THE CAMP HILL

LITERARY LION

Creative Writing and Arts Magazine 2023



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cover art by Sofia Fitzgerald (Class of 2025)

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A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read the 2023 edition of the *Literary Lion*. The editing process was truly a joy. Reading through each submission, we were impressed by the talent and innovation of the Camp Hill student body, from middle school to high school.

To all of those who submitted work to us, thank you for contributing to this magazine and spreading a passion for the creative arts.

We hope that the magazine will continue on and inspire students to love and make art.

Sofia Fitzgerald and Jet Gillan

A Chance Encounter with the Supernatural

Owen Melham | ‘26

Heavy snow weighs pine branch down
They bow and creak under its pressure
Under the glistening moon, snow shines brighter,
it's luminescence dousing all land equally
A white fox flits over snow far away,
chasing glimpses of swift hares
One cave stands at a clearing,
housing hibernating bears in its homey heat
Sleepily, a mouse wanders in a daze
Its stunned by a gaze and then,
still as a deer in headlights,
the mouse staggers in vertigo back to its hole,
never to emerge from its den again
Geese squawk overhead, a foreign noise in a quiet world,
but a glance hushes them too,
and they fly on silently like defeated men stumbling to their deaths
In the presence of the Supernatural, no bird dares to chirp
No tree dares to sway, no deer dares to fray
With hands big enough to grab mountains,
eyes as deep as the ocean and as wide as the sky
And feet that stamp continents in one step
As the world is still, the Supernatural is still too,
for it fears the world just as the world fears it
Until a child wanders between two large trees
and bumps into the Supernatural
Instead of feeling fear, the child laughs,
Her giggles carrying across the quiet landscape
A gust of wind spins her around and she falls
By the time she stands herself up,
the Supernatural is gone, vanishing without a trace

A Few Haikus

Hayden Keich | ‘26

People shouldn’t be
so opinionated, but
that’s just what I think.

~

Procrastination
often results in small
errors in one’s work.

~

There is no “i” in
gaslighting. There never was.
Why would you think so?

~

I’m irritated
by men with DID. Who
do they think they are?

A Flesh Island

Will Klos | ‘26

In a sea of blood, there sits a flesh island,
That had lived once.
In a sea of blood, there sits a flesh island,
That had loved once.
In a sea of blood, there sits flesh islands,
That had all flourished once.
But now they lie,
Rotted,
Decayed,
Forgotten.
The islands look different,
But they are all the same.
They all sit in the same crimson sea,
They all had ambitions, goals, lives.
But there are some who don’t care.
They acquired a device,
A cold metal tool of massacre,
Of murder.
A means of destruction and macabre creation.
Destroying lives and creating new islands of flesh
Ripping through flesh like paper.
Eventually, the artist of death is captured,
But their paintbrush of pain is left untouched.
Nothing is done to prevent more killing.
Rules remain unchanged.
There are those who aim to defend their machines of massacre,
Like gargoyles guard their castle with their stony gaze.
Until something is done, something is changed,
Machines of massacre will continue to steal lives.
And there will be more flesh islands,
Flesh islands in a sea of blood,
Flesh islands that had lived once.

A Skirt, an Egg, and a Song

Ava Switzer | ‘25

Faded and Torn

Given to me with love,
A delicate dress skirt
Adorned with warm flowers
Soiled and unkempt in child’s hands
In itself, it was carefree
Billowing in a summer’s breeze
Kneeling in the soft earth
Stirring with a child’s spirit
Hovering just above peeking
toes, not all dainty
Then the magic dissolved,
the pixie dust wore off
Shut away with the moths
never touching summer’s warm cheek
And it broke, its poor heart
That carried such liveliness,
such innocence
Nothing could be done to mend it
And if there was,
the pattern wouldn’t look the same

Rotten Egg

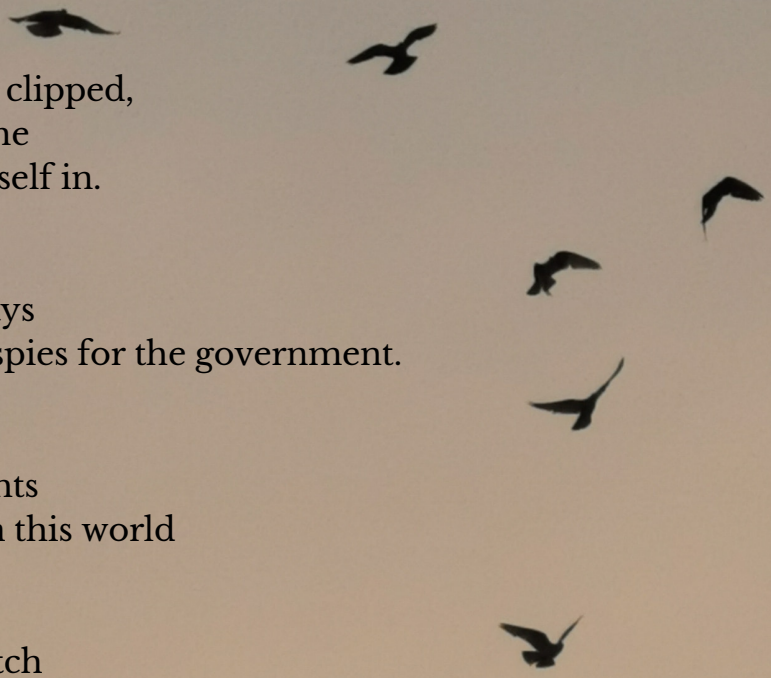
I destroyed the love in your words
Until my throat turned raw
Until your eyes melted
underneath my scorching flames
and left dry red.
Our lips quivered
And our hearts ached.
Your hands clawed at my demons
in desperation;
Yet they only roared louder
I felt ignorant and stubborn
And soon our eyes both burned
The same storm.
Lightning struck
And our world split in two
Like a rotten egg
And out came poison

Music

You flow like streams winding around bends
You dance like ballerinas in their silk slippers
And your fast beats and quickening rhythms
Send my pulse on a speed track
Yet too much of you, a hurricane will blow
And knock my head into stars
My heart can only feel so much
You are overwhelming
But you are beautiful

Birds may not be real but I think I am

Max McHugh | ‘24



Once white wings are clipped,
Can't fly away from the
Cage I’ve trapped myself in.

