, left on this barren wasteland. And I... I deserve it.

I'm sitting here in the dark, typing as the last days of my life tick away, and the fate of the human race hangs in the balance, sitting just outside the atmosphere. Waiting and hoping.

The human race can't go anywhere. All the planets in our solar system are uninhabitable and that is as far as we can travel by spaceship. And without Illuviate, the sky really is the limit. Illuviate does work, but it needs codes. Each code a key to a new planet. But the demise of Earth

arrived long before we had obtained any codes. And every world we have contacted wants nothing to do with our tainted race.

So, for 2 years, I've been waiting. Waiting to die. There are even a million ways to do it. The easiest one would be to just walk outside, where, after one breath, the life would be burned out of me. But, there was something deep inside me, that would never let me do it. Maybe, it is the narcissist in me that won't let me die in such an unglorified manner. Maybe, society ingrained in me the belief that death is bad. Maybe, it's just because I'm a coward and afraid of dying. Or, maybe it's the dusty, tear-stained picture of my son, who I clung to, the last time I saw him. Maybe, since I wasn't able to save my son, I can help some other mother save hers.

When you're all alone. When you are the last one left. There are no principles or laws to abide or live by. You only have yourself to live with. And when you're at the end of it all, that's when you truly know yourself. I now know that I'm not someone who gives up so easily. So. I ask myself one last impossible question: How am I going to save the human race?

The lights start to flicker on, and I smile.

I've spent too long in the dark.

Self Portrait As Rain

by Ally Mills

Droplets create ripples.
Some small, others large,
that spread far and wide,
getting larger and larger.
Turning into tumultuous waves,
flooding homes,
destroying safe places,
a crazy, uncontrollable mess
drowning and destroying.
So loud, demanding all attention,
a commanding storm.
But oh so quiet on other days.
Sentimental and nostalgic,
drizzly and wishful.
With little sparkling puddles,
and romanticized moments.
People kissing in the rain,
kids jumping in puddles.
Shiny gleeful smiles,
and heavy raindrops dripping
down the edges of colorful umbrellas.
Sometimes it's a warm drizzly rain.
But in rain, you get soaked.
Frozen down to the bone and then deeper.
A cold merciless rain.
So really, there's no controlling this
downpour.

Owners of The Night

by Ally Mills

The old couple held the other's weathered hands.
As the timeline of their life unraveled in strands.
In their memories, they retraced,
the very first time they saw this place.

With boarded up windows and a hanging door.
Broken old furniture and a grimy floor.
A year later, construction was finally finished.
The newspapers said, "THE NIGHT: Now Open For Business"

And, like clockwork, each night by nightfall,
The room was packed wall to wall.
With discarded heels, and suit coats,
and laughter erupting from their throats.

Every smile strikingly vibrant.
Music flowing, a rush of excitement.
But as glittering places popped up throughout the square.
There was more room for dancing, and more empty chairs.

Soon Charlie behind the counter had to be let go.
And the only music played was from the radio.
Magic from the past hung through the air like perfume,
as they sat there in that dimly lit room.

With boarded up windows and a hanging door,
and broken old furniture from a life before.
The ghosts of times past came,
and danced around the room like a never ending flame.

With the eviction notice in their hands,
it seemed this was the last thing they could stand.
There were tears in their eyes and nostalgia in their hearts.
And they were filled with woe to depart.

It started to come, the dreaded daylight.
And they remembered when they were owners of The Night.

Love Continues

by Jaycelyn Chino

Wherever you go,
I won't let you freeze.
Even in the snow,
We'll be like a warm breeze.
I want you to know
Life won't be easy.
Just please take my hand.
We can travel land to land.

Wherever you go,
I won't let you cry,
Even when you know
You can't reach the sky.
When you're feeling low,
I'll show you how to fly.
So please don't be shy;
It doesn't hurt to try.

There might be times
Where I have to say goodbye,
But I won't lie;
You might have to dry my eyes.
Even if it feels wrong,
We must stay strong.
It won't be long; in time,
I'll be back by your side where I belong.

Untitled

by Manny Nunez

The full moon shone down upon the spindly tree branches, the light that made it past the skinny arms of the tree illuminated the path of the traveler. His worn boots shuffled down the path with his cloak swaying in a light spring breeze, eager to return to his home before the night became too old. The hood would flick left and right as he gazed over the shadowy surrounding. His pace quickened as he began to recognize the terrain about him. The excitement that home was just right around the corner gave him the strength to jog back into his camp. He grinned upon seeing his crude hut. Plastered mud covered the walls, with thatch for a roof. A small garden lay to the right, against the mud walls. A thin fence enclosed the garden from the outside.

As he approached his dwelling a feeling arose within him. A feeling of uncertainty, fear and then anger. He whipped around, a bearded axe finding its way into his hand. Forth a figure came, and with it the stars. Light seemed swallowed by this enigma, as it strode forward, trees and weeds bowed their mighty trunks to it. As it ranged within ten feet of the traveler it turned its capped head, expecting the man to bow like trees and weeds. In response, the traveler extended his axe, pointing it to the being. No words were exchanged, but the meaning was clear.

The being drew from his robes a simple broadsword. Her blade was black as a moonless night. The Pommel shown a black glimmer. The traveler, wary of the blade, moved forward, the axe crossing from left to right in an unpredicted slash against the being. It tilted to the left, completely dodging the swing, and disappearing as well. The traveler swung his head about wildly, in a vain attempt to spot his foe. Something brushed against his foot, causing him to turn and swing into the darkness, his legs became unsteady as he tumbled to the ground. The being rose from the dirt, directly in front of him. He remained still, awaiting the actions of this being. When it regained its full height it stretched out a limb to the fallen man, an object in its grasp. A cascade of emotions washed over the man as a flow of words poured from the being: "Wanna Sprite Cranberry?"

The Marks

by Lindsey Richards

The first time it happened I was sitting in class. I was just six years old when the black ink started to spread across my skin. Along with the black ink came a burning sensation and the tattoo began to darken. I had learned about the tattoos since I was a toddler. Everyone had them. Some varying in size and color, and what the design of the tattoo was. We knew from a young age that you got the tattoos when a significant event happened that changed who you are or who you would become. So, as I watched the black ink form into the shape of two clasped hands, I couldn't help but wonder what had happened that will change who I am. It didn't take me long to find out; a few seconds later I saw the same tattoo appear on another little girl right next to me. Her name was Mindy. She and I first bonded over the tattoo and then she became my best friend. For the next 10, years Mindy and I became inseparable. We did everything together. I was there for the tattoo she got after her baby brother was born, and the tiny house tattoo that appeared behind her ear when she moved, and the tattoo written in her dad's handwriting after he got sick.

I didn't have many tattoos appear on me. I had lips that appeared on my side after my first kiss, and the paw print on my ankle when I got my dog, but other than that I was blank. It was unusual to have as few tattoos as I did. Some kids my age had 10, maybe even 15, and I had three tiny tattoos. I was always self-conscious about it and I almost always wore long sleeves and pants to cover my blank skin.

One day I was sitting in school looking at my phone trying to distract myself from the monotony of the class, when I felt the burning sensation. It started slowly at first and then intensified. It was just behind my right ear almost hidden in my hair. For a moment, I ignored the pain and looked around. Nothing was different. I had sat in this spot for months doing the exact thing and no tattoos appeared. What was changing my life? My eyes darted across the classroom—and then I saw him. He had just walked into the class and walked to the back so quietly, not even the teacher noticed him. He was tall and had dark hair that flopped over his forehead. You could see a few freckles peppering his cheeks. My heart quickened, and I reached up and covered that tattoo. I expected him to look unsettled because I was sure that he got the same one. But his face remained stoic.

The bell rang, and I lingered back waiting to get the courage to go talk to him, but he disappeared out of the classroom as easily as he had gotten in. I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Behind my ear was a small triangle with 2 tiny dots on each side of the triangle. I stared at it in utter confusion. Tattoos always represent whatever the

thing that changes you is. What does a triangle and a few dots have to do with me?

Two weeks went by and I didn't see that boy again. My eyes looked for him everywhere, but he was nowhere to be found. Until one day, I caught a quick glimpse of him walking out of school. My curiosity got the best of me, and I followed him. I stayed about 15 feet behind him and got more and more confused as he led me through nearby neighborhoods. He disappeared behind a bush and I walked until I reached the spot where he was. My confusion intensified. How could he have just disappeared? All of a sudden I felt a hand pushing my hair back to reveal the tattoo. I turned around and slapped the boy I had been followings hand away.

"I knew it," he said.

"Knew what?" I asked as my brow furrowed.

"You have the tattoo," he brushed his floppy black hair up and behind his ear was the same tattoo.

"What does it mean?" I asked. He smirked and took a step closer to me.

"I guess we'll just have to find out, won't we?" he said with a smile.

Haiku

by Kennedy Wight

when you are around
I pull myself out of hell
to make you smile

By Zero

by Jordan Farnsworth

"It's quite simple, really." The voice had no discernible source but its air of calm authority made obedience seem natural. "Just divide Four by two. That's all."

The boy turned to Four, who was visibly trembling.

"Will it hurt him?" the boy asked.

A gentle laugh sounded. "Don't worry. Just divide. It is the natural way of things."

The voice knew best, he decided, and so he picked up the little device they had given him and pressed four buttons. Four opened his mouth as if to scream, but he didn't make a sound--he never got the chance. The moment the boy hit the button to finish the operation, Four was split in half. Where he had stood a moment before, there was now two Numbers, younger than Four had been but identical to each other in appearance. They were looking around apprehensively.

"Very good," the voice said approvingly. A door opened up to the side of the room, unmarked except by a little dash, and out of it came a man in a white lab coat. The boy had seen these men before and was unperturbed. The man seized one of the young Numbers and ushered him back through the door, though not before he cast a frightened look back at his twin.

"Keep going," the voice spoke. "Divide Two by two."

The boy was only too happy to obey, and a moment later, there were two new Numbers where the little Two had been. They were very small. Just as before, the door opened up and a man in a lab coat came out. The boy stood back, waiting expectantly for one of the Ones to be removed so that he could receive his next instruction. But to his surprise, the man took both of the Ones through the door, leaving the boy alone. He looked around anxiously, worried he had somehow done wrong.

"Don't worry," the voice said soothingly. "You've done so well, you're ready to try something new."

Just then, a shrill scream sounded from the room where the lab coat man had vanished. A second later, the door opened and a new Number was shoved out. Unlike the others, this one was not small and young, but older, with tired wisdom in his eyes.

He looked at the young boy. "Don't do it," he murmured.

The boy had never heard a Number speak before, and he didn't trust this unfamiliar digit. He frowned.

The door opened once more and a Seven was brought to stand next to the new Number.

"All right," the voice said. "Go ahead. Divide Seven by Zero."

"Don't--" the Zero begged, but it was too late. The boy had punched in the numbers.

There was a tremendous explosion. When the smoke cleared, the room was in smolders. There were large holes in all four walls, and where the boy and the Seven had stood, there were only scorch marks. The Zero stood alone, covered in ashes but otherwise unharmed.

Men in lab coats wearing gas masks emerged from the remains of the room next door and seized Zero, who showed no resistance. There was no point.

"When will you stop?" he whispered as they pulled him away. "You will never succeed. How many innocents have to die before you accept that?"

A cold, cruel laugh sounded from somewhere above. "As many as it takes. We will find a way--someday."

Simplistic Beauty

by Emmy Johnson

The busy commotion of city streets woke me up as it has for 3 years now. Many complain to wake up in such a way, but I prefer it. This summer morning, it's raining. The apartment I live in is on the third floor of its complex. My landlord is an old Filipino woman that always smiles at you and in doing that, makes you feel like her closest, best friend. Her name is Rosamie and she lives on the first floor. It's a nice cozy home for my 2 parakeets, my dog Dani, and me.

Today's agenda has nothing on its list, so I could take my time to start my day, but I don't want to. I get out of bed as soon as I wake up and start a pot of coffee. I decide on a cozy outfit that's fit for the rain. The amethyst pendant I'm wearing has been mine since 9th grade. Once I finish my coffee and feed my dog and birds, I rush out to greet the sweet summer rain.

The simplicity and tranquility of the city when the air is damp is when I like to go out the most. The gentle rush of the people trying to get to a warm, dry place charges my gratitude. It is days like these where I really get my peace of mind. Peace of mind, I think, is a goal the whole world deserves.

I pass flower shops and bakeries, workers and homeless, sweet and earthy smells. This world is beautiful when mother nature plays her role. The green trees, their leaves passing each other drops of rain. The fragrant flowers, dewy with water, almost smell more indulgent. The layer of umbrellas, all different colors and sizes, slide the rain off their edges to keep their south end dry.

I'm suddenly sucked out of this blissful wonderland by a man with a tangled beard and tattered clothes. He asks, "Do you have any spare change?"

Ever since I was little, my mother told me to leave the homeless alone. That they were homeless because of their poor choices and dirty lifestyles. I always listened to my mom when she gave me advice. She was an intelligent woman. But my mom is wrong this time. This man's sadness is obvious. His wet, light-hazel eyes scream of loneliness and loss. His gaze is somber, and his skin is dirty. Mom also said most homeless people were posers that were too lazy to get actual jobs. Of course my mom was partially right about that, but this man smells of street trash and body odor. This man has obviously felt and witnessed the worst loss. Loss you would not want your worst enemy to endure. This man was no poser. So, I reply,

"Of course,"

I reach into my bag, pull out my wallet, and grab a twenty,

"Here."

A twenty-dollar bill is not enough to change someone's life, but it is enough to wipe the somber look from his face.

"Oh, thank you ma'am. Have a beautiful day," he says.

I move along the wet pavement. As I'm walking, soaking up my surroundings, a window painting catches my eye. It is a groovy depiction of the Led Zeppelin blimp. The sign in the door to the right of the picture says "open". I welcome myself in. To my surprise there is a Tabico cat at my feet twirling and purring. Inside are records and books. It smells like dust, cats, and menthol. As I browse the store with my eyes, I find a lady in the back of the store.

She has an energy emanating from her that could warm your soul to the core. She has big, curly, grey hair and dull, blue eyes. She reminds me of what a female buddha would look like.

"Hello Hun, can I help ya?" she asks.

"I don't think so. Your window is great advertisement."

"I know. What brings you out on a day like this?" she says as she looks out the window.

"I just like the air, I guess. It beats doing nothing."

She glances at me with her head down, her eyes above her glasses. "You like the rain's melody too?"

It felt like she had touched my soul, "It's like therapy."

I look at the cat clock on the wall above the cashier counter. It was about 6:30 p.m., so I said goodbye to the sweet buddha lady.

I hop on a trolley for the scenic pleasure. As it gets darker, the city slowly begins to glow. The city lights light up the raindrops on the glass. The neon buzzing in the bar windows and the lit open signs in the clubs and cafes attracts my spirited attention. And so, I take the next stop at one of the many bars.

The bar, Atomic Liquors, has a band playing on a small stage with lights, two microphones, and their instruments. They are playing old Bob Dylan and Simon And Garfunkel songs. "I am not the one you want, babe. I will only let you down," they sing. There was a distinct smell, not of alcohol, but of perfume and warm bread. The cozy atmosphere in the bar welcomes people from the rain with open arms.