But I can't
Face the world that says
Birds aren’t real, just spies for the government.
Because I am real.

I can fly to great heights
Become something in this world

But the
Red on my wings match
The thread binding my chest together
A sewn on smile and gray button eyes
A plush to forever sit in a cage
Just something for you to look at
And to never interact with
A set piece in the show of life

All in all,
Life sucks
Give the birds bread because we hunger
For the mere morsel of food
That you give
We are alive too, yknow.

Blazing Mystery

Jordan Lawruk | ‘26

The morning is clearer than crystal.
The sky's the color of the sea.
The sun that blazes is a presage.
But I am unaware.
All I can see is the path ahead of me.
The same path I walk every day.
The path I walk to school.
Every walk is the same.
And yet today it feels different.
Maybe that is just what I think when I look back.
I will never know.
The city surrounds me.
My city of wonder and possibility.
I take it for granted.
I believe it is the diamond of Japan.
I trust that it is indestructible.
The clouds that race by hold a secret.
A secret that will soon make itself present.
Some secrets are whispered quietly.
Maybe if I had listened I would have heard it.
Gliding on the wind like a song.
I may have said goodbye to my mother.
Given her an extra hug out the door.
Oh the things we wish we had known.
This secret wasn’t told quietly.
It came from across the sea like a lion's roar.
From worlds away came a blast.
A burst that blazed like a million suns.
All crushed together in blazing fire.
The fire that burned away the last of the world I knew.

Daughters of Trees

Lila Seip | ‘25

I was six the last time I heard the willow’s call
She sang in between breezes
and whispered in children’s freckles
She danced in a skirt of reeds
and fell in a crown of lilac thorns
I weaved wreaths of her branches
Carved an oar from her side
and fell drunk on her sap
Her sweetness dizzied me to adolescence

I’ve since forgotten her feathering leaves
and her woven bark

The aftertaste of Mother still startles me each time the moon glows full mast

Even now her graveyard has visitors
Her roots trip my laces and tangle my heart strings
Her twigs nestle in my spine

Until the day I touch willow again
Sliced up the back in a funeral suit
My narrow sanctuary lowering into her old home
Roots returning to roots
Willow returning to willow
Daughter returning to daughter

Empty Cradle

Finn Ericksen | ‘26

Sophia should have been more alarmed by the sudden intrusion of what looked like offbrand SWAT officers storming her school in the middle of the prom dance, all things considered. She probably would be, if it didn’t make complete sense to her at the moment exactly why they were there, her date’s nervous and panicked flinch only helping to confirm her suspicions.

Ray had always been a bit shy of people, even when they were little kids. He’d inch away from the others in kindergarten, and would quietly color in the corner of the room when free time was announced; though he’d occasionally glance at people in the room, like a cat’s gaze flicking between a nearby mouse and canary. At the time, Sophia had thought he was trying to find something to socialize over, and so made the first move in establishing an admittedly close friendship.

Admittedly, his shyness was a wise move on his part. Most of the community of Westgros was a rather tightly knit and exclusive group. Had he even tried to interact with the other kids, they would have ignored him. Everyone in Westgros knew each other, and if you didn’t you’d better learn and introduce fast, because strangers meant Intruders to them. And Intruders were usually gently nudged (read: bullied) into leaving. And Ray’s parentage (or suspicious lack thereof) definitely made him an ‘Intruder,’ just not the foreign kind.

Strangely, that bullying never quite seemed to happen. Anytime Sophia heard talk about targeting him in gym class or getting him after school once they got older, those who were planning on showing up suddenly got sick for a day, went back to school, and had no memory of ever even discussing Ray. And Ray never did change from his "stay out of the spotlight" mentality (until recently). He was a kind boy. The type you’d see occasionally in public. If you caught his attention, he’d look, smile, wave, and then go back to whatever he was doing. In hindsight, Sophia pondered, his smiles always did look too wide, and his head swiveled a bit too much like an owl rotating its neck.

When Sophia realized she needed a date for prom, she had spent hours with her friends Madison and Abigail cataloging every boy in school like police profiling for a suspect of a crime. When she got to Ray, though, it occurred to her that he’d been acting a bit different in the last couple of months. He was more social now; a bit out of character, but maybe he’s coming out of his shell, she thought. She decided she might as well go with him, he’s her friend after all.

He wasn't abandoning his shell, as it turns out.
He was trying to blend in.

The day after prom, Sophia was escorted to the police interrogation room. "Look, I didn't know he was a 'snatcher,' okay? I literally only put it together once you guys showed up," she said. It hurt a surprising amount to say that. Her childhood friend, bodysnatched by one of those creepy red fleshy things with far too many eyes to be normal? It was a terrifying and deeply saddening thought, though she could tell it hadn't fully settled in yet. "Just ask your questions and let me go home." The Interrogator pursed her lips in a sympathetic frown.

"Alright then, fair enough. So, how long ago do you think Mr. Ray was snatched?" the Interrogator asked, picking up a pen. "Personality changes, verbal tics, body language?"

"I think it was a month ago. He was always shy, ever since kindergarten. Then he started openly socializing, like he had always acted that way," she replied. "That's about all I know. He was my friend for so much of my life, maybe could have been something more...it's surreal to think that he was gone for that long."

The Interrogator hummed, flipping open a folder. "Alright then. I'll add that to the repo—" She suddenly stopped on a page. "That's... strange. According to our nerds over here, he was snatched at least a decade ago, but it's probable that he could have been snatched as a toddler."

Jealousy

Sophia Geller | ‘28

Jealousy decidedly
Reminds me
That life isn’t fair
That I might see a million stars
And you might know what they are.
That I might try to talk to you
But I’ll fail so miserably.
That you might go with someone else
And smile so happily.
That I might have to look
At a picture depicting this
And settle for a genuine glance
Instead of gaining another chance
To make you smile just like you did
When you went out with a different kid.
And just like always I’m left in the dust
And I’ll try to run again but I might just combust.
The problem with insanity is always wanting constantly
The chance to try again,
Even when you know it leads to the same fatal end.

Jealousy
Divies company into two unique sides.
Wanting More Of and Wanting Less Of
And they just don’t coincide.
Because when you ignore a single side
You focus too much on the mass of the other
Forgetting that both still are company
Forgetting that you wanted both
And forgetting that one side
Always leads to the other
Over and over and over it goes
Keeping you ever from coming off your toes.
Never forget that there's people behind you
Never forget that you wanted them all.
When the party seems so small
And that one person is making you fall
Then you’ll dive and you’ll die
And you’ll get up and try
But the real problem is
There’s still people outside
Waiting for permission
To brandish the invitation
To come inside
And coincide
And make your life a mass downslide.

Misery loves company so let them join the crew
Jealousy has stolen me so don’t let it steal you.

Poland 1939:
A Country Ripped at the Seams

Donald Murphy-Ahles | ‘29

Poland, 1939, a supposed safe place for its people, Jewish or otherwise. They had a non-aggression pact with Germany, and Germany wouldn’t dare to invade them, or so they thought. After Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union teamed up to invade Poland, many citizens, Jewish and otherwise, chose to evacuate. Many didn’t make it. Most of those who did were traumatized. This is the story of a young Jewish boy, and his evacuation to freedom.

“Matka! Come play with me!” shouted young Jan. Even from a very young age, he had a lot of energy and plenty of curiosity. Though he was old enough to begin school and his parents could easily afford it (his father owned at least a dozen farms), he was kept home to learn how to farm. His parents needed someone to take care of the farm more than a scientist or doctor.

“I’ll be there in a second,” shouted his mother. She stayed at home to take care of Jan while his father managed the farms. It was a beautiful, sunny day outside, almost mocking what was about to happen.

His mother was listening to the radio, something he often bragged about having to his friends. He didn’t often listen to the strange voice that came from it. Today, though, he was less enthusiastic about his toys, so he decided to listen to what the voice said. He didn’t understand most of what the radio announced, and what he did understand didn't give him much information.

What he did understand, however, was that his mother looked concerned —horrified, even. Much to his confusion, she started to pack a trunk full of necessities: clothes, toiletries, and food.

The longer she packed, the more concerned Jan became. His concern turned into near panic when his father rushed through the door, face grim and jaw clenched. He rarely showed affection to either of them, not due to hate, but due to his introverted nature. But today he knew it might be the last time he would see his son or wife.

So he kissed his wife, then turned to his son, looked him directly into his eyes and said, “Promise me you're going to be brave, OK? Keep your mother safe and always remember that I love you. ” He hugged his son, took one last look around and then saw his son and wife crying as the door closed. It would be the last time he saw either of them.

That night, they left as soon as it got dark. As they drove down the road in their CWS T-1 they realized that they probably wouldn't be able to drive all their way to freedom. These new cars, while marvelous inventions, required huge amounts of petrol as fuel. The barrel of petrol they kept in their trunk slowly got emptier and emptier until after about 125 miles of driving, they ran out of petrol. Luckily they were only a mile or two from Białystok and could walk there in about 20 minutes. From there, they would catch a train or get help from someone with a functioning car.

But when they got there, they were greeted, not by friendly faces but by a Soviet destroyed city, full of dead and wounded soldiers and civilians. Just down the block they could hear heavy footsteps. They hid in a shop of some sort and saw Soviet soldiers marching down the street demanding that Jewish people be turned in to them. Jan's mother didn't know much about German politics, but she had heard that their new leader had some pretty strong anti-Jewish beliefs. So if the Germans' allies were rounding up Jews, it probably wasn't anything good.

When the Soviets got in front of the shop they were in, they hid under the counter. Luckily, the Soviets only quickly looked through the window, leading Mrs. Kowalska (Jan's mom) to believe that they had already searched the shop. They, being weary from days of traveling, decided to stay the night in the shop. But sleep would be slow to come, and when it did, it was full of nightmares of the dead city and whatever other horrors might be happening at home.

In the morning, they woke to the screaming of a young woman. They saw her being dragged out of her house, looking thin and desperate, as if she hadn't eaten in days. The soldier carrying her covered her face with his hand, and within a few seconds, she went quiet. Mrs. Kowalska decided that they needed to get out of there. They took the back door, which led to an alley.

After walking for a few minutes, they heard a voice whisper, "You looking to get out of here?"