I have to work tomorrow, so I call it a night and walk home. Under the lights in the damp air, I feel as if I am walking in heaven. The sky is no longer sprinkling, and the people are no longer looking for shelter, yet the gentle rush remains. When I get home Rosamie, the landlord, buzzes me in and I make my way up to the third floor. At the foot of my door Dani is scratching and sniffing, her usual routine. It feels nice to be in the comfort of my home with the familiar smells and surroundings. For some reason it is the easiest thing for me to see the simplistic beauty in everything and it can be the most amazing blessing

or the most haunting curse. Today, thankfully, was one of the rare blessings.

Untitled

by Dutcher Lines

I often think about this life we live
And why we're even here.
What is our purpose upon this Earth?
What is the whole idea?
Is there a reason for my breath?
Or the blood flowing through my veins?
Maybe there's a plan for us,
Or maybe we're just a mistake.
I start to think about this vast cold world,
The things we suffer through—
Take a look and you will see that pain is all around
Mental, physical, emotional too—
The hurt is very real.
How do I get through this then?
Why would I even want to?
The answer lies in those around,
The kind, the loving, the few.
My family and friends that care for me,
They ask me how I am.
They see when I am hurting,
And they take me in their hands.
They shine more brightly in my life
Than the stars above.
I know that I can count on them
To keep me hanging on.
I now know why we're here today,
Standing on this Earth.
We're here for those around us
To love them and support.
Do something nice for someone else,
Make them smile or laugh.
Be the light in the dark,
Be their compass on the path,
For when you help someone else,
The aching will cease to be.
Your heart will finally fill with joy;
Your eyes will finally see.
Your mind will rest,
Knowing that you helped someone in need

Unchangeable Reality

by Haboon Jibril

To a world,
where perfection is valued,
but imperfection is reflected.

To a world,
where few are as sharp as the needle,
but no one is as helpful as the clouds.

To a world,
where people are seeing everything,
But with blind eyes,

To a world,
Where people are hearing everything,
But with deaf ears.

To a world,
Where kindness is free,
But seen as a weakness.

To a world,
Where education is used as a weapon,
But seen as a burden.

To a world,
Where people have many faces,
Just like the dice that has six sides.

To a world,
Where people seemed so close to you,
But not by heart.

To a world,
Where everyone is trying to make autopia,
But in fact making it more dystopian...

Why do humans have to be,
So heartless and affectless?

Why do we have to be,

Harmful and poisonous to each other?

Why do we have to be,
A stubborn reality.

Sound Waves

by Josh Julien

As Jason climbed the tree, he felt that something was wrong. He reached his hand toward the next branch and trusted his weight to it. Big mistake. The branch broke off from under his hand and he tumbled back down through the branches that he had already passed. When he hit, his head slammed back into the hard ground, and his sight went black.

When he woke up he could feel that some time had passed, so he opened his eyes to assess the damage that had been done to his body. Only, when he opened his eyes there was no world to greet him. All was black. He tried closing and opening his eyes again as if his sight was a computer that could simply restart. Nothing. Panicking, he tried to raise his arm to touch his eye and realized that he couldn't feel his arm. As he lay there in distress, he slowly started to see little green waves and blue spots trickle into the blackness above him. Confused, he squinted his eyes to see them better, but it didn't help. Could this be real? He shouted for help and could hear his own voice in his head, but that only made him realize that the rest of the world was silent to him. He started to see frantic little red waves come into the edge of his vision that seemed to grow over time as if getting closer to him. When the waves were so big that the pulses seemed to fill his head, he felt someone place two fingers on his neck. Suddenly, a line of text appeared out of the blackness saying,

"I found a pulse, let's get the headboard ready." He was lifted for a brief moment and placed on a stiff board. The lines of text were going so fast that he had a hard time keeping up. He could make out a few words like "ambulance," "hospital," and "parents," but his attention was pulled away from the words by the different types of waves and lines that surrounded him. Some were intense and colorful, others were gentle and muted. The soft blue spots that he had seen earlier were back, popping quickly in and out of sight, reminded him of bird song, the green wispy lines looked like wind going through the trees, and to his left he could see distant streaks of silver that reminded him of cars driving by. He saw a new line of text appear that had a different font than the first.

"What happened to my Jason! Is he gonna be okay? Hurry!" it said. He could recognize his mother's handwriting anywhere. He didn't feel any pain, but started to realize the seriousness of the situation he was in. He couldn't see, he couldn't hear, and he couldn't feel his body. He was going to need to find a way to live in this new world.

The Race

by Josh Julien

There was a girl who was placed in a race.

She was told to go fast or get left behind.

As the race got underway she became friends with the racers around her, and they were doing well.

A few miles down the road she tripped on air and looked up from the ground and saw her friends look back once and keep running.

All the racers passed her, no one stopping to help her up, and some even kicked her while she was down.

When she finally got up, she looked around and realized that she had been left behind and was alone on the track.

She decided to take herself out of this race that we call life that day.

So look around at your fellow racers and ask yourself if you will stop for any of them to offer a hand if they fall, and walk with them as they limp towards the finish line.

Will you sacrifice your place in the race to help someone else finish?

Division

by Jaxon Lyman

Some things in life can't be prepared for. Some people choose not to try, but regardless of the effort put in the return is based on something else entirely. We expect life to be a simple equation y being our happiness, our contentment, love, and peace, and x is the effort we put in. How much we're willing to sacrifice. In a way, x could be considered sadness. We take these two variables and put them in the simplest equation: $y = x$. But when someone plots their life on this graph they find a paper-thin shape. Impossibly thin in its absence of truth.

Most are less naive. They put a small multiplier on that x , and they add a new variable, z . Z represents luck, the universe, God. But it's unknowable, a true variable that can't be controlled in any experiment. They make a new equation that looks something like $y = 0.5x + z$. They work as hard as they can, and they hope whatever they do is enough to counteract that z . Maybe the z will be in their favor, who knows. Someone's life plotted would be a strange artifact. Something three-dimensional and tangible.

It's easy to stop there. Now we have something that can be held, that can be examined from every angle. Something we can understand. And therein lies the problem with this equation, it makes too much sense. The truth is life isn't numbers at all. Life isn't something that can be held in your hand. It's not even something we can try to understand. I can't tell you what the equation that will find your happiness is. I don't think anyone can. But I can tell you something.

It seems that those who are the most naive are the happiest. We can understand that life is complicated all we want, but those people who say $y = x$ don't care if they're wrong, because they're happy. They give up "optimizing their life for the greatest output of satisfaction" in favor of simply living, enjoying the moments that make everything worth it, and learning from the rest.

The State Versus That Guy Who Fell From the Sky

by Joshua Day

“All arise for the honorable judge Glomblork the Thronk.”

In the dark, I saw the twisted forms around me arise. Standing added perhaps three inches to their heights. With some difficulty, I managed to arise from the cold stone floor with my hands and legs tied up.

“The court is now in session,” growled a goblin on a podium. His yellowing powdered wig bounced as he shouted. “Sit, losers. The prosecution will now present his case.”

A wrinkly, overweight creature, with no hair but his bushy eyebrows, arose. “I’ll keep this brief. This... thing... Has invaded our home. He fell through that hole and murdered--” there was a collective gasp here. “--our precious blunkler bush. Now there will be no blunkie butter for krung season. It is our job, as the people, to put this hideous creature to justice.”

There was a cheer—until the judge hit his podium with a gavel the size of his head. “The defense will now present his case.”

I had never seen the creature who then arose, but I’m certain he was too small to be an adult. “I like him. He gave me a nice hat.” The hat he wore on his head was indeed mine, but I hadn’t given it to him. In fact, it had disappeared as I fell, and I hadn’t noticed its absence.

The judge, clearly surprised anyone would plead my case, grumbled, “Alright, let’s just get this over with. Prosecution, evidence.”

The fat goblin arose. “Exhibit A. His left foot-cover.” He raised my left boot and I realized just how cold my bare foot was. “I pulled this off his foot when I discovered him.” A misleading comment because he was hardly the first to find me. “Note the blunkie juice all over it.”

“Objection!” cried the child with my hat, “You have no proof.” The boot was proof enough, especially when combined with the rest of my torn up outfit. The thorny bush broke my fall, but also my jacket.

“Overruled,” called the judge. “Prosecution, keep going.”

“I call Klorkin Durg to the stand.”

The goblin in question seemed to have been stretched vertically. Its head was visible above the crowd even before it arose. As the creature hobbled to the stand--which happened to be a rock on a tree stump--I got the impression that it was female.

The goblin bailiff swore her in: “Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, or I’ll break your tooth?”

“Yeah.”

The prosecutor approached her. “Now, Klorkin, why dontcha tell me whatcha saw?”

Klorkin seemed to jitter as she testified. She had a smooth voice according to the laws of relativity, and I decided that if she were to sing, I would not have to tear my ears out. "Well, I was standing right there--" She pointed a long finger. "--and I was looking at the blonklie bush, and I saw something falling, and I heard a crack, and I says to my friend Jop, 'Did somewhat just fall on the blonklie bush?' I says, and I ran over there, and I saw this thing--" She covered her eyes with one hand and pointed at me with the other. "--and I says, 'What the?' and it was that thing, I swear."

"So it was, without a doubt, this creature that fell on the blonkler bush?"

"Oh, without a doubt. It was--"

"I objectify!" roared my miniscule defender. "You're lying!"

The witness broke into tears. "No! I'm telling the truth! I'm telling the... Oh!"

There was a snap as the judge whacked his gavel on the desk with ferocity. "Order in the court, ya slops!" There still was not order in the court, so the judge repeated his demand for five straight minutes. Then he jumped off the stand, which was also a rock on a tree stump, and hit the small goblin on the head.

That got the crowd's attention. They murmured until the judge repeated, "Order in the court!" Then they silenced.

The small goblin sat up. "No more objections, yer honor."

The judge coughed into his fist. "Now--"

"Objection!" After an awkward silence, the defender murmured, "Sorry."

The judge returned to the stand and glared at the goblin child. Then, he said, "The defense will now present his evidence."

"Evidence?" asked the child. "Oh, evidence! I call to the stand... that guy!"

I noticed with a groan that he had pointed at me. I again worked my way to a standing position and hopped over to the podium, which could hardly fit both my feet.

The bailiff approached me and stopped a notable distance away. "Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, or I'll break your tooth?"

"Won't you do that anyway?" I asked.

He threw his imitation Bible, which happened to be a rock, at me. I promptly amended, "Yes."

The defense attorney stood before me and looked up at me, grinning foolishly. "Are you guilty?"

"I don't know," I... fibbed.

The goblin was astounded. "So, no?"

I rolled my eyes. "Well, I fell from that hole, way up there..." Everyone looked up at the whole in the cavern ceiling, visible by the light of glowing crystals. "Then I fell, hit my head on something, and went unconscious. Then I awoke all tied up about twenty-three seconds before the trial started."

"So you were there when the crime happened, right?"

"Sure."

"And you didn't see anyone break the bush?"

"Sure."

"Then you're innocent," the little one exclaimed. "Case closed."

The judge sighed, although I thought he was gagging at first, then pounded his gavel. "Orright, let's just get this over with. You, jury losers, whaddaya decide?"

"Guilty!" the three goblins on the stand all shouted, jumping up and down.

The judge whacked his gavel on his rock again, then shouted, "I declare this ugly punk guilty!"

From the side, I heard the bushy-browed prosecutor mutter to himself, "Death, death death, death!"

"And I sentence him to eternal servitude. Now that he has broken our blonkler bush, I say we make him our new blonkler bush!"

All the goblins in the room except for my small defender roared their approval. The child who defended me was promptly shoved aside by the mass of goblins converging on me.

I tugged my wrapped-up legs and then arms apart, and the knots easily came undone. I ran through the crowd, trying not to kick them when possible.

Above the angry shouts, the voice of the judge swore. "Who tied those garbage knots?"

"I did," laughed the little goblin wearing my hat.

"Nooooo!" The judge's voice faded away as I made my escape, their short legs failing to keep pace with me.

The Creation of the World

by Annika Naylor

People like to say the world came into being from a spark, or god(s) willing their children to take form.

I know better.

The great beasts of the sky, those of the stars, were peaceful for many eons as the universe swirled into existence. However, as more and more beasts took form from the new stars, they became increasingly territorial. Beasts began taking sides, and before long each was prowling about, wary and twitchy. As tensions spilled over on both sides, war broke out. These starry beings began bounding over starry fields, clashing with one another and kicking up the debris of incomplete worlds.

Several of these shapeless clumps clashed in midair; until a lumped mass bubbling with heat began twirling in the center of the battlefield. Beasts continued to fight tooth and nail against one another, smashing against the bubbling mass in the chaos. It compacted, taking form as a many-edged sphere covered in jutting protrusions and deep scars.

A curious lynx, who was not fighting as the others were, slunk past the slashing claws and snapping jaws, nosing at the sharp sphere. Upon being cut by it, the Lynx hissed but did not swat the mass away. Instead, while its nose gushed stardust, the Lynx snatched the sphere in its jaws and trotted away from the disastrous battle.

It reached a small, hidden pocket of the universe and tossed this mass into a pile of other interesting items; some like the edged sphere and others completely different. One among these was a small star which pulled the new object into an orbit around it to join the other planets.

The new addition, being nearly a blank canvas, stole from the Lynx what it decided it needed. The drool from its burned and lacerated jaws became the water, the blood the churning center, and the pained tears from its eyes became the day's sky. For the heat of the day reminded it of the burns that would never heal. Plants sprouted almost immediately, pushing their way to great heights within moments to the Lynx. Then the stardust falling from its wounds became every living creature, each as unique as the bit of stardust that made up its being.

Finally, and as a final stab to its creator and caretaker, what we now call the Earth stole from the Lynx its left eye. This became the moon, allowing the Lynx to always see what was stolen from it, and could never get back. The other planets in this small solar system the Lynx had inadvertently created, pushed out and protected the Earth, keeping it close to the center but far enough away that it would thrive

Thus our world was born. Of war and disloyalty, thievery and cruelty. No wonder it is as we know it. With origins so violent, how could we not follow in the footsteps of our very creation?

Candlelight

by Joshua Day

It rained outside his open window, the overcast sky lending the city skyline a dreary blue tint. A chill wind invited itself in and whipped at the candle beside his desk. He hated the rain. He couldn't stand being confined to such a small house as his, his father away from home, his mother, though only a room away, even more distant.

The rain and breeze threatened to snuff the flame from the small candle that weakly illuminated the room. Therefore Mark arose from his desk and forced the window closed. He took a quick glance about the room—the peeling red paint, the wooden bed with its unkempt sheets, the general coziness of its decor—and sat again, having nothing more to do than to watch the little flame dance upon its wax candle.

His interest in watching the little light soon waned, and he, despite himself, found himself on his feet and looking out the window. Smiling sadly, but glad for the warm light he had. As he stared pensively at the cold night, he spotted movement on the street below and was surprised to see a pair of poor souls about in the rain. From above, he could tell little of them, and although they were both wrapped tightly in muted azure coats, neither seemed to find any warmth in them. They must have been children like him. They had been running, but he watched their pace slow until they collapsed into a huddled pile in the middle of the street.

Mark sat again upon his desk and turned back to the little dancing flame, but its dance had become small and weak. It quivered, and Mark could think only of those children shivering outside his door. He thought he could feel the cold that buffeted them, and the candle could not warm him.

At last, Mark resolved to act. He stood, took up the candlestick, and, by its light, found his way through sleeping corridors to the front door. He threw open a door and, exposed to a sudden blast of chill that nearly snuffed out his candle, retrieved a coat from a rack and an umbrella from an old basket.