Another said, "We're headed for Vilna tonight."

Jan's mother, relieved but also suspicious, replied "And what do you get out of it?"

The voice then whispered back, "Nothing, just the reward of doing the right thing."

So Mrs. Kowalska and Jan agreed to leave with them that night. They piled into the crowded car around seven and got out of the city by 10.

They arrived in Vilna around 2:30 the next morning where they were greeted by lots of other immigrants who had fled Poland. They shared stories of their lives back home. After a couple of days, they were taken to London where they stayed for the next 6 years. One day they received a letter that gave them the unfortunate news that Jan's father had been killed in battle.

They returned home to Poland after World War Two ended, and found their farms overgrown and houses blown to bits by bombing. Even after they fixed their home, things would never be the same again.

Six Feet

Emily Bond | ‘26

You were five feet tall
You were one foot away from six feet.
But six feet is like an illusion.
When looking at the world as a whole
It’s as significant as a particle of dust in the wind.
And six feet is short
When thinking of things relative to us.
Six feet is a yoga mat,
It’s a supermodel
Wearing three inch heels
It was the height of my grandmother’s coat rack.
Six feet is as puny as a squirrel
In comparison to the whole world.
Six feet is a bicycle
Measured from wheel to wheel.
It’s my father’s height
From his head to his heels
It’s the length of his ladder
And it’s two yardsticks glued tip to tip
Six feet is how far they told us to stand from one another
“Flatten the curve”
It seemed far *then*.
Six feet is just a measurement
It’s inches, centimeters, and feet
But six feet reminds me where I am.
And so when I think of where *I* am
And where *you* are
Six feet under feels so far.

The Ocean's Secret

Maura Newman | ‘26

The ocean roars as the sun beats down.
I hear them talking,
What a glorious sound!
People gather from miles away
To see their timeless performance.

Everyday I look again
The water rises and falls all the same.
As the mist flutters down like fairy dust,
I wonder if the sea ever gets to rest.

Come winter, the air is cold.
My teeth chatter as the wind blows.
No one is here, the sand is untouched,
Yet the ocean carries on with a hard day at work.

I yawn and rub my weary eyes,
But the ocean is as lively as ever.

I sit and ask the rough waters what their secret could be,
How do you do it? Where do you get the energy?
All I get is a wave crashing down,
Such a sensual yet spectacular sound.

I look for an answer in their mysterious waves,
Rough on the surface, like a mountain range.
The wind blew violently against my face,
And the truth came in with the tide.

The wind is like a battery that powers the water,
And gravity pushes the waves down farther.
The water waits sluggishly like a selfish king,
For their servants to do everything for them.

I am my own battery,
An ongoing force that strives for success every day.
It's just me working for myself,
How do I get the energy?

Time Cannot Be Beat

Keeley Nunn | ‘26

My life is like a movie
I watch it pass by
I wake, work
Then return home
In bed I restlessly lie

I’m tired of waiting hours
For my thoughts to run out
Before I can find peace

I’m tired of laying there
in the shadows rethinking my days
Before the abyss welcomes me

I embrace her
With open arms

My dreams are
whispered worlds
in my ears

I see them
in flashes
Like fleeting
Memories
From a past life

When I wake
I cannot remember

Time moves far too quickly
I blink and the day vanishes

The sun rises like a fire
Her heat blurring my vision
Daring me to go on

I can’t stop
I’m tired of running
I can’t catch up
It’s hard to breathe

Perhaps I should
Slow down
and enjoy
The journey...

Maybe then
I could
catch my breath

Tribute to Junior Year

Charlotte Budman | ‘24

Eat the Pavement

We are sixteen
and the only way
we know how to love
is recklessly.

We cling to
places and
people and
parts of being
because
familiarity and revelation
have a
terribly forbidden romance.

Our own bodies are still
unmapped in such ways that
eldritch reflections
are expected
and scabs are picked at
without knowledge of their origins.

Sixteen is why
humans are meant to fit together.
We've nothing left to grip,
so we interlock our fingers—
pretend my nails aren't picked at
pretend your palms aren't sweaty—
make believe our world isn't
unraveling at the seams.

We're remembering how to
be authentic
so for a while it's all
haircuts and
new clothes and
filling trash bags for
Community Aid.

Then we learn to do it daily,
so after that it's all
ink phrases sprawled on wrists and
text messages we may regret and
forced truths and
heart palpitations and
trying not to treat our souls like
school assignments
cause they aren't something you can
analyze without reading.

We haven't
grown into our hearts yet.
Every other morning we wake up
covered in bruises
from tripping over their strings.
Not sure how to open doors either.
It's just fortifying walls
or letting them crumble so that
rubble tumbles from our mouths.

I'm still picking bits of cement from
between my teeth.

Sixteen is throwing myself at the world,
the one I can't recognize,
asking it to truly look at me,
see the horror,
and somehow say,
"I love you."

Tribute to Junior Year

My Greenhouse is made of Bones

I think,
for a long time,
I used words
to hate myself
(very loudly).

Because they felt
bad in my head, and
better between my
teeth,

And if you are
very loud,
and have
blood in your
mouth,

People do not question how
vulnerable
you're being.

I realize
now,
that good poetry
feels like a garden
in a
half-healed wound.

The lines that
hurt most to write,
aren't the car-crash
stanzas.

They're the ones that
cradle what remains soft
in your mind.

Crack my head open.
You will find blood.
(You will also find flowers).

Tadpoles

This ibuprofen tastes like
inhaling too much creek water
as a kid.

My insomnia headache hurts like
falling off a bike.

I learned how not to breath,
even got my driver's license but

She's still terrified.
Still dripping wet and
bloodied knees.

I'm drinking coffee darker than
the corners of the room that
used to keep me up at night.

Swallow wrong, and
I'm nine years old.

Ultraviolet

Cece Beem | ‘26

Walking on the sidewalk
One step, two step, in each perfectly symmetrical square
Feet heavily pounding rhythmically on the raised, cracked cement

An awakening inside of flowers,
they dance around the intention of blooming
One flower, two flowers dropping their petals
They fall passed that empty path those feet beat on

They knew it was the sun that led them astray
It was too early for the rays of ultraviolet to burn,
Burn the surface of the earth
as if it were a reward and a punishment
all at once.

But frost, shortly coated every individual blade of half-alive grass
The crystals kept it inanimate and colorless
The sound of its gentle touch was like a glass windchime spiraling in the sun
Glistening in the morning’s dawn

The flowers patiently wait for their inevitable cue,
to absorb the rays of life
Stored water remained turgent in the cells of their roots and smooth stems
They simply succumb to the lust for hydration
But most of all the luminescence

Axillary buds yearn to open,
to have a mutual relationship with birds and bees,
to be vulnerable to the cycle of life,
to be beautiful,
all at once.

To slowly break, dry up, and lose its innocence,
for your ultraviolet rays.

Washed Out

Maria Benavides | ‘25

My father is from El Salvador,
a small country in Central America.
He came over when he was dating my mother.
He had to learn English, go to college, find a job.
He was white washed.

In 2007 I was born.

A mixture of white and Latino.
I grow up speaking English,
my dad tried to teach us Spanish.
“Spanish is useless here”
“Only English”
I forgot how to speak fluently.

I live in a white suburb in the middle class.
I see white everyday.
My peers all speak English so I have to too.
I only know white culture,
Only know some Hispanic food and music.

In summer my family travel to El Salvador,
try to get all the experiences.
I feel bad because I can barely speak the language,
and when I do it’s not enough.

I come back to America and have to “forget” the language once again.

When I sometimes speak Spanish to my peers,
I’m “bragging.”
But when I speak English,
they ask if I can speak Spanish.

Spanish or English?

Brown or White?

Latina or Caucasian?

Here I get white washed, I only care for white culture.
I am forced to know white culture.
I am different if I know anything else.

I am white washed.

Where Do Clouds Go?

Hugo Poppy | ‘26

Where do clouds go once they drift away?
When they flow right out of sight,
Wind whisking the wandering clouds
Do they float towards their journey’s end,
Welcoming an unknown destiny?
Or do they dissolve into the infinite cosmos,
Becoming vast nothingness in a place of everything,
Like thoughts unfathomable to the universe itself.

Perhaps, clouds are like eternal journeymen,
Whispering tales of their voyage to other travelers,
Taking pleasure in sharing with
New and remembered faces they meet along the way.
Often they may twirl upon Heaven’s canvas,
Maneuvering like an abstract paint brush,
Creating passion from every touch
Not embarrassed, but free and unashamed.

Perhaps, when parting ways from the line of vision,
They may seek refuge and hide with the protective mountains,
Driven by the embracing tranquility of their tall companions.
After they may leap next to the stars,
Merging to become the ethereal light of the universe.

Possibly, clouds never truly drift away,
But their spirit remains,
To compose the essence of the sky.
Always present,
Yet invisible
Fleeting memories of our world.

a tiny flame

Jet Gillan | ‘25

my despair glows in candlelight.
no shadows befall The Broken Victim,
burning their own skin with
the tiny flame
that ignites something in me, too.

candles burn to remember.
how about burning to forget?
and as the tears of wax pool into a puddle of disregard,
i wonder if i can melt my heart, too.



Everything is Fine

Melody Hoffman | ‘24

Nights like these made her hate her apartment.

It was always too cold in the winter, too hot in the summer, and the walls were thin enough to hear the rest of the tenants on her floor. The frequent blackouts, unsettlingly loud groaning and creaking of the building at night, and occasional rat infestation in the laundry room made the whole place feel like it was on the verge of collapse. But it was cheap and close to school, so she stayed, despite the anxiety it caused her.

Living there was hard. Over the past year, it had only gotten worse.

The oppressive darkness and complete silence in her bedroom suddenly felt unbearable, only intensifying the feeling—no, the understanding—that she wasn’t alone in her room. As the stillness grew heavier, a sinking, resigned pessimism washed over her as she suddenly realized exactly what was happening.

She cursed under her breath and turned away from her bedroom window. Her fingers began blindly searching for the flashlight she kept on her bedside table, the darkness impeding her already terrible farsightedness. She finally grasped it and swiftly turned it on, directing its light to the farthest corner of the bedroom, where she saw—

A horrible, horrible creature.

The imposter’s light green eyes were a shade too bright, their brown hair a tad too dark and unnaturally straight. Its face was a bit too oval to be convincingly human, its skin was somehow paler than hers, and its posture far too poor. From its spot in the corner a strange scent wafted to her nose—a strongly artificial, chemical one, not unlike the smell of bleach.

Not quite Lovecraftian, but close.

The shapeshifter blinked at her impassively before its mouth stretched into an inhumanely wide grin that showed off its few too many teeth- a crude and unconvincing performance of sympathy. She felt sick just looking at it.

“Did I wake you, Evelyn? I’m sorry.”

An involuntary shiver went through her body and she couldn’t help but cringe. She hated how well it imitated her voice—her flat, yet sarcastic tone.

“We both know that you’re not. What do you want?”