The cold wind and rain fought candle's flame, but the umbrella provided just enough shelter to keep it alive. Two long-faced children huddled outside; they felt the warm light upon their necks and turned to face him. Mark found himself at a loss for words, but managed to force one out, "Hello."

The children stared longingly at his light. The younger, a boy of perhaps six, reached out but made no effort to stand. His face had a blue tinge to it, except his rosy cheeks and nose. His hair showed signs of once, long ago, being short and straight. His older sister, not much his

elder, turned her eyes from the candle to Mark, her large eyes asking the question her frozen lips could not.

Mark found no words to answer with but nodded and waved lightly. He stepped forward and held out the candle until the girl took it, then trusted the umbrella with her brother. He helped them each to their feet and led them to the door.

The air was chill, but, somehow, he felt joy, a warm flame in his heart undisturbed by wind and rain.

Untitled

by Kaedon Apezteguia

Why must we dream underneath veiled ceilings?
Why must we dream within painted walls,
Crafted by aged hands, who—
Through loving us—
Set us apart from the stars.

Black Talon

by Ethan Baer

“PROGRAM SUCCESSFULLY LOADED. PREPARING MATTER FABRICATORS. ESTABLISHING COMBAT SIMULATION IN T MINUS 30 SECONDS. 29... 28... 27...”

Maria settled into a guard position as the robotic female voice counted down, checking the strap on her vambrace and adjusting her shield. Her sword was a comfortable weight in her right hand, the metal blade reflecting the bright lights in the corners of the sim chamber. She stared at her own warped reflection on the metal. Her black polyweave armor was nothing special, with hard, fireproof outer plating on top of more flexible body armor, and a simple rounded helmet with visor slits in the front. No ornamentation or added gear, just pure functionality for the training programs. She'd be able to customize her own set before her first real hunt.

“4... 3... 2... 1... PROGRAM ESTABLISHED.” Walls morphed into rock, the sim room expanding into a massive cavern. Maria couldn't see the far walls in the dim light, so she waited. A concussive roar shook the chamber with the sound of a hundred rockslides. Maria's helmet deadened most of the sound, but the sheer intensity of the roar was still loud enough to make her wince. Out of the darkness, a swirling column of flame shot straight towards her and slammed into her shield. The force of it made her slide backwards, her boots grinding against the rocky cavern floor as she shoved back, struggling to stay upright.

Dragon fire wasn't like normal fire, which would just engulf and burn you. Dragon fire could really punch. It was almost like it had physical substance when it crashed into you, but then dissipated into floating sparks and embers. The flames lit up the cavern, and the embers shot away in every direction, like thousands of tiny, floating torches.

Maria rolled to the side, letting the fire shoot past her and blast a crater into the back wall. In the flickering light of the embers, she could finally see the beast she was facing. They only lit up the front half of it, but that was enough. The head alone was bigger than Maria was, and the entire beast was covered in deep maroon scales, an impenetrable bloodred armor impervious to nearly every attack. The only place without scales was the soft underbelly. The black eyes burned with an inner fire, staring straight at her. The dragon bared its jet black teeth, growling softly. It moved towards her, claws just as black as the fangs clacking against the stone floor. Her first fully corporeal simulation, and those idiots in the tech booth had put her against a fully grown male blood dragon.

“Are you kidding me?” Maria muttered under her breath. The dragon charged, blasting flame at her again. She rolled out of the way,

slashing at the monster's hide with her sword. It barely scratched the scales. It took a very careful hit to break through dragon scales, and a glancing blow certainly wasn't enough. It spun around, whipping her with its tail. She pulled her shield up just in time, but the impact still launched her into the air. She was hurled into a wall, the impact dazing her and cracking the back of her breastplate. Instinctively, she curled up behind her shield. Seconds later, a razor sharp claw raked across her shield, audibly scraping the metal plating underneath. The attacks kept coming, swipe after swipe slamming into her, as if the dragon was trying to go through the shield rather than around. Blood dragons weren't the smartest beasts, but were unmatched in sheer ferocity and firepower. Some dragons you could speak with, even reason with them. Not so with these monsters. The only way to get rid of a blood dragon was to kill it.

She swung her sword arm out in a desperate attack, but the dragon knocked it out of her hand and bit into her arm. Through pure luck, the fangs were far enough apart that her arm fit in the slight gap between two teeth. Maria gaped, surprised that she hadn't been gored, but her relief was short-lived.

The dragon flung its head upward, lifting her with it. She grimaced as her arm was twisted painfully in its socket, and put her feet on top of the small ridges behind the dragon's eyes. She pulled back her shield arm, then slammed it into the dragon's snout as hard as she could. The beast roared, opening its jaw and dropping her to the ground. She hit the ground hard, and felt one of her ankles snap. She ignored it, pulling a long dagger from its sheath on the side of her boot. A claw came out of nowhere and scraped across her shield arm, tearing the shield off the straps and gouging all the way down her arm. She bit back a scream of pain, eyes watering as she stumbled backwards, clutching her useless left arm.

Smoke started pouring out of the dragon's mouth as it prepared another fire blast. Without her shield, Maria would be incinerated for sure. Against her better judgement, she ran straight at the dragon, armed with only a dagger. As soon as fire started exploding out of the dragon's mouth, she dove to the side and rolled under it, punching her dagger upward with everything she had. The dragon exploded into thousands of tiny pixels, the echo of its roar of pain still reverberating through the cavern.

"PROGRAM COMPLETE. RESETTING SIMULATION CHAMBER."

Right, Maria thought to herself. Simulation. No real dragon. The pain from her slashed arm and broken ankle reasserted itself, and she grimaced. Certainly felt real.

After about an hour of enduring medical teams and listening to reviews of the simulation, Maria sat in the observation deck, wrapped in

bandages and watching replays of her fight. A man in a white lab coat sat down next to her.

“Congratulations,” he said in a nasally voice. “You passed. Now you can be assigned dragons to hunt.” He pulled out a form and a pen. “As a full-fledged dragon hunter, you’ll need a moniker. A code-name, if you will. What do you want to be called?”

She turned back to the replay of the simulation, watching the massive blood dragon hack at her shield with its menacing black claws. She smiled and said, “Black Talon.”

A Panhandler's Lament

by Kaedon Apezteguia

Good morning,
I say to Jwan—
He is fast asleep or dead, and no man alive could tell the difference.
(doubt he could hear me, anyways, through
the jumbled cacophony of morning traffic
on the bridge above our heads)

I walk out from the shade
and a mile downtown,
in front of a gleaming concert hall.

The routine is the same—
Thirty seven dollars and twenty-five cents

By noon it isn't too shabby.

There is a McDonald's one block south—
I am too hungry to mind its patrons' darting looks,
So I shamle in and order a McChicken.

The windows on the west side where I am eating are grimy,
but not enough for me to fail to notice my reflection.
I sit for a moment and beg the man I see to speak, to say something
(anything at all)
He stares back, silent.

Caught in the thrall of self-pity
I almost don't see the word behind the man's eyes.

Library.

Something unexplainable grips me—
A compulsion, a desire, a magnetic attraction to that building,
A place I walk by every day and yet a place
That has never captured my attention until now.

I throw my sandwich away, half-finished, and dash across the street,
as the reflection watches from the window with raised eyebrows.
The large glass doors are heavy, but I open them easily—I am greeted by
rows upon rows of books
And a shelf with a label reading
"Story Time: 12 to 2 PM."

I walk through the first aisle I see, marveling at its contents.
Books—
Novels, biographies, encyclopedias—

I haven't read a book in twelve years.
Not since high school—I remember being bored of
Great Expectations.

The book sits at the end of the aisle,
Crammed into a thin space at the end of the middle row,
Most likely by another frustrated adolescent,
wondering why exactly he studies dry words,
instead of the more polished stories he absorbs late at night
Through a sleek television screen.

It comes out with some difficulty—
I look at it for a lengthy moment,
And then, on an impulse,
I flip it open, bury my face inside,
and take a deep breath.

The wrinkled pages smell of time and broken dreams—
Dreams that, a long time ago—
I would've considered realistic.
Dreams that I took for granted,
Dreams that this evolving world ripped from my hands,
leaving behind a pair of pills and an invitation written in jagged
lettering.

You are next, after me.

Do not forget the smell of books.
They are the stories, the knowledge, and the dreams of those men and women
Who dared to have themselves immortalized in the written word.
Many do not have your privilege,
The same privilege you complain is a burden
when others try to help you understand the gifts you are privy to.

The world is lending you a small mercy—
Take advantage of it.
And when you chase your dreams
and sit on top of the throne you have crafted
for yourself
from the books and the backs of others—
do not forget me.

I had dreams, once—expectations, even.
I am the unfortunate child of wicked circumstance and human frailty—
the least you can do is remember these words
and offer a little bit of compassion
Regardless of politics.

There are innumerable volumes dedicated to the art of helping others—
Pick one up and say hello.
I am here—I will be here.

You

by Brielle Lewis

If the melody of your voice is stuck on repeat,
Please don't skip this song.
I would listen to it over and over again.

If the way your thumb links to my chin and tows my
lips to yours is just another metaphor,
Don't stop towing. Just drag me everywhere.

If every little touch meant nothing,
Let me keep pretending.
Each touch told ME that I'm going to be okay.

If they think that we're too young,
Let them keep on thinking.
We're just another **love** story proving them wrong.

If you're really leaving, kiss me one last time.
Tonight's the night I die.
I'll be alive, but without you I'm not living.

If we're not meant to be together,
Well then I don't want to be, because everyone even says,
It's like I was made for **you**, and you were made for me.

If spending all my time with you is wrong, I don't want to be right.
In my selfless being, with you I am happiest.
So, excuse my selfish act.

If somehow I've been sleeping all along,
Don't shake me, please don't pinch me.
I'd rather dream of you all my life.

If something were to end us;
I **couldn't** regret you,
You'd be my favorite mistake.

If the butterflies never **stop**,
Well that's okay.
If they wanted, I'd let them fly me away.

If we don't last forever
I promise that's okay,
Just promise me we can **try** our hardest.

Art is a Subtle Way to Not Get Shot

by Sammy Naylor

What is art? Art is expression. Medical session. Softened intention. Mind comprehension.

Art is beautiful. Art is opinion, therefore, opinion is beautiful.

Mankind's greatest burden is opinion. They never listen. Total dominion. We're only a minion to the thing holding us all together: Art.

A rose is a rose is a rose but art is art is not art. Art is ugly. Opinion is grotesque, rearing its ugly head in the guts of the sensitive and the hearts of the passionate.

What is a gun? A gun is expression. Body oppression. Unbridled contention. All thought suppression.

A gun is a universal Shut-Up machine, a hand over the collective mouth since 1364. A gun is used to destroy and therefore strengthen opinion, and therefore strengthen art. We shoot in the name of free speech and call it justice.

Art is an act of rebellion, stirring the pot since the beginning of mankind. Art is to express without notice. To think without consequence. Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.

Art is a sword in the hands of the warrior and a shield in the arms of the attacked. Art is a key to the door in front of you and a lock on the door behind you. Art is an escape route.

In other words, art is a subtle way to not get shot.

Dealings

by Emma Blood

The salt and the sulfur of pain-laden years
Were present still then on my tongue.
They stung as I tasted them, there on the shore
Where glass-beaded sand scratched and rubbed.
My soul and I creaking 'neath cracked wooden load
That scraped us with unsanded head
I, grateful, sheltered from sharp pinprick rain
My soul staying silent and dead.
With I in dark ebony, she snow-cold white,
I treaded in front without fear.
She trusted blindly without any thought
Just as she'd done year after year.
And thus trekking onward, my blind soul and I
We trudged through the thick, soupy air
Till fin'ly we stood at the edge of the sea
With salt crystals caked in our hair.
"Set her down here." One command, it was done,
The timber in shrieking protest
A splash like a swan dive, then cold settled calm
The boat floating silent at rest.
"Get in." Just a grunt, and the poor soul obeyed
Her bare feet caused worn wood to hiss
She sat, waiting meekly for me to step in
And launch us towards journey's raw bliss.
And yet, to her puzzlement, I stood unmoved
As salt-stinging rain nipped my nose
The curtain of ocean fog masking my face
My heart staying blackened and cold.
With sure, sudden movement, I startled her then
My palms scraping deep against wood
As quickly and firmly I shoved the craft off
Out into the storm-sea for good.
Her cries were immediate, pleading and choked
As strangled as those of a shade
Yet I turned my back on the drifting white speck;

I'd done what the angels forbade.
My soul, once I'd sold her, was no longer mine
Instead, she belonged now to Death—
And there as I trudged back through rain and glass-sand
My ebony heart broke and wept.

The Time You Weren't Talking to Me

by Jaisie Rast

Long days had passed in search of her salvation. Her salvation from his wrath. The savior that would shield her came in the form of a horse. Yes, you that read right, a horse. Her salvation was a horse because she lost it, and if she found it, then the horse would be her salvation. Finding it would mean that he wouldn't have to get involved.

Alas, after long days and sleepless nights, she came to one conclusion. It was lost, and she would need to go to him for help. He was the patriarch of the land, the highest of powers, and something to be feared. She sent for an audience with him and it was accepted. Upon reaching his house she trembled, fearing the worst but hoping for the best.

Her hand balled into a fist and pounded three times on the hard wooden door. Seconds passed, and it creaked open, revealing an awful sight. He wasn't what she imagined, he wasn't tall and wide. He wasn't big and mean looking. He was, well, average height. If not below average. His features weren't rough and sharp. They were round and, what seemed to be squishy. However, that didn't prevent him from being terrifying. It just happened to be in a different way. His hair was long and mangled, he was greasy and dirty. The eyes are what made her stiff with fear. They let her know that he didn't have much sense to him, but that wouldn't stop him from tearing her down.

"What do you want?" He sneered, spittle running down his dirty beard as he spoke.

"I, um...." She stuttered, "I sent for an audience with you, and uh, it was accepted." her head was turned down, avoiding his gaze.

"Why are you standing around then? Get inside," he huffed while turning around and walking inside. She stood for a moment, baffled by his actions. Quickly she composed herself walking into the threshold and shutting the doors behind her. For such a pudgy man he made his way around quick, and she almost lost him through the halls. He led her to a big ornate room, with plush, comfy looking chairs and couches. He sat on the biggest couch and gestured toward a couch near him. "So why did you want to see me?" he laced his fingers together near his chest.

"Well sir," she started. "I have misplaced the horse that you have so graciously given me. And, uh, I was wondering if you would be so kind as to, um, gift me another." She avoided all eye contact while stumbling over her words.

"Ah, I see," his voice crackled like gravel. "So you need a new horse." She nodded her head with shame. "Then you shall have one." Her eyes met his as they lit up with surprise. "However, you must do a little work for it." She nodded with a smile, just happy that she would get another horse.

They walked down to the stables and he brought her to a horse. It was average, but a good horse nonetheless. "This shall be your horse, as soon as you muck out its stable. That is if you can. I wouldn't expect a young girl like yourself to be able to do such a task." Confused, she looked at him and wondered why he thought she wouldn't be able to. However, she got to working.

As she worked hard and diligently he stood over her, condescending, watching her every move. He would criticize her technique, mock her, and disrupt her. Often he would move things around, making a mess of what she had just cleaned in an attempt to 'help' her. From the moment he told her to perform this task it was obvious he didn't think she could do it, and it continued to show as he disrupted her work. Despite these problems, she continued to make progress. Eventually it was all clean. She glanced at her work proud, sighing in relief.

"Well well well," he said, startled. "You actually finished." He glanced down condescendingly towards her. He held the reigns to her new horse out in front of her face. "Now stupid girl, are you going to lose this one too?"

"Uh, no sir." She stared at the ground.

"Are you sure? Because I wouldn't be surprised. You are a stupid, insolent little girl."

"Uh, um, I'm sorry sir. Is there something else you would like me to do..." She shifted her weight from foot to foot.

"What could I possibly want from you?" he scoffed at her. All these insults and berating made her blood boil. The more he threw at her, the angrier she got.

"Okay sir," she said, slightly sarcastically. "If that is all I would like to leave."

"How dare you talk to me like that," he raised his voice and spat at her. "I am above you. You must respect me."

"I have done everything you have asked for, yet you still keep me here and insult me. If this is all you wish me to do I will leave." As she said that she stepped toward the exit. However, he blocked her path.

"You will not talk to me like that! You are just an idiotic, inexperienced little girl! You know nothing! You are nothing!" He stepped close to her, some spit flying onto her face.

"Please just let me leave sir. I have done everything! Now I am going to leave." He shoved her by the shoulders and she slammed into the wall. Before he could do anything else she shoved her way past him and out the door.

"Guards!" he screamed. "Get her! Bring her to me at once!" The heads of all the guards snapped towards her and she cursed under her breath. In a split second she was bolting off into the woods, dashing in a zigzag pattern in an attempt to lose them. Eventually their shouts and footsteps died out. She sat down to take a breath and think.

'How dare he!' she thought to herself. 'I did everything he asked! I'll show him!'

With that she walked right back toward his house, avoiding all of the guards. Eventually she reached his house and walked to the stables reaching the horse she was promised. She opened the door and hopped onto the steed, riding over to the other horses stables. One by one she let all of them out, and they went stampeding towards the guards. She finally rode off towards her house and peacefully lived out her life there. Avoiding him mostly and continuously defying him, for she would not be disrespected like that again.

Thief in the Night

by Rhys Harwood

Pale moonshine reflects off my face
A sickly yellow shines on my back
The abyss is broken for only a moment
A single flaxen ray drowns out the dark
The shadow on the dusk stares onto me
Its midnight glare unchallenged and black
The crime I've committed is bare to see
The laws I've broken are plain to us both
The words I've stolen aren't forgotten
I am the furtive thief in the night

The Rogue Queen

by Joshua Born

Celestine looked down from top balcony on top of the castle she called home. It was the evening after her father's funeral. Should she feel sad? Probably, but she didn't. She wasn't even at the funeral. She was up here, alone in her room, gazing into the night. She couldn't bear to be seen crying in front of other people. She had spent the night contemplating what this change meant for her, seeing as the king was dead, she was now the next in line. The crown that should be on her head was in her hand, dangling loosely by a couple of fingers over the stone wall that was the only thing that currently prevented her from simply walking off the edge and saying goodbye to it all.

She lifted the small crown up to eye level as she softly rubbed the emerald that adorned the center. That was the problem: she was no queen, she was a warrior. The one who murdered her father was still out there, and she intended to find him. Celestine looked back at the crown, and without even a second thought she threw it off the balcony.

Celestine ran through the lavish corridors decorated with paintings and heirlooms of the royal family. She wore a light traveling cloak that unfortunately still reflected the royal colors and insignia that would get her easily noticed in a common crowd. She also made sure to pick up a satchel with enough supplies to last her a few days, along with a short sword and dagger. Because it was a rough world, she'd had a long day and any opportunity to stab someone was openly welcomed.

Distant shouting could be heard all around the castle as she attempted to be unpredictable in her escape route. Earlier she had confided in her friend, a young elf about her age named Telperion, that she was planning to leave the castle and hunt down the man who killed her father. Well that naturally didn't sit well with the rule-abiding little twit, so he had taken the liberty of telling dear Celestine's mother all about her genius plan. So now she had the entire castle guard out looking for her, luckily the only one that knew the castle as well as her was dead. She still had several tricks up her sleeve.

After slipping through a couple more hidden passages, 2 of which only she knew about, she had managed to nearly get to one of the main kitchens which had a convenient trap door that led her straight to the sewers. From there her plan was to wander? She guessed, until she found an exit. She was almost there, just had to round a corner and go down the stairs-

Her train of thought was cut off abruptly as she ran right into a suit of armor. She stumbled and hit the floor with a resounding "thud", scrambling away and fumbling with her sword's handle for a moment

before finally drawing it and facing the person she'd run into. She wasn't happy when she found out who. Standing in front of her with a dumb grin on his face was her uncle Roon, a mountain of a man that was renowned for his skill in a fight.

"Well if it isn't my lucky day," Roon said as he began to strut forward, his armor clinking lightly with each deliberate step, clearly over-exaggerated as if to show just how important he was.

"Not really, no," Celestine responded, lifting herself back to her feet and backing away as Roon advanced towards her.

"Oh and what are you going to do with that measly little blade of yours hmm? Do you even know how to use it?"

Celestine almost stumbled again as she found herself backed into the wall. She kept her sword at her uncle's chest level as he continued to slowly move towards her. There was no way she could fight her way out of this, not that she wanted to kill Roon, she was just hoping he'd be intimidated... she began to see the holes in her plan.

As her uncle continued to drone on about how cute her "little" escape attempt was and he playfully taunted her about how it was "past her bedtime," Celestine began to dart her eyes around the hallway. Trying to find something to allow her to escape—and then she found her salvation in the form of a window that looked easily breakable.

She looked back at her uncle and with a wild yell she turned and slammed the pommel of her sword against the glass, only to have it not break and instead make a hollow "tung." Celestine turned back to Roon, only to see his eyebrows raised and his arms folded, as if he'd expected her to make a dumb move like that. They stood there staring at each-other for a moment before Celestine began to hear more shouting.

With re-invigorated determination Celestine turned back to the window and instead undid the small clasp and flung the window open. A cool breeze rushed in from the night air and Celestine quickly stuck a leg over the edge and looked back at her uncle to see he hadn't moved a muscle.

"Good" she thought to herself as she looked down at the ground, only a story below. She didn't hesitate, she simply turned around, stuck out her tongue and saw with satisfaction, Roon's face go from smug to shocked as she hopped out the window.

A Butterfly's Breath

by Brandon Titensor

The Strongest force in the world is that of a butterfly's wing
A trivial thing to be sure, yet vast in impact
Delicate, frail, strong and true
Breath of one so small conquers space and time
How strong is a breath?

From butterfly's wing in the spring time air
To mote of dust floating idly by
The mote of dust is no longer individual nor free
It is confined to a destiny on a higher plane
How strong is a breath?

Add mote to mote a speck is fashioned
A speck is formed from what seemed an infinitesimal change
Speck upon speck the dust grows
Until a dandelion fluff impedes its path
How strong is a breath?

A wish is made and upon its journey it goes
From hill to vale sails on the little seed
The fluff like a cloud floats idly by
No sense of rush for one so slight
Whose life is so forthright
How strong is a breath?

The fluff settles down a seed unto one
Grows seeds of thousands.
Father John loathes new sprouts
A madness overcomes him until,
He sees yellow no more
How strong is a breath?

The little sun goes flying,
a bird for a moment; it crashes to the earth
a sad limp head can grow no more
but on the rump of a mouser it did land
how strong is a breath?

The feline a whirlwind of claws and fur
Created a commotion worthy of Nixon
Jarred a rock; the rock went tumbling

Tumbling, tumbling until it crashed anew
How strong is a breath?

A landslide! A landslide! Cries Father John
Down with the mountain that withstood mother nature
Down with the mountain that stood firm for centuries
Down with a giant unknown to a butterfly
By the butterfly like a giant
How strong is a breath?

Untitled

by Bradley Ratovonjanahary

Dream 132—I was in a museum of some sort with a strange girl, her name was April and she had long golden hair and a pretty smile with freckles splattered across her face, she had warm blue eyes that shimmered like the ocean.

We wandered the museum together stopping to gaze upon the pieces we found most amusing. A little clock on the wall made up of small little tunnels, a sculpture of a giant made up of bits of car and refrigerator, and a picture of the world with little pictures of people making up the continents.

We walked towards the next room when I saw a see a painting of angel wings out of the corner of my eye, I walk towards them until I hear April say-

“Woah, what the heck is that?”

I turned my head and see her pointing toward a contraption I can only describe as some sort of giant clock flat on the ground made up of pieces of violin. I heard a bell and look around to see everyone beginning to leave, when I turned my head, I saw April climbing in. I climbed in after her.

“What are you doing, we got to go, the museum’s about to close.” She didn’t reply and kept crawling around the clock’s strange tunnels.

“Look around, Huey, don’t you see it?”

I looked back at her confused.

She rolled her eyes. “This clock is like a giant maze, just like the one we saw on that wall back there.”

I looked around again, and it all started coming together. She started wandering around tapping and pulling on random parts of the clock.

“What are you doing?”

“There must be some sort of door or tunnel that can lead us to the other end. Help me find it.”

I started looking around, still confused at what she was trying to do as the lights of the museum begin turning off.

“Come on we’ve got to go, we’re going to get in—” I saw an object out of the corner of my eye that catches my attention, it was a little angel wing hanging out of the corner camouflaged into the violin clock. I walked over to it and looked over at April who was still wandering the tunnels.

“Here goes nothing.” I pulled down on the wing and heard a quiet twisting of gears. I looked around and waited for something to happen. “What am I even doing, April we—” the clock began rotating, and next

thing I know the top of the clock closed like a trapdoor and the bottom opened to reveal a shimmering light.

He puts a checkmark next to the entry. He yawns and begins flipping through the rest of the book.

Dream 120, Zombie City—I was walking around Salt Lake City with a few of my friends. We opened the doors and see people running. I looked in the other direction to see a terrible car accident, cars stacked up on each other with flames and bodies scattered along the road.

There was also something else, what looked like a badly burnt person eating the body of a man in a suit. It looked up at us and shrieked in a horrifying tone, behind it more strange figures and even some of the dead bodies began getting up and charging at us.

“Get to the car!” screamed Aiden.

We ran to the car. I looked back at the bloody nightmares behind us before getting in. The creatures began leaping on the car and punching the back window.

He yelled, “Hold on!” before backing into the monsters. He stopped, launching one of the ghouls into the street. He switched gears and began speeding away from the city

“What the heck were those?” yelled Lauren

“I don’t know, but we need to get out of here as fast as we can.”

As we drove off, I turned around and took one last glance at the city.

He continues flipping through the book

Dream 105, Deserted island, he looks on the side of the page and sees a note, “Restrictions: None.”

Each dream has a different set of rules such as super strength, power over time, but those kinds of things don’t occur often, the majority of the time you’re just a normal person—but this dream is different.

He was on a plane behind him there’s a lady and her baby who would not stop screaming and crying. Next to him sat a pale French man, he had a red and white striped scarf and a thin mustache. On the other side was another man, a larger gentleman who snored loudly for most of the flight. He put in his headphones and turned on an audiobook.

A few moments later he started to feel his seat shaking and the plane wobbling. He opened his eyes and saw the stewardess dropping her plates and joggling over to her seat and buckling in.

The loudspeaker turned on, “Fasten seatbelt sign is on, we’re going to be experiencing a bit of turbulence everyone. Just stay in your seats it shouldn’t be long till—”

The loudspeaker cut out. He could hear the confused chatter echoing around the cabin. Suddenly, the plane started plummeting, the passengers began screaming for their lives. He held on tightly to his seat and closed his eyes. The plane hit the water and his head hit the chair in front of him.

He opened his eyes, still dizzy and confused, and began climbing out. He looked at his arm—which seemed to be broken—and stepped out of the plane to see a few passengers that survived the crash: a tall fellow with a bloody nose was crying with his back rested on a rock on the shore; a small lady, holding her head with a bloody rag as she looked around trying to comprehend the events that just transpired; even the fat gentleman and the French guy that he saw earlier were still alive. he leaned back against a tree, staring at the fuming plane.

“This can’t be happening.” He looked down at my arm and pinched himself, nothing. He looked back up with a smile on his face. He lifted his arm which was no longer broken and began flying away from the island.

He stared at the page for a second.

“What a weird thing to do.”

He started to flip through more of the pages until he reached Dream 99...

He is standing on the top of a tall building somewhere in the city. he walks over to the edge and looked down at the earth below him. He takes out his phone to take a picture and begins leaning back slowly. He feels himself leaning and tries to catch himself, but it is too late, and he plummets down the side of the building. He looks around for something to grab onto, a rope, a brick, anything at all, but there’s nothing and—

He wakes up in a pool of sweat, breathing heavily.

Pretty girl

by Bella Frittinger

growing up I was always told "you are pretty for a big girl"
and I always took it as a compliment
until I got older and I quickly figured out that they were saying thick
girls aren't supposed to be pretty
so I was lucky that I was a meaty girl and still could be pretty
why do I have to be pretty for a big girl?
why can't I just be pretty?

they say "big girls need love too" like that is something new
well guess what I figured out a long time ago that I deserve love too
I just don't need it from people like you

am I just to fall in love with any man who speaks to me sweet words? but
what if his touch isn't sweet? and is kiss his forced across my cheek? am
I just supposed to accept that because I am told to be weak?

but what you don't understand is my self-love speaks volumes
that you can't hear
because you didn't have to work to get your mind to love yourself here
so no

I am not going to fall for any man who speaks to me sweet words. I
demand that his touch be sweet. I will *not* have his kiss forced across my
cheek. I will *not* accept that because I am *not* weak.

I deserve more than just sweet words.

and as far as confidence goes mine can take me on a world tour
I can be pretty and big
I can be big and confident
I can be confident and be myself

these are confessions of a pretty girl.

Rhino

by Jackson Coyle

I can't believe it has been two years.
It seems only yesterday we were eating spaghetti,
The way you used a spork to eat.
You were so real, when you weren't high,
Only if synthetics weren't your thing,
The earth might not hold you six feet deep.
That anodyne of yours made you hollow,
You wouldn't even meet me eye to eye.
That drug took you from us.
I remember your hand and stare so cold.
That hospital bed could hold you no longer.
I just hope you're at peace.
Brother I hope you found a place to rest.

Hyagruff

by Alec Britte

Upon reading this passage you may think of me as a delusional lunatic, lost in nothing but hallucinations made up by a decrepit mind, but I ask that you believe me and what I am telling you. I promise that I am a perfectly normal person, just like you. I have a full-time job managing office work. I have a wife and kids. I hang out with pals from the office on weekends, I buy groceries for the house, manage my finances, and do everything a normal human being does, and I do it just fine, yet obviously I am different. From the day I was born, I've had incredible dreams, dreams that are about as real as our own world. Dreams that take me to entirely new planes, separated from our own by an impassable barrier. In these dreams I am free to touch and feel my surroundings, breathe in the air, move freely as I wish, and act just as I do in our own world. In most dreams I remain a physical human being, with the same body. Other times the dreams take only my soul, where I can only observe and not interact. When I wake up in our world I am torn from the dream, left but to ponder on it for the next day of my mortal life. Sometimes these dreams will seep into reality in ways that only I can observe. Most often the seeping through of these other realities comes in object form, ranging from things such as small bowls to larger scale monuments such as entire buildings, often floating in the sky. Out of fear I have told no one of these dreams, they remain a secret only to me and the many documents of notes and research that I have done in relation to them. If my condition became public, I could lose my job, be put in some sort of asylum for the insane, or potentially worse, which is why all of my research is locked away, and I never speak of anything relating to the dreams. As soon as I am awakened from whatever dream I have, I write as much as I can about it. Where it was, who was there, what it was about, names of people, names of places, everything I can. It's not that I forget these dreams, because I don't, it's so I can easier arrange the dreams in order to discover anything about them, and I have discovered much. In this passage I will detail to you the most important sequence of dreams and events, which haunt me to this day.