The entity paid her hostility no mind. Its unblinking green eyes continued to look through her and its smile remained unfaltering. It took two long, stiff steps towards her, and she barely resisted the urge to throw the flashlight and

scream. She knew by now that fighting it would only make things worse. It reached her bedside and loomed over her, and she suddenly felt grateful for her poor vision- at least she couldn't see its hideous expression anymore.

"Your first class will be starting soon, won't it?" It retorted.

Too tired to remember the current month, Evelyn turned the flashlight away from the creature and towards the bedside table, where she began a half-hearted search for her glasses. It would be too difficult to read her alarm clock without them. She silently cursed herself—she never put her spectacles in the same place twice, a habit that she was sorely regretting now.

"Looking for something?" A mocking voice questioned.

At the sound, dread overcame her. She couldn't find them.

"You son of a—" she quickly turned the light back towards the monster, half-stumbling out of bed to confront it, but she was too late. It had vanished in the second it took for her to blink, and had taken her glasses with it.

"Come out here you, you—" she sputtered, looking around her bedroom frantically. Her irritation and exhaustion mixed unpleasantly, leaving her dizzy, frightened, and overwhelmed. "Give them back, you coward!" No response. It was hiding from her, she knew, probably scheming, plotting, and delighting in the grief it had been causing her since it arrived in August.

She had tried to keep it out at first—locking her door, installing a security camera, and she even tried to ask the landlord to keep an eye out for it (he ignored her, as per usual)—with no success. She had been trying to ignore it, hoping it would go away, but it only seemed to be getting crueler and more persistent. If this was how it was going to treat her now, she could only imagine how much worse it would be this summer.

Summer.

Evelyn mentally chewed on the word, considering its implications as she twisted a lock of her dark hair around her finger—a soothing quirk she'd had since she was a child. She would be stuck in her apartment with the creature for months on end, with nothing to do and her nearest friends and family more than two hours away. And even if they were closer, who would believe her? She couldn't think of a single person who would take her situation at face value. That left her with nowhere to go and no one to help her get rid of that thing—

Wait.

An epiphany suddenly broke through her sleep deprived brain. She had months to dedicate to it- to learning, containing, and, most importantly, exterminating the damn thing. A giddy, triumphant feeling swept through her, and she couldn't help but grin.

"Just you wait…" Evelyn whispered to herself.

It'll be sorry, she decided.

* * *

The combination of adrenaline and anticipation had made falling back asleep nearly impossible, and she'd only managed to get an hour or so of rest before the sun forced her awake again. She wasn't too bothered, though—waking up earlier meant more time in the day and more opportunities to get the creature out of her apartment.

She slid out of bed, careful not to make too much noise, and quietly made her way to the kitchen. Once there, she opened her small fridge and began blindly searching for something edible. The only things within it were a tub of strawberry yogurt, a half full jug of milk, and a small bag of baby carrots, all of which she took gratefully for her breakfast. She paused and checked for an expiration date. Ever since the entity came, she'd found her fridge and cabinets to be perpetually empty or full of rapidly spoiling food, resulting in constantly overflowing trash cans, her grocery bill more than doubling, and her taking up an extra tutoring job at school to cover the new costs.

"Speaking of which," Evelyn muttered to herself, "I need to find somewhere to work this summer." She grabbed a cup and poured herself some milk before opening her silverware drawer to find a spoon. She grabbed one, ran her thumb along its curve to make sure it wasn't a fork, and carelessly shut the drawer.

She jumped at the slam and suppressed a yelp of surprise. She turned and looked frantically behind her as her free hand instinctively combed through her hair. She hardly dared to breathe, knowing that any extra noise would help the creature find her. It wasn't quite as active during the day, but she wasn't willing to take the risk.

Finally, after a minute of waiting, she put away the milk jug and warily made her way to her dining room—a corner of her kitchen with a small folding table and chair. Once seated, she took a hearty sip of milk and let her mind wander as she chewed on a carrot. Her thoughts inevitably focused on the monster and what she was to do with it. She glanced around her kitchen, as though the plain white walls and wooden cabinets could give her an answer, and her gaze fell upon the salt and pepper shakers sitting on one of the granite counter tops. Evelyn faintly recalled something about salt circles and protection from demons, and she mentally rolled her eyes at herself. She didn't know if the creature was a demon, and even if it was, she couldn't help but think that she would've gotten rid of it by now if it was intimidated by salt.

Still, she reasoned, scooping out the last bit of her yogurt. I might as well give it a shot. If nothing else, it might make me feel safer.

Sighing, she tossed the empty yogurt tub into the trash, placed the glass in the sink, and put away the carrots before tentatively picking up the salt. Her eyes landed on the fridge. She rotated the glass salt shaker in her hand, trying to determine if she'd actually be able to go through with this. Sure, she couldn't completely surround the fridge, considering it was against the wall and she wasn't strong enough to move it, but a semicircle was better than nothing.

Great, I'm actually going insane.

Not long ago, she laughed at the thought of salt circles, incantations, and good luck charms. But now, as she carefully marked out her protective space, she feared that she would kill for a rabbit's foot.

Evelyn stood up and stepped back to admire her work. It was a bit thin and oddly shaped, but it would have to do. She felt a strange sense of pride and accomplishment as she squinted at her misshapen creation, and she basked in the idea that she was finally making progress.

But even so, as she walked away to start the rest of her day, she couldn't help but notice the faintest smell of bleach.

* * *

"Hey, Siri, what should I do if an invisible shapeshifter breaks into my apartment?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that."

"Of course you can't."

* * *

When she jolted awake that night, she was starving.