It began with a dream where I found myself in a great structure, one I later discovered to be named the Halls of Hyagruff. What felt like holy light shed through the grand windows of the hall, falling on the red carpet covering most of the hall before me, with steps leading down. I stared through the windows as I descended the steps, looking out into a golden sky, the strong light illuminating no objects in sight. It was further down the steps I descended that the temperature became rather hot, increasing the deeper I found myself, but I kept on my descent. There at the bottom there were no windows, no holy light to shed on the

vast open area before me, much more dull than the halls I had previously descended. At that point I was covered in sweat, drenched in the almost unbearable heat I was enduring. I walked through the open space, still dimly lit by some glowing object above, its light barely finding a way through the mist. What sounded like a sharp breath pierced my ears, and I stopped in my tracks as my stomach sank to my chest. My legs felt to be frozen despite the overwhelming heat, and I felt chilled to my very soul. A few seconds after the initial breath that stopped my venture through the space, the breath continued, starting slow but ramping up its pace as I could hear it drawing nearer and nearer, till he revealed himself to me. He stood in the mist, at the edge of my vision, looking at me. I looked back into his eyes, and his breathing, now at an overwhelmingly rapid pace, ceased. After a pause, a short while of eye contact, the breathing resumed, but now the one breathing was me. The sound rang in my ears as my breathing got faster and faster, sharper and sharper, louder and louder. This man in front of me wasn't just staring at me in this dream, he was staring at my sleeping body, in my bed at home. That's when I woke up, in a perfectly fine condition. No sweat and no rapid breaths. I remember nothing of the man's form but his cold, dark, and colorless eyes.

The dream occurred around two years prior, and in every dream afterwards, I had tried to find out more about the man I saw. Most dreams hadn't been as intense, or as relevant to the Halls of Hyagruff, but I had been able to uncover a considerable amount. The figure, whatever he is, is apparently a curse to the house of Hyagruff, a noble family that has ruled over several different planes for many millennia. The figure has no real name or identity, so I have labelled him as "the curse". I had only encountered the curse in the depths of the Halls of Hyagruff, but I saw his cold, dead eyes everywhere. Not only throughout the various dreams and places they take me, but in my mortal life also. They manifested in other people and in other objects, and they stared at me, deep into my soul. Though frightened, I wasn't extremely concerned about the eyes, that was until another dream that would shake me to my core.

I was in the Halls of Hyagruff again, with the same holy light shedding through, however this time the stairs were leading up. Concerned but more than curious, I made my way up the stairs. There was no change in temperature, no change in lighting or setting as I made my way up, the only change this time around was the growing uneasiness I felt. I came to the top of the stairs, and down the grand hall was a great double door. Dread replaced my uneasiness, growing much stronger as I gripped the handle and pushed open the door, where upon taking my first steps inside I fell into an unending abyss. Pure blackness engulfed my vision, the cold air I was falling through seemed to grab a hold

around the form of my body, and as I fell, I was burdened with the information I had been seeking out for so long. The history of the noble house of Hyagruff was laid bare to me, all the generations and their many conquests across the many planes of reality, as well as the many atrocious sins and acts they had committed to maintain their cruel grip on power. These sins grew so great and heavy that they manifested in the deepest and darkest depths of the noble house of Hyagruff, forever to seek out and haunt the Hyagruff name for eternity. That's when I woke up. I frantically completed my morning routine of writing it all down, afterwards getting ready for work and heading out the door, still quite dazed by the previous dream, not something that usually happens.

Three days passed afterwards, until a fateful Friday night would haunt me to my core. The dreams afterwards had been rather mundane, taking me nowhere of any real interest or relevance to previous events, and the days in my mortal life were slow and boring. On Friday, following a long and eventful day at the office, a few work buddies invited me to join them at a local bar afterwards, an invitation I gladly accepted. They would leave before me, as I had several more responsibilities I needed to get taken care of, and I would meet them there after I had finished and closed up. It was about an hour after they had left that I locked the doors and headed out, walking to the nearby car park. I went up to the second floor where I usually park and was met with a sight that caused my stomach to sink. My car was gone, as well as all the other cars usually parked there. The paint making out the parking spots was faded out, the form of the structure had withered away, and the wind began to pick up. There was nothing in sight as I looked around, until he came into form, practically appearing out of thin air. He was a grey jumble of mess, perfectly outlining the figure of a human man, the essence that made him up was undulating and waving around while still maintaining its human form. The sharp sound of every step he took towards me rang in my ears, the sound growing louder and louder, echoing the beat of my heart. The wind began to pick up even more, chilling me to my very core. Creeping tendrils of the same grey mess that made up his figure grew out of him, as he inched closer and closer to me. That's when I saw his eyes. Cold and black, lifeless and dead. His stare alone rooted me in my place, and his eyes scanned through every form of myself existing in every other plane I had ventured before. The wind whispered in my ear as it picked up, whispering indiscernible phrases, until he was standing in front of me. Each of the tendrils arched over and around me, as the wind grew loud enough for me to hear it say, "PAY

FOR YOUR SINS"

Division

anonymous

It's the division in my life that can make everything beautiful or a nightmare. The division between me and my dad is slowly increasing. Every day I see him he has another misogynistic, racist, or sexist thing to say. He has another way to degrade me and make me feel Less than him. It's the division between me and my sisters that has always quietly been lingering. The need to be away from them at most times so I don't have to sit through their deprecating insults. It is the division between me and my mom that comes around every once in a while to remind me that as long as she isn't benefitting, she doesn't care.

However, it is the division between my family and my friends that reminds me that I can choose who I want to be around. That I can feel comfortable in another person's presence and not feel judged or isolated. It is the division between depression and love that gives me hope for the future, that lets me know I can be happy and I can be comfortable. It is the division of the present from the future, that lets me know my life can be what I want it to be. Division is my worst enemy, but also my beacon of hope.

Untitled

by Trinitie Thain

His dark, void eyes twinkled in amusement as the mortals in the village below ran. His arms crossed over his chest as he speculated the chaos he'd caused. The fire had spread faster than he'd expected.

How easy it is to start a fire with a single match. Especially a fire that has spread so far. Devoured so much in such little time.

Suddenly he threw his head back as a howl of laughter escapes his lips.

A man in a white, blue, and golden suit yelled out about someone being trapped in one of the burning houses.

Curiosity getting the best of him, the fallen angel slowed the pace of his wings, lowering himself closer to the Chief of the police.

Apparently it was a kid trapped inside the third house that was set to flames. The mortal Chief was running around and yelling out for people to gather water. The head of the Serviciul de Poliție pentru Intervenție Rapidă, otherwise known as the Police Force, was waving his arms wildly and yelling out orders and commands.

His ten-foot wings beat from his back as he continued to observe his masterpiece from the air, his ice cold heart tightening just a little inside his chest. His smile faded as the vision in front of him slipped away and a gruesome memory takes its place.

Dark, ebony hair whipping through the air. Fingers and hand outstretched in a silent plea for help. Eyes, filled with fright, looking up at him, her mouth screaming out his name as she falls through the air, closer and closer to her death. He struggles against his captors, crying for the first time, crying for the angel that calls for him. For the girl who holds his heart. For the girl, who passes through the clouds and meets her death.

His head bowed down, in shame and regret of the memory. He sighed and tensed his shoulder blades and his wings slow down their steady beat. He slowly descended towards the ground, the memory still fresh on his mind. His eyes were filled up, but he didn't let a tear slip. He didn't show his weakness.

His feet lightly touched the ground below him, and he looked around. No one noticed his descent amidst the chaos.

He slowly turned around in a circle, tucking his wings back, but not putting them away. His wings loomed over his tall frame in black grace.

He scrutinized his work, smiling slowly at the masterpieces, proud of all the work he had done. He stepped up to the house that was currently engulfed in flames and creaking at the weight it bears.

He crossed his arms.

It was only after a few minutes of observing the ruins and wreckage of the village, that he realized something was missing.

Silence ensued, and he squared back his shoulders.

There were no more screams of terror. No more rushed footsteps. Just quiet. No whispers among the winds. It seemed that even the trees had stopped moving.

On his heels, he slowly turned back towards the town square, where he'd first landed thousands of years ago when he was banished from the high heavens.

To his surprise, he spotted mortal after mortal, their eyes trained on him. After a few seconds, the surprise vanished and he raised an eyebrow.

"Yes?" He asked. His voice echoes across the loud silence. The lick of the flames and crackling of the houses were the only sounds. He mentally sighed and began to step towards the burning house where the Chief had claimed the young adolescent was trapped. The mortals gasped as they all scrambled back from him in terror.

He couldn't help but laugh at their pitiful reactions. He couldn't help but admit that these mortals amused him. But, despite their entertainment, he hated that they had taken his land. They may not have been the generation that had, but they came from the generation that had forced him from his home on the land. Forced him into hiding.

"Have it your way, mortals! I only came to get the child." He ignores the tightening in his chest and balled up his fists. He only smiled and continues, "But have it your way."

He smirks as his wings snap out and he gives one push of his mighty wings and he was gone, leaving the child to die and the houses to burn to the ground.

Eventually

by Ellie Castleton

As I arrive, a faint sense of fear
Is instilled within me
I see many people already waiting
Here for what I myself have come looking for
I have been on a long journey
Ravished by sleeplessness and hunger
I cling to the last shred of life I have
I sit and wait for what seems like hours
Inching ever so closely to what I crave
Then suddenly before my eyes
The others are no longer in my way
After being deprived for so long
The light finally shines through
I go forth to what I have been
So desperately wishing for
As I near it, I hear a distant crackle
And then a beautiful voice
Saying to me the long-forgotten
But beloved words
“Hi, welcome to McDonald’s. Can I take your order?”

Wishful Thinking

by Sara Reeder

She is a dandelion, poking up through the cracks in the sidewalk, hoping she'll have enough time to make her wish before she's crushed. She is an ocean cave, hiding deep below the surface with thoughts swimming around her head like fish. She hoped she'll find love, but to her, love is music, the beat and instruments distract everyone from what is really being said.

Loneliness is an empty house. It is not being able to share fond memories. It's standing in an empty room waiting for someone else to talk. Loneliness is ice, it is meals for two gone bad from no one eating the other serving. It is a blanket of ice wrapped around your heart waiting to be melted off.

Love is an ocean, stretching on and on, never ending, but hiding secrets deep below. It's a pit, falling down deep until it's too late to climb out, hoping someone will lower down a ladder. It is glass, as our hearts shatter against the hit of pain, until someone comes along and glues it back together. It is a knife, as we feel the pain of a broken heart, the cuts form, until someone comes to patch us up, and shows their scars. Love is a patch of weeds with one single sunflower, quietly poking up between the weeds to share the beauty and joy.

I am a daisy, poking up through the cracks in the sidewalk hoping not to be stepped on. I'm a notebook, being used and destroyed as all my pages are torn from me and thrown away. I'm an abandoned house, hidden away, overgrown with plants, hoping someone will see my inner beauty. I am an ocean, my thoughts flowing as a wave of emotion, as tears fall, with no one to notice. I'm a rainstorm, seeming small at first when in reality I'm building up to the lightning. I'm a dog, loyal to those who care, but I will turn on you if trust is broken.

Untitled

by Jonathan Taylor

We all have a path set before us by fate.
The path oft will split, which some of us hate.
But every time we must make a choice
to follow desire's or reason's voice.
Left or right, north or south,
To the mountain's top or the river's mouth
The choice is yours which way to go
But there is something you should know:
The decision is yours to travel a path
You cannot travel both. Do the math.
Yet your choice affects what paths others can take
It changes the world, the choices you make.
So be cautious when choosing the paths you tread
Sometimes paths turn into a DEAD end.
Whether in darkness or whether in light,
Be sure the path you chose is right.

An Excerpt from *God's Sins*

by Ethan Williams

Report number 118

We finally have it after years of death and pain we finally made it! God's seed. We are the first. Now all we need is a single soul who is willing to put up their time and we will create the children of the future, but, we must keep this to ourselves. If word gets out then we will be punished. I leave the log here. We have no need for it anymore. May those who follow lead us to the end.

"We seem to have similar ideas." The man in the white coat looked at me. I could feel his expectations bleeding through the air in the room.

"So it would seem." I say not letting my eyes break from his cold, hungry, look. "What would you like me to do?" His grin still haunts me to this day.

"I will put the papers in for your release into my care, witch." He said marking a few things in a notebook he pulled out of his pocket. "Expect a call from your lawyer and things will be set." He smiled after this statement putting the notebook away he made his way to the door. After the door closed shut I let out a sigh of relief. I had just traded my freedom for my life.

Report number 119

I have found a volunteer for the experiment, a prisoner on death row, she willing gave her cooperation to me in exchange for her life. Nothing can stop the project now. We will create the table of perfection and the children will be born!! We will have reached our ultimate goal. Tomorrow the job will be done. I will have the children. I have only to begin it. Tomorrow is the day of reckoning.

Colors

by Ellie Castleton

I am moving fast towards it.
The bright green is telling me that I am safe.
Suddenly, I see a flash of yellow.
I speed up even though I am told that yellow
means being cautious and slow, but what
comes after scares me into
moving ahead as fast as I can.
I continue moving fast, maybe too fast.
Another calming bright green meets my gaze.
I am far away when the color changes this time,
too far to run away from what I
know is coming.
What I am most afraid of.
I slow down, hoping I don't get hurt.
The warning yellow changes to an evil red
The red paralyzes me, I cannot move.
I watch them move in front of my eyes,
cautious not to continue on,
for if I do, I could die, or I could kill
someone else.
They slow down and stop moving,
they wait for me to go.
The color I see is again that bright
green that is friendly and welcoming.
I realize I am grateful for all the colors
trying to keep me safe. I am thankful
for the person who invented the stoplight.

My Country 'Tis of Thee

by Ellie Castleton

I remember a time when it was easy to believe.
To believe that this country loves me.
I remember a time when my president cared about me.
The only leader I had ever known,
I trusted.

Now I see that my freedom has been a lie.
When they speak of freedom
They don't remember the people starving
Suffering.
Clinging desperately to the thought of the American Dream.

They don't think about how many people came here for a better life
Only to be greeted with the angry screams of the people who don't
belong here.

Freedom means people can make choices.
But you don't have a choice when you live in a country,
A country that doesn't love you.

It doesn't love you because you are different.
Because you are not white.
Because you are not a man.
Not straight. Not Christian. Not rich.
It will not love you unless you are the same as the people who created it.

All men are created equal
With the exception of everyone that doesn't fit into
what we define as a standard human.
I remember a time when I had hope.
But so naive was I to have faith in the future of my native land.

Now I am scared.
I am terrified of what could happen to me.
To my friends, My family, Everyone I love.
My fellow citizens of this country
And of this planet.