The hunger by itself wasn't alarming. She'd been dealing with hunger pangs ever since the entity arrived in August, and she'd mostly learned to tune them out. But the new intensity of the sensation baffled and frightened her, sending her into a drowsy panic. She climbed out of bed and nearly stumbled to the floor as dizziness overcame her. She leaned against the wall for a moment until the lightheadedness passed and she no longer feared she would faint, and took the opportunity to steady her breathing. Once stable, she spared only a few seconds to grab her flashlight before charging for the kitchen against her better judgment. She flung open the cupboard and cabinet doors, desperately trying to find something in them to satiate her sudden appetite, but coming up empty.

Something smelled like bleach.

No, no, not now, not you, please please PLEASE-

"There you are, Evelyn."

She shrieked and involuntarily dropped the flashlight, hurriedly stepping back as the creature calmly picked it up. It redirected the beam of light straight into her face, and she turned away from the sudden brightness as it stalked towards her slowly and deliberately, each step disturbingly silent against the kitchen tile.

"It doesn't feel good, does it?" Each word it spoke sounded difficult to say, as though it was speaking through clenched teeth and a tense jaw. "Going hungry hurts, doesn't it?"

She retreated further into herself but gave no reply.

"What's the matter? Did I hurt your poor little feelings?" The entity taunted, its voice shifting in pitch to mimic hers. "Did you actually think I'd stand by and let you starve me? Are you really that stupid?"

She backed further into the corner and moved to cover her face with her hands, but the imposter was faster. It ripped her right arm away from her face and violently threw her to the floor, pointedly ignoring her yelp of pain and how she scrambled to protect her face.

"Are you scared of me?"

Evelyn inadvertently made eye contact through the gaps in her fingers. The blurry, burning fury in its bright green irises—eyes that looked too much like hers—gave her a warning before the monster curtly said—

"Because you should be."

She had only a second to dodge before the creature raised the flashlight over its head and swiftly swung it back down. She rolled under the dinner table and gripped onto the legs of the folding chair to ground herself. She squeezed her eyes shut and grit her teeth, trying to force her breathing to slow and willing herself not to cry. The beam of light flashed over her.

Oh god, I'm gonna die here.

The table above her was suddenly lifted and tossed aside, making a shockingly loud crashing sound as it collided with the floor. Adrenaline and desperation drove her to her feet and she made a break down the hall towards her bathroom. She haphazardly locked herself in, nearly slamming her fingers in the door as she did so, and frantically flicked the light switch. No luck—either the bulbs were burnt out or there was another blackout. She tried again and again, barely noticing her shallow, quick breathing, her spiking heart rate, or how her hands trembled with every flick of the switch.

The doorknob rattled.

Everything is Fine

"Evelyn. Open the door. Now."

Leave me alone leave leave leave leave leave LEAVE ME ALONE.

Evelyn hurried into the shower, nearly tripping and ripping the curtain as she did so. She sat on the shower tile and curled in on herself, trying to stop herself from shivering and shaking as she gripped her hair and pulled it with all her strength, the pain doing very little to distract or calm her.

The monster on the other side knocked, almost politely.

"Don't play games with me, Evelyn. Open the door and everything will be fine." The false assurance was accompanied by a firmer, more aggressive knock.

I'm gonna be sick my head my heart my lungs everything's so warm I'm running out of air—

She covered her ears, but nothing could block out the horrible rattling and banging from her mind. She felt hot tears trail down her cheeks, and couldn't help but berate herself for feeling so weak.

"I'm not asking you, Evelyn. Stop acting like a child and unlock the door. Now."

That's not me you're not me why do you have to sound like me look like me why do you hate me—

An eerie silence abruptly set in. Evelyn hesitantly unblocked her ears and immediately began twisting strands of her tangled hair, grimacing at the knots she felt. It wouldn't just give up like that, would it? She unfolded herself and staggered to her feet.

Please please let it be gone please let it be day let it be dawn—

The shower curtain was torn aside.

Fear drove her forward as she lunged for her adversary, gripping at what seemed to be its shoulders as they crashed through the pitch black bathroom. She managed to push the entity into the porcelain sink, and in the second it was stunned she threw her fist forward, gearing up for the sucker punch of a lifetime, and-

Hit the smooth, cold glass of the mirror instead.

It had always been there, always lurking, watching, scheming, and waiting. It was always part of her.

And truth be told, she'd always known that.

Losing It

Hanna Keeton | ‘24

Pressed into the carpet beneath a five year old’s Sketchers and struggling to stay away from the dog crap Sandy stepped in yesterday when they went for a walk, is Mickey. Mickey is a LEGO man Sandy named, and he's currently playing a game he created, "How Long Does It Take for Mom to Break Down?" In this game, Mickey moves where he's sure Sandy won't look, and when she inevitably starts crying, he counts how many deep breaths Mom takes before she loses it. He only plays this game on days he knows the adventure is the ball pit, Chuck E. Cheese, or some other place perfect for a forgetful toddler. He has gone on countless expeditions as a partner in crime, though begrudgingly so. He couldn't remember how they met or when, but from sunup to sundown he's with Sandy. When the day turns dark and Mom kisses Sandy on the forehead, Mickey retires to his house on her bed stand crafted from Barbie, Hotwheels, and LEGO parts. It was designed by the one and only “Stylist Sandy,” as she so put it, using a makeshift pencil-microphone to announce herself when she presented him with the home.