I used to love this country, but now,
I realize I live in a place full of hate,
Full of confidence in privilege.

People being told that their hatred is justified
That their opinions they've rightfully been hiding can come out

And be seen.

They can abuse, they can belittle, they can murder

Without repercussions

Because if this country loves you, you are mentally ill, bullied.

If it does not, you are a terrorist, a criminal.

When this country does not love you, your actions
are taken as the actions of everyone like you.

When this country does you act alone.

When it loves you, your hatred is a valid opinion,

When it does not your fury for your oppression

is deemed violent and a part of the problem.

How can I be expected to stand for a country
that does not stand for me?

If I do not fit into the narrow standard,

I become something less than human,

an easy target,

an animal,

unworthy of decency.

I do not love this country

Because this country does not love me.

Death Date

by Aubrey Hess

It was 9 p.m. on a Thursday. Tomorrow was Friday, March 3, 2963. My death date. Ever since The Great Rage War (the last, largest, world war decades ago) the world has never been the same. Not only was much of the earth and its natural resources destroyed, but while scientists were trying to extend the age people lived to during the war, to make for stronger and more resilient soldiers, it backfired and now everyone is born with a death date at which they die tattooed on their arm. Mine was tomorrow.

I was 17 years old, which is about the average age of when everyone dies. I never knew my parents or my biological siblings. Everyone born was a test tube baby and that's just how things were. I read somewhere once that actual families used to exist. With parents and siblings and pets and real love. Real love didn't exist anymore; the only thing my generation was focused on was making it so we could live past our death date, which hadn't happened for decades. I oversaw 4 girls at my orphanage, where I had grown up myself. Once you turned 16 you were given 4 girls to look after and care for until your death date. I considered the 4 girls in my group my family, and if I real love did exist, I knew I would love them. Our dorm was quiet tonight, my group knew tonight was my last night with them and I didn't want to say goodbye. I wasn't sure what they would do without me.

I walked into the room to see 6-year-old Willow with a blanket wrapped around her, holding back tears. When she saw me, her face fell, and the tears streamed effortlessly down her swollen cheeks. "Please Skye please don't leave us," she cried "I need you. I really do"

I went over and wrapped my arm around her. I promised myself I wouldn't cry and would keep my composure. I had to for the girls. I rocked her back and forth. "Shhh Willow it will be alright, don't cry it will all be okay."

I wiped the tears from her eyes and continued to rock and hold her sobbing frame. I looked around the room. All my girls were standing at the edge of the room tears in their eyes. I set down Willow and went around to each girl and gave them a hug and wiped their tears. 9-year-old Dakota looked up at me with big brown eyes, biting her lip to strain to keep her composure. "I'll see you again won't I?" "Of course, Dakota," I replied as I brushed dark hair out of her eyes, holding her tight against my chest.

Next was 12-year-old Paytyn. "Take care of the girls for me okay?"

Paytyn smiled and wiped the tears from her face, I could tell she was trying to be strong, for me and the girls, and I was grateful. I knew Paytyn would be okay, she had always been a fighter. I spun around to

face 15 year old Ivy. This was going to be the hardest for me. Ivy was my best friend and what I would've guessed it would've felt like to have a sister. Ivy who had always been emotional was sobbing and shaking in the corner. She refused to meet my eyes. I crouched in front of her and tilted her chin towards me, gently wiped her tears away. Ivy was breathing and sobbing uncontrollably.

"Ivy, Ivy, Ivy shhhh," I called her name gently. "Ivy I need you to be strong for the girls. They need you now more than ever and since you'll be 16 soon, I need you to be there for them. You need to be a leader for me okay?"

Ivy said nothing but nodded slightly. I kissed her forehead and stood up. I looked at all my girls. I really did love them I realized. "You girls are all so strong and amazing, I care about each and every one of you more than you will ever know, I need you all to be there for each other and help each other when I'm gone okay? If love does exist, I know I love you guys. Don't ever forget that, or me. I promise I will see you all again."

I checked my watch, it was almost 9:30, which was the city's curfew. "It's pretty much curfew and you know the rules, we can't stay up any later."

I got each of the girls situated and in bed then told them goodbye one last time, I closed the door to their chamber and headed to my separate chamber, the one I was supposed to die in.

I laid in bed wide awake. I knew I wouldn't sleep, at least not on my death date. Nobody ever did. I replayed over and over in my mind the way I would die, awful feeling when the clock hit midnight and it became hard to breathe until you eventually passed out and your heart slowly stopped beating. Doctors had tried everything to reverse it and stop it as it was happening but nothing they tried ever worked. Everyone eventually died on their death day no matter what was tried, and it seemed like scientists were getting ready to give up after the years of experiments and fails. Tomorrow morning, Parker the assigned cleaner, would come collect my body and take it to the lab to be studied and experimented on. I just hoped my girls didn't have to see it. Oh my girls...the tears I had been holding back finally rushed to the surface and spilled down my face and I sobbed silently. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to leave them. I scratched at the tattoo on my forearm reading tomorrows date. Screw the tattoo, screw the war, screw the doctors and scientists that failed so many times. I waited silently and numbly for the time to reach midnight. A million questions entered my head but I pushed them to the back of my mind. I didn't want to think, I didn't want to feel, I just wanted to be numb. Finally the clock hit midnight.

Nothing happened, no pain, no problem breathing, nothing. That's weird I thought...everything I've read and heard said the pain

starts immediately. I waited, holding my breath, but nothing changed. 12:30 rolled around, then 1... but still nothing. What do I do? Usually it takes only an hour for a person to die on their death date. So why wasn't I dead?

Around 2 AM a small knock rapped quietly on my window, it was so quiet I wouldn't have heard it if I hadn't been on such high alert. My first thought was why in the world was anyone up and out past curfew? But then again I was still alive so this kind of thing wasn't too surprising. I walked carefully and silently to my window and slid it open a crack.

"Who's there?" I whispered out into the dark.

"Skye Owens?" a boy's voice called out and I caught a glimpse of his dark hair and blue eyes in the moonlight.

I was taken aback, how did he know my name? I had never seen this boy before in my life.

"How do you know my name?" I asked timidly.

"I'll explain it all later I promise." He grabbed my hand. "Hi Skye, my name is Blaze Atkins and I suggest you come with me right now if you want to continue living—and if you want to save your girls."

I looked back to the other rooms where my girls were and with that, I made a split-second choice, and climbed out the window with him into the dark cold air.

Sharks

by Ellie Castleton

The people here they say,
That in a time gone by,
The sharks swam close to bay
And let me tell you why

Some will say that the tale is fake,
A myth born in the past,
But the sharks left crying in their wake
The horror, it did last

For once a month the sharks did say
That a sacrifice must be made,
Nothing can keep the sharks away
So the price of safety must be paid

Human flesh is what they crave
Nothing else will make it stop
One human a month and we'll stay in our cave
But it is your choice of who to drop

The people conversed and the children did cry
They had things to decide
Should we risk that everyone die,
Or give one to the tide?

The sharks were hungry, the time was here
A plan was set in motion,
Once a month someone filled with fear
Was thrown into the ocean

The plan was simple, for in that time
If somebody did die,
They did not have to commit the crime
Of choosing who would say goodbye

But if no one died and it was too late,
They would have to give the oldest,
They checked their age right to the date
To pick who would be coldest

Some people say it's all a lie
A story for kids to tell,
But the older people remember why
It's referred to as the sharks from hell

If a moral did exist, it wouldn't be well done
And it would probably be dark,
But do not be the oldest one
Or you might be fed to a shark.

A Small Adventure on the Oregon Coast

by Jordan Farnsworth

The ocean was icy cold. Frigid, in fact. But I expected that.

Also, the rocks and barnacles and whatever else littered the ground were mercilessly sharp, but I expected that too.

What I didn't expect was how what appeared to be a mere ten yards or so when I was back on shore could change so quickly into so great a distance the minute I had made it past the bigger rocks. Back on shore, I had looked at the arch and the little cave it made and imagined how, if I lived near this beach, I would swim out to it every day and make it my own secret hideout, and maybe I would have a best friend that I would hang out with there. Maybe even more than a best friend. It had seemed quite romantic at the time, but now that I really was trying to pick my way through the waves, I was having second thoughts. Still, it wasn't enough to make me turn back.

I gritted my teeth and continued my cautious journey, fully aware that if I stopped to think about what I was doing, my sanity would return and I would never make it. Instead, I focused on my intended destination and forced myself to keep moving, despite the fact that my legs were growing number every second.

Ideally, I would've been doing this in a swimsuit, wearing water shoes, and the water would've been several degrees warmer. But given that it was only the first week of April, and this whole adventure had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, I had not come prepared with either. Instead, I had stripped down to my underclothing and a tank top—a white tank top, which was rather unfortunate, but what can you do—and was now determinedly wading through water that was barely 40 degrees, with feet that were very bare (and probably covered in cuts by now, though the feeling had long since gone out of my legs so I had no way of knowing for sure). But it made for a better story this way, anyway. Nothing wrong with a little spontaneity.

As I neared the arch, my brain suddenly decided that now was a good time to remember that hypothermia was a very real and very dangerous phenomenon, and while we were on the subject, so were riptides, and had it occurred to me that the water surging around my waist was the very same water that had carved out that arch in the first place, and was therefore easily powerful enough to drag me out to a watery death?

I pushed the thought away. Now was not the time. My nine-year-old brother had done it, so I could too. Easy.

Shivering uncontrollably, I half-waded, half-stumbled the final few feet and finally made it beneath the arch, which was even more magnificent up close. I turned to face my family, still standing on the

rocky shoreline, and raised my arms in a victory pose for a picture as I struggled to stay standing—my numb legs and the powerful waves made this rather difficult. I hadn't thought it possible for the water to get any colder, but now that I was standing still, I saw that I had been wrong.

"C-can I come back now?" I gasped through chattering teeth, and began the journey back. It felt shorter than the first trip, but no less cold, and the many sharp things beneath the surface were no friendlier, either.

When I did make it back to dry land, I dried off as best I could, using my brother's discarded t-shirt, and then inspected the damage on my feet. Sure enough, there were several little cuts and scratches, as well as a rather large scrape on my leg, but none of it appeared to be too serious.

In addition, my limbs were a ghostly white with occasional patches of red, and I was covered in goosebumps, but that was to be expected. I began to dress, though that was made difficult by the fact that I was still shivering quite a bit, and that jeans don't go on over damp legs very well. When I had finally succeeded, I wrung out the ends of my hair, put my shoes back on, and walked over to rejoin my family, still cold but also very pleased with myself.

"Well, how do you feel?" My mom asked. This whole thing had been her suggestion, though I don't think she expected any of us to actually do it.

"I feel..." There was only one word for it, really. "Alive!"

Sleepless Nights

by Ellie Castleton

You have to wait till the sun comes up, but darling, really it never does
 You say you feel it on your face, but really it never was
 You beg to dream, that dream is a lie
 You beg to rest, you can only cry.
 The sun goes down, the stars shine bright
 Despite its beauty, you're afraid of the night.
You dream of distant memories, the sunlight on your face
 You do not want the day to end, you always lose the race.
 You walk all day, with a crooked smile
 But no one can see, how you've felt all this while.
Scared of falling too far, too fast
 You want to wake so your dreams will last.
 You wake up bright and early, the sun behind the hill
 You wait for it to shine its light, but darling, it never will.
 You hold on to that dream, that feels so warm and bright
 You wish I wouldn't speak it, but you're afraid of the night.
You sit in your bed. And stare at a wall
 You wait for the sun. But darling, it won't come at all
 You sit there and wait. Wait for the light
And nobody knows. You're afraid of the night.

The Breath Before Tomorrow

by Aiden Carver

Gruesome scratches, a cat behind my eyes
a weight pulling my body further and further down a quiet lake
I can feel him behind me, I know he's coming
just a little bit more, please I need more time
he says nothing but his presence grows like sadness on a rainy day
I know not to let myself be dismayed by the inevitable
so I give up, I stop trying to swim and let the weight pull me down
it's getting darker and darker, no moonshine and no stars
the pain of fighting him is greater than surrendering into his arms
I lay down at peace no more worry or thought
letting go of my last deep breath as I close my eyes and await tomorrow
and sleep

An Excerpt From *The Barovian Bastards*

by Rhys G. Harwood

Ranthel's heart raced to the staccato of his steel boots sounding through the streets. He could hear the sounds of battle in the distance. His thoughts rushed quickly by, faster and faster, as he dashed to the decrepit church.

At the doorsteps of the forlorn church, a lone guard, barely out of his teens, fought desperately against a gang of four pale men. Their ivory skin was plastered with the blood of a fallen soldier, who lay ominously still next to the watchman. Even from a distance, Ranthel could see the man's strength was waning. The young soldier saw Ranthel approaching, and for a moment, the sight of the paladin distracted the guard's desperate gaze, replacing it with a look of hope.

A moment was all his assailants needed. Unable to intervene, Ranthel saw a final look of desperation and fear fill the young man's eyes, a final flame that faded as quickly as the sword thrust that fell upon him. The boy fell to the cobblestones, his body crumpling on the steps of the church.

A righteous rage seized Ranthel. His blood boiled, and he let out a war cry, leaping into the band of pale-skinned murderers. They turned to face the paladin's swinging greatsword, and Ranthel could see their bared fangs, stained with blood, as he brought his weapon around to slay them.

The silvered arcing blade was impossible to avoid. It sliced through the torso of the nearest enemy, sending the two halves of its body flying across the courtyard. Its compatriot tried to evade the massive sword's arc, but the blade's rising edge caught it in the throat. The vampire fell to the floor, choking on its own blood and grasping at its mortal wound, steam rising from its throat. Ranthel smiled grimly at the bloodsucker's ironic fate. Turning his attention from the flailing thrall, he readied his blade to fight the last two. The one who had slain the guard turned to face Ranthel, pulling his bloodied scimitar from the inert body. He and his companion, who had avoided the Ranthel's initial attack, lunged at the paladin. The armored warrior raised his guard to catch one of the blades, but the second sword found its mark, penetrating a chink in the paladin's plate armor and piercing through his chainmail, the metal scimitar snaking up towards his heart.

A wave of unbearable pain seized Ranthel's body, and he wanted to scream, but all the broken warrior could muster was a grunt. His vision faded, and the pale, sneering face of his assailant became a smeared blur. His legs buckled, and his iron-clad body collapsed on the steps of the church. A heavy torpor seized him, beckoning his mind into

a long and dreamless night. As his body slowed, his mind fell deeper and deeper into the long and welcoming slumber.

But as he drifted off, memories of an old temple flashed before him, keeping his mind too troubled to rest. He saw a humble acolyte worshipping at an altar. A fallen star like a scar upon the earth. A landscape of eastern forests and ebon-green woods. A marble temple. A village at the edge of a sylvan forest. Golden fields and emerald plains. All these images and more he recalled in an instant. Ranthel gave a shuddering, bloody cough, shivering. If there were divine beings, he thought to himself, they had a twisted sense of humor. These torturous visions were fitting for a disciple of the God of Suffering such as himself, he supposed.

He hacked up another foul puddle, a mixture of blood and gastric acids, and his face furrowed with disgust. How could he be so cynical of his faith on death's doorstep? He tried to offer a final prayer to his own god, the God of Compassion and Pain, to ask for forgiveness, but he lacked the strength to part his lips. The scorched images disappeared, and he was left alone in the darkness. As his world faded to black, a final flash of light filled the void.