Today Sandy awakes at seven with rays of sunlight coming through yellow curtains and casting a golden hue on her ivory skin. Mom enters the pink walled room, dressed very nicely and snapping her heels to the floor with every step. Her black hair is pulled in a tight bun just above the collar to the cherry blazer she wore. Mom wakes Sandy and she climbs out of the duvet in a rush for breakfast, her favorite meal of the day.

Mickey, however, wakes up at seven-oh-two, to the screeching hen that was Sandy hitting her toe on the way out of bed. Mom calms her down and Mickey is yanked from bed, which is when he noticed the slight dent on his head from last night. He traveled to the guest bedroom after lights out to meet up with some old friends from the basement play area. After a couple rounds of apple juice, Mickey decided to break out the cape and relive memories from his and Sandy's superhero days. He got up on the sink counter and Superman punched in the air off it. He fell flat through the air right on the corner above his left eyebrow.

While he doesn't think Sandy will notice the mark on his face, as she eats her Cheerios, there is a curious look growing on her young one. She inspects the toy with stubby fingers over her cereal bowl. Mickey thinks a distraction might pull her from the soul staring she had going on, so when she glances at the TV, he decides to make his move.

Losing It

Mickey turns his hips ever so slightly where he is held between her forefinger and thumb; just enough to slip from her grasp and land with his head cap directly in a cheerio.

“Mickey!" Sandy cries and dives both hands into her breakfast in search of her friend, splashing cereal onto the table. Mom stands quickly from her chair, racing to get towels from the cleaning closet. She yells at Sandy to take her hands from the bowl, yet Sandy continues to drag her hands through cold milk. Sandy tilts the bowl to get a better view, but overdoes it right as Mom gets back with the towels. The glass knocks to the floor and bounces once before shards of glass cover the kitchen floor.

For a second the world stops.

The only sound is the running dishwasher and slow drip of milk off the marble counter and onto the gray ceramic tile. Mom takes a step back and Sandy's wide eyes begin to brim with tears.

“I-I'm so sorry mama, I'll help you clean up the spill—” Sandy says, beginning to step forward for her mother's comfort.

Mom puts up a hand as a silent stopper to her action, not wanting Sandy to step on the reflective grounds. Mom picks Sandy up and walks with her on one hip to their orange L shaped couch. Glass is crushed beneath her heel as she sits Sandy down on the edge and begins to clean the floor.

“We talked about you using glasses, Sandy, you're almost 6. You need to listen more and stop focusing so much on Mickey." Mom continues to talk about respect and listening, however her voice fades in Sandy's ears as Sandy's eyes begin to distort the kitchen floor into a battleground. As it was now in Sandy's mind, this was a search and rescue mission. Sandy is no longer Sandy, she is the great super duper spy here to recover Mickey and bring him back to the princess. Sandy's eyebrows drop into a stare of concentration as her eyes scavenge—

“Sandy,” says Mom with her hand resting on her hip and the famous accusatory motherly look on her tight knit face. She makes an outward sign and hunches beneath the kitchen counter where Mickey has been kicked to. She picks him up between two fingers, trying not to touch the slightly wet plastic.

“Mom, can I please have Mickey?” Sandy pleads when she recognizes what her Mom is holding. Her Mom puts the cleaning supplies back into the closet while she tells Sandy, “We can talk in the car. Go get dressed, we are trying something new today.”

Sandy gets up quickly, swinging both legs over the light orange couch arm and jumping onto the wooden floor. Racing to her room, she quickly puts on jeans and a yellow shirt, then begins stumbling around trying to get her shoes on.

She walks from the room to the front door where Mom is waiting.

Mom looks down at the child for a moment and in response silently opens her palm for Sandy to grasp. Walking hand in hand to the car, Mom gives a slight tug in response to Sandy's dragging heels.

They back out of the cobblestone driveway with windows halfway open to let in autumn air. 2000 KIDZ BOP starts to play lightly as Mom speaks with uncertainty waning her words.

“So sweetheart, the interview I'm going for is gonna last a bit longer than the other ones have and Aunt Dobler is busy so she can't watch you today.”

“I get to go to work with Mama?” Sandy questions, looking in the rearview mirror.

“No, actually, sweetie, we are going to try out daycare. It's a place for little kids where you guys have snacks and play games. You'll play with new toys too,” says Mom, trying to sound encouraging.

“Are they gonna have LEGO friends for Mickey?”

Just as she speaks, they pull into a stripmall parking lot in front of a bright purple building labeled "Drop 'em here" in rainbow letters. Mom pulls their minivan into the first open space she sees and puts the car in park.

“Actually, sweetheart, I was thinking you need to go a day without Mickey. This is a good chance to get to know some new, real friends.” With nearly pleading eyes, she looks for understanding on her daughter's round little face. The phrase ”Without Mickey” is something Sandy didn't think she'd ever hear. Her face scrunches with anger and confusion trying to fathom the very idea of not having Mickey with her.

“I don't want new friends, I have Mickey," she argues, crossing her hands over her chest with a huff.

“Damn straight, Sandy, damn straight”, muffles Mickey, still in Mom's pocket. Unheard, he continues to make comments against Mom's leg. “The real question is how come she's going to this place we have to pay for, when I watch her for free. That doesn't make any sense. This place is probably dirty too, Sandy is already a messy child. I couldn't imagine even more than one at a time.” Mickey contemplates his hourly rates as Mom and Sandy begin to get more heated in their argument.

After a couple minutes of further back and forth, Mickey feels Mom move fiercely before he feels her fingers grip around his small figure and tear him from her front pocket.

“He's not even real, Sandy!” Mom states with frustration gleaming off her as she thrashes Mickey side to side in the air in front of Sandy