Ranthel awoke to an explosion of pain that tore through his ribs; an agony that made his lungs feel as if they were alight with a fiery tar. Paralyzed, he lay on the ground, unable to breathe except in short, shuddering gasps. The faint echo of his heart began to pick up pace and thunder like a chariot, and the blood in his veins boiled like the rapids of a raging river, flooding his body with stamina. He grasped for his sword, groggily searching for the weapon in a blinding sea of light. His frozen fingers found a hilt and reached around it, guiding his other arm to clutch the familiar leather handle. He rose unsteadily, legs shaking. The pain in his body was faint now, a dull agony that was a backdrop to the adrenaline that he now felt give him strength. The harsh light became softer, revealing the dark shadows and shapes of the world around him. Soon, the shapes began to take form, slowly at first, but after a while the world was back to its normal melancholy.

The church was still there, gray and rotting, but the bodies of the soldiers had disappeared. The vampiric thralls were also gone. In their places, piles of alabaster ash lay on the ground. Ranthel examined the nearest pile, crouching down. The movement made him wince and his side ache. He shrugged the feeling off, picking up a handful of ash with his offhand. The grains were fine, flowing through his fingers easily as they fell to the ground. Ranthel was surprised to see that there were no bloodstains on the cobblestones. In fact, there was no sign of any conflict at all. A bitter breeze scattered the ashen dust across the black church

grounds. Ranthel looked up to the sky and saw that the heavens were still clouded by that same gray veil, that boiling sea of shadows. The skies of Barovia were just as he had left it, he thought to himself.

Except, something felt different. The streets were quiet. The only sound that could be heard was the southern breeze. He could've been unconscious for only a few minutes, he thought, yet the sounds of screaming women and soldiers struggling from earlier had ceased. The town of Vallaki was silent.

Ranthel turned towards the entrance of the church. Outside of the courtyard gates, a group of figures was watching the warrior approach them. The shortest among them waved a greeting to the grim paladin.

"Ranthel! Hey, what happened? We noticed you had left, and after we got that tiger to Rictavio, we saw that flash of light and came here as soon as we could," said Zip.

"Yeah, Ranthel, where've you been? Saving townsfolk from skeletons? I thought the church had a ward?" Fausk said. Suddenly, his eyes widened with something that looked like shock to Ranthel.

"Hey, what the hell's wrong with your armor?" Fausk asked, pointing at Ranthel's torso.

Ranthel looked down. There was bloody hole in his chest plate, and the steel around the entry wound was warped and twisted. His chainmail beneath it was also visibly shorn, the remaining links hanging loosely onto one another. Under the ruined mail, the torn fabric of his shirt was stained with a thick layer of blood. The entire area around the damaged armor was like that, splattered with the metallic-smelling gore. But when he looked closer, Ranthel could see that the mortal wound had healed. The flesh had scarred and rotted, and the skin around the scar was an ugly and bruised shade of green, but the pain was gone, and the dull throb had all but disappeared.

"It's nothing," replied Ranthel.

"It doesn't look like nothing. Your mail and plate are completely wrecked. You love that armor more than life itself. What's up with you?" said Zip.

"Nothing. I'm fine," Ranthel said. He turned to leave. "Let's get going."

"Wait, where?" Fausk asked.

But Ranthel gave him no answer, and instead the paladin marched steadily down the road, the drum of his boots on the cobblestones echoing off the buildings like a dull dirge.

The Man in my Neighbor's Yard

by Hunter Clark

The trees are quiet in the neighbor's yard,
All I see is a man, deeply scarred.
Inside, his minds corrodes,
Outside, his body tells stories of war-torn roads.
I don't know much about the man in my neighbor's yard,
Not much except his life was hard.
He sat me down and said "When I was young man...
I was told, if you're scared, you ran.
Until I had my chance to run, and run I did,
From the enemy, me and my brothers hid.
They told us nothing but 'you'll be a hero, point and shoot
We left our lives, we left our girls, all for combat boots
I still visit my brothers in my dreams,
Haunted by their tortured screams.
Yet, they are lucky, 'cause I am forgotten, but they have each other.
Oh how long I've waited to return to my glory days with my brothers."
I still visit the man in my neighbor's yard, I leave flowers on his marble
bench.
I tell him that I miss his simple stories and imagine his days in the
trench.
Outside happy, inside anxious the man used to roam,
At long last he found his brothers and made it home.

The Call of the Forest

by Jordan Farnsworth

That mysterious force was calling to her again.

She didn't know what it was or why it so persistently reached out to her, but night after night, she could feel it from deep within the forest, calling to her. With each passing sunset, it grew harder to resist.

Addison looked out her window anxiously at the dark trees shrouded in shadow, then shook her head and began pacing the room. She had been drawn to those trees from the moment her family had arrived at their new house, but her mother had firmly forbidden her to go in.

"It's not our property," she had said. "Besides, you don't know what's in there—snakes, poison oak, ticks..."

"Serial killers, hobos, werewolves..." her older brother Luke had added with a grin.

Addi knew there weren't any such things as werewolves, and she was quite certain that serial killers and hobos had better things to do than hang around in a forest all day. Snakes, ticks, and poisonous plants didn't bother her either. The forest didn't scare her at all, she only longed to go in and answer the voice that had not left her alone for a moment since she'd first laid eyes on it. She might have disobeyed her mother and gone in anyway, if it weren't for her parents' continual fighting. Her father had always encouraged her to go out and explore; he wouldn't mind at all if she were to venture into the forest. But her mother had always been more strict and protective. If Addi were to go in and her mother found out, she would think that Addi's father had told her it was all right and that would only make matters worse.

Still, Addi felt that she might go crazy if she didn't find out what, or who, it was that was in there. The call grew stronger every night, and she was growing more and more desperate.

She returned to the window to glance out. The sky was partly covered in clouds, but the crescent moon peeked out from behind them and provided a little light, by which she could make out the path leading into the woods.

Addi looked at the clock. 12:04. Her parents wouldn't be asleep yet, but they also wouldn't come check on her. They never did after 11. So, they wouldn't notice if she slipped outside—not if she was quiet.

Knowing she would talk herself out of it if given the chance, Addi resolutely crossed the floor of her room and carefully twisted the doorknob so as not to make a sound. Softly padding down the stairs, she listened breathlessly for any indication of activity in the house. There was none. Satisfied, she made her way to the back door and gently eased it open. Another step and she was free.

Now that she was actually out of the house, her mission was made easier. Breaking into a run, Addi fled across the lawn, ignoring how the dewy grass made her bare feet wet and cold, until she stopped at the edge of the forest.

The call was pulling her stronger than ever, urging and imploring her to enter. Yet she hesitated, uncertain. She wasn't afraid of the forest, that was true, but there was something strange and otherworldly about it, and a feeling of foreboding had crept into her heart.

But she hadn't come all this way to stop now. So, she took a step into the forest, and then another. The urging grew louder and fiercer, and her pace quickened. As she ventured deeper, her skin began to prickle. Something was watching her—or several somethings. She could feel their eyes following her every step. Still, she wasn't afraid; in fact, she was more at peace now than she ever was in the turmoil of her home.

Moonlight trickled in through gaps in the foliage overhead, and it allowed dim shadows to fall and overlap on the forest floor. There was no breeze, yet Addi saw movement out of the corner of her eye—whether the shadows themselves were moving or their invisible casters, she wasn't sure. Still, she pressed onward.

The further into the forest she went, the more ethereal the forest became. In her peripheral vision, Addi saw patches of moonlight take shape and rise, only to disperse when she turned to look. She could hear soft, inhuman voices whispering but couldn't decipher the words, if indeed they were whispering in any real language.

She didn't know how long it had been when she heard a new voice join the chorus and was startled to realize that it was her own. She tried to remember the words that she had been murmuring, but couldn't recall them. That did frighten her just a bit, and she strained harder to listen to the other voices to see if their words reminded her of her own. But the harder she listened, the blurrier her memory became, and her own thoughts were drowned out by a soft, haunting music. When had the music started? She couldn't remember that, either.

"What am I doing here?" she gasped out loud. Her voice sounded far away and unfamiliar, and it took her a moment to comprehend what she had just said.

"What's happening?" she tried again, and the same thing happened.

Growing desperate, Addi looked around, trying in vain to find where the music was coming from. There was still no sign of anyone else, except for the shadows that flitted and darted just out of sight.

"Is this a dream?" she cried. The music and voices were throbbing in her ears. She clapped her hands over them to try and block it out, but it did nothing to help. Instead, she was horrified to discover that her own

skin seemed to be changing in ways that she couldn't understand—shimmering and shifting and tingling.

Suddenly, Addi's own instincts overpowered whatever force was holding her captive. She turned to run, but stumbled and fell. Her feet were rooted to the ground—literally. Vines and moss were creeping over the ground and were entwining her legs. They resisted her efforts to pull herself free. Addi began to panic.

"Addi!"

That voice, that blessedly human voice, cleared the fog that had built up in her head and put a halt to whatever spell this forest was casting. The foliage that had ensnared her fell limp as she pulled it off of herself and stood, shakily, to her feet.

It was Luke that had yelled her name. He emerged through a clump of trees looking frantic, but relief poured over his face when he saw her.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded. "In the middle of the night, and not even on the path!"

Addi looked down. She didn't remember leaving the path, but Luke was right; she had wandered off of it. She also discovered that her legs and arms were covered in scrapes and scratches that she hadn't noticed before but that were now starting to sting.

"I get up to check on you, and find you gone! Thank heavens I thought to look here, or who knows what would've happened! What were you thinking?" Luke asked, looking angry and amazed at the same time. "You could have gotten lost! You could have—I don't know—"

"I did get lost," Addi said softly. "I don't know what I was thinking." Her voice sounded small and vulnerable even to her own ears, but she could hear it again and for that she was grateful.

Luke's face softened. "Well, let's get home. I think I remember where the path is." Addi nodded and followed her brother out.

"Luke?" she asked, once they had found the path and were on their way out.

"Yeah?"

"Why did you come check on me?"

He glanced at her. "I always come check on you."

"You do?"

"Yep. Around one."

"Oh." The thought of her brother waking up late at night to come make sure she was okay comforted Addi.

"Don't come out here again, okay?" Luke added a moment later. "I don't like the feel of this place."

There was something terribly powerful here, Addi knew, and she had no desire whatsoever to return. "I won't."

But even as they exited the trees and crossed the lawn to get back home, that familiar call arose again, urging her back.

“No!” she thought. “I’m not going back. I’m not!”

The urge remained, though, not growing any stronger or louder, just waiting.

Weeks went by. The situation with their parents didn’t improve, but Luke stepped in whenever necessary to make sure Addi wasn’t neglected. They spent lots of time together, and when she wasn’t with him, Addi went and played with the other girls in her neighborhood. Halloween and Thanksgiving came and went. Addi enjoyed both of them as much as is possible when you know your parents are on the verge of divorce. Life was settling into a new norm.

But the call still reached out to her.

Night after night, it kept her awake, tugging at her and urging her to return to the forest.

“No,” Addi kept telling herself. “No, I’m not going back.” But it only grew harder to resist, and Addi knew deep within that she wouldn’t be able to resist forever.

More time went by. Snow fell, and when heat from their parents’ arguing filled the house, Luke and Addi escaped outside into the cold, where they built families of snowmen and went sledding down their sloped front yard. It should have been fun, but Addi found it hard to enjoy. She was struggling to focus these days; the call was pulling hard now and she was losing sleep because of it. Luke was growing worried, she could tell, but he thought it was because of the inevitable divorce that would soon shatter the family. He didn’t know that the forest was still on her mind.

Finally, one silvery winter’s night, it happened. Try as she did to fight the urge, it overpowered her and she found herself leaving her room, going downstairs, and slipping outside towards the forest. Glancing back as she left the house, she saw the clock. It read 2:16.

Addi closed her eyes as she entered the trees, hoping that if she were to ignore the shadows and other fleeting shapes, she would be able to resist the powerful force that had overcome her last time.

There was no snow on the forest floor, but the ground was still icy cold and it hurt her bare feet. As she continued to walk, letting the call guide her, the voices and music began to arise again. Addi opened her eyes and saw that she had already left the path behind. She was at the mercy of the forest now.

She was afraid, really afraid, but there was no point in struggling; it would only exhaust her. As she was dragged along, she wondered if this strange force would make her walk forever and ever until she dropped dead, or if it had some destination in mind.

She found out a short while later, when her feet abruptly stopped and she felt herself falling gently to the ground. Her mind had long since grown foggy, and she was dimly aware of a soft tingling spreading over her skin. It was so much easier just to give in to whatever was claiming her, and she closed her eyes with a sigh.

Back at the house, Luke opened his eyes with a start. He had already checked on Addi; she had been asleep, though she had looked anything but restful. So why was he awake now?

He sat up in bed, trying to determine what was causing the sense of unease in his stomach. After a moment, he pinpointed it: there was a cold draft coming in through his open bedroom door. Where was it coming from?

Suddenly seized with a cold terror, Luke threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. Hastening down the hall, he looked into Addi's room. She was gone. He raced down the stairs, where he found the back door wide open. Barely pausing to put on snow boots, he dashed outside and towards the forest. There was something dreadful about those woods, and whatever it was, he would not let it take his sister.

"Addi!" he screamed as he sprinted into the trees. He got no response.

What if she had left the path? How would he find her? With barely a second thought, he turned off the path and into the wild, tangled thicket. He could feel branches tearing at his skin and clothing, but he couldn't stop now, not with his sister in danger.

Luke had no idea how long he had been running when he suddenly tripped over a mossy log. Sprawling forward, he threw out his hands to catch himself and sat for a moment, breathing hard. Clearly, he needed a better plan. He turned to get a better view of his surroundings, and his insides froze.

The log that he had tripped over was not a log. It was a girl, a girl covered in moss and looking so much like part of the forest that he wouldn't have given her a second glance if he hadn't tripped. With trembling hands, Luke reached over and pulled the moss away from her face.

It was Addi. Her skin was cold to the touch, but she was still breathing—barely.

"Addi!" he cried. He shook her, but she didn't respond. He tried to pick her up, but she was so entwined in roots and vines that he couldn't get her free.

"Addi, Addi, Addi," he whispered over and over under his breath.

So distracted was he with trying to free his sister that he didn't notice the soft music that was beginning to build around him. He had attributed the fog in his head to shock, but as it grew thicker, he began to falter. Within a few moments, he wondered why he was so occupied

with the mossy log in front of him. He was sleepy, so sleepy...he would just lay down for a moment, he thought. That would clear his head, and maybe get rid of the strange tingling creeping over his skin, too...

By morning, all that was left was two ivy-covered figures scarcely distinguishable from the rest of the foliage.

Division

by Jackson Coyle

A person may be divided.
Their soul pulling them one way
Their brain the other
Their heart bounces back and forth.

The Silent Voice

by Trinnity Prisco

“Where’s your voice little toad?”

Growled the biggest of them all.

He was the slimiest and the wartiest;

he was cruel and he was tall.

“Oh I have no croak today,”

replied the little frog.

“Besides, I have nothing, yet, to say.”

“Nothing yet to say?!” Heckled the giant toad.

“No one cares about that, as long as it’s

great and mighty and fat.

As long as you croak at the top of your lungs

Till not even your neighbor hears what could have been sung

Then it won’t really matter what kind of croak you deliver

As long as they hear you at the other end of the river.”

“But what,” inquired the frog, “is a croak without meaning

Even if it’s done by yelling and screaming?”

“Oh!” Rasped the toad, “let me help you with that.

You need someone who’s big and who’s strong and who’s fat.

Don’t worry about meaning, just leave that to me

And you can croak everything I want them to see.”

But the frog simply smiled, looked down at its feet

And without another word, it hopped to the end of the street.

VISUAL ART



Viking Legends Logo

by Joshua Day



Alternate *Viking Legends* Logo
by BrookLyn Prisbrey



Alternate Viking Legends Logo
by Denim Keith



by Brandon Titensor



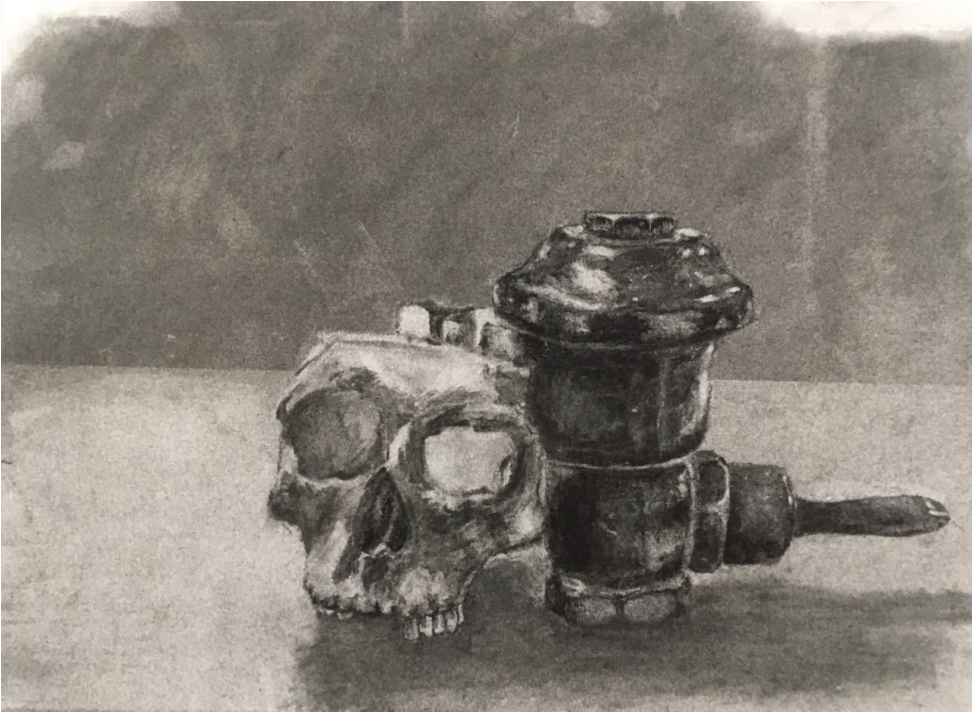
by Kennedy Salimbene



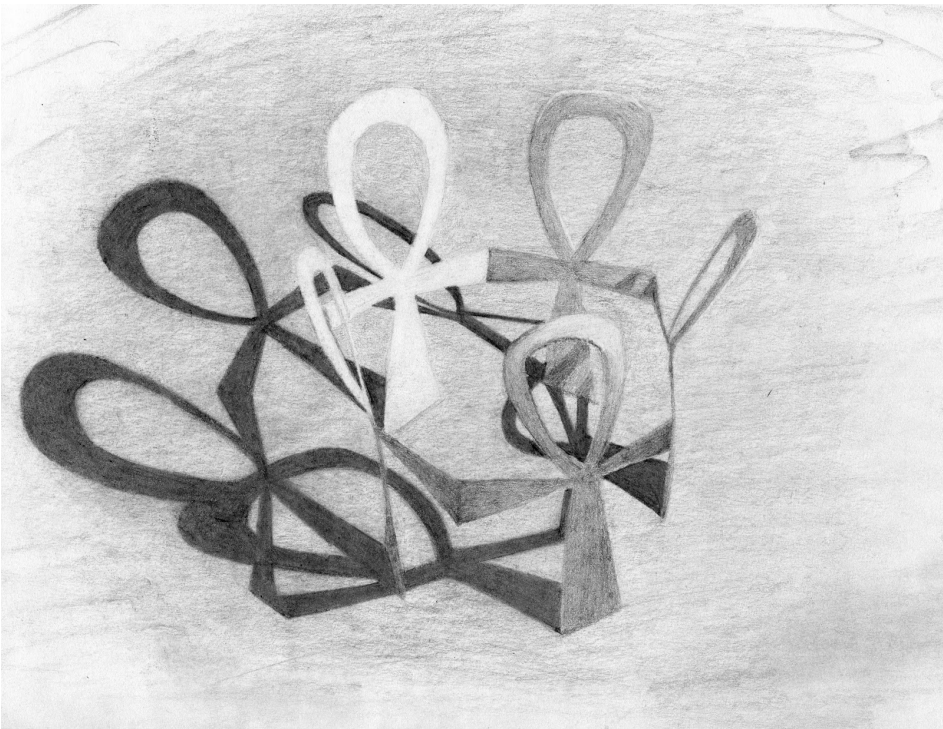
by Jeremy Evans



by Cole Sherwood



by Mckay Cox



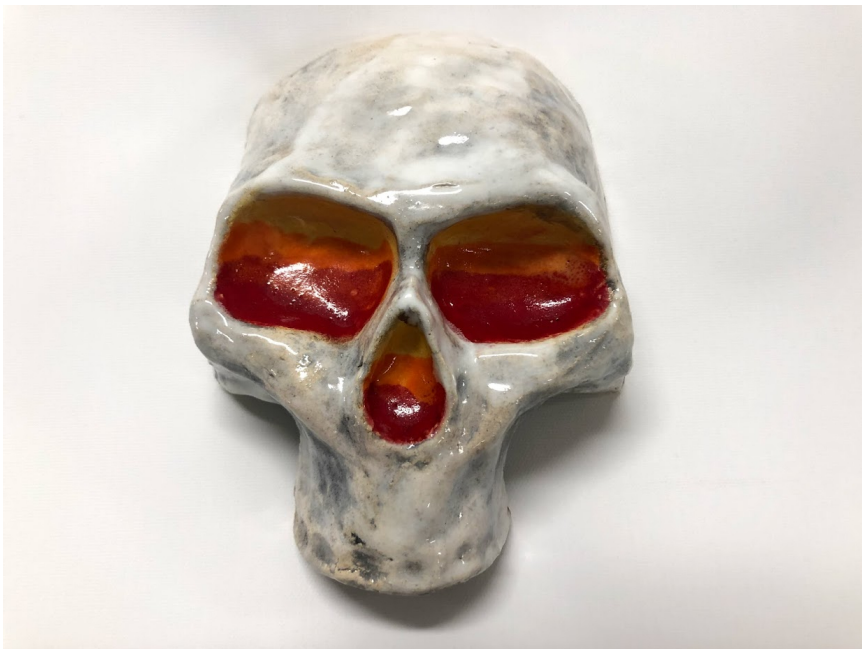
Circle of Lyfe

by Emma Wheeler



Slip Through One's Perspective

by Emily Erikson



by Zeb Rhodehouse



Memorialize Change

by Emily Erekson



by Jackson Sjoberg



Rope Drawing

by Emily Erekson



by Rachel Eggleston



Glasses Abstraction

by Emily Erekson



by Daniela Arroyo



American Draw Poster
by Emily Erekson

Frankenstein



Mary Shelly

Frankenstein

by Sydney Korzep



by Avery Joiner



by Carter Zaugg



by Jaisie Rast



Shape Outside of Class

by Danni Westerman



The 1975

by Ciara Stock



by Daniela Arroyo



by Tah Hto



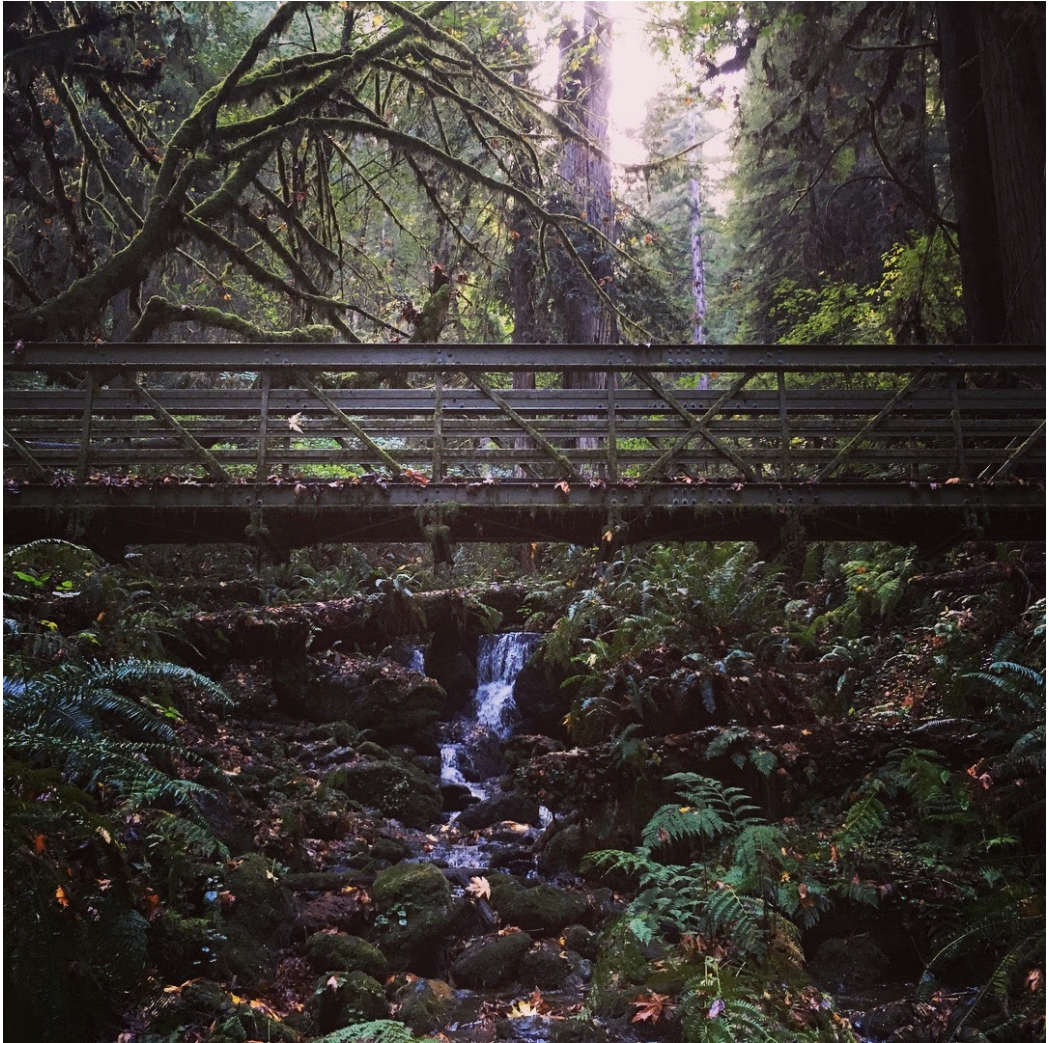
by Jaisie Rast



by Alex Harrison



by Daniela Arroyo



by Brandon Titensor



Oneirataxia
by Hailey Ovitt



by Cole Bangerter



by Samantha Silver



by Brielle Lewis



by Miriam Fairbanks



by Samantha Silver



Violin Sunrise
by Samantha Silver



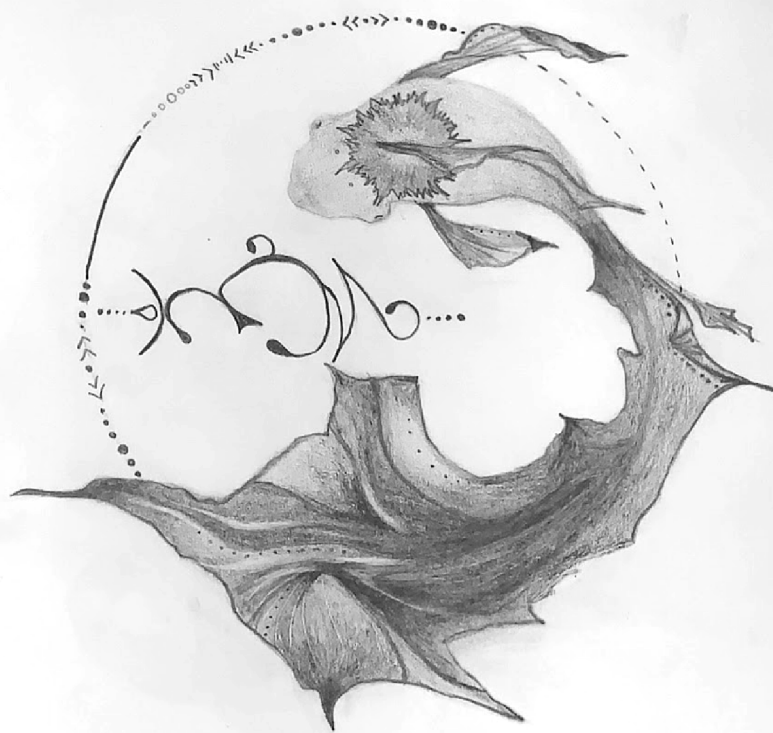
by Brielle Lewis



by Jaisie Rast



by Samantha Silver



by Brielle Lewis



by Annika Naylor



by Blake Buckley



by Sammy Naylor



by Tamera Condie



by Sophie Robinette



by Jeffery Taylor



by Nate Richardson



by Brandon Titensor



by Taylor Bradshaw



by Tamera Condie



by Will Doucette



by Danni Westerman

The Zodiacs

A collection by Abigail Chambers



Aries



Taurus



Gemini



Cancer



Leo



Virgo



Libra



Scorpio



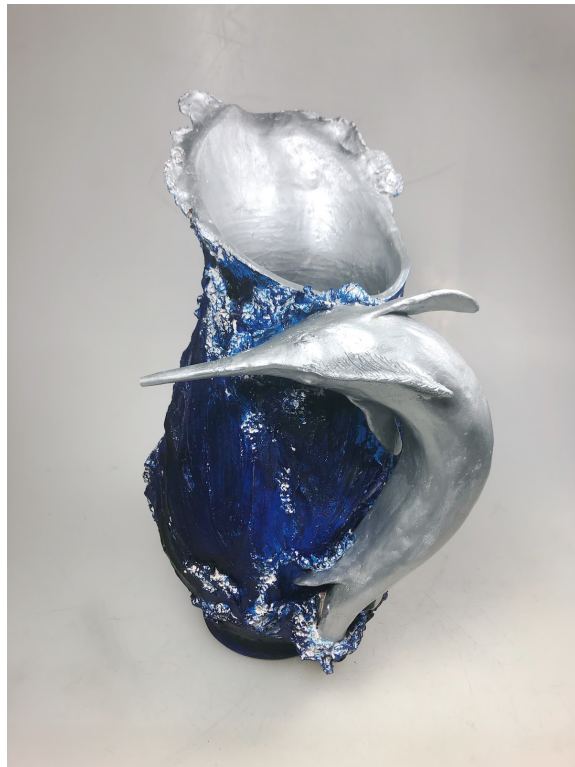
Sagittarius



Capricorn



Aquarius



Pisces

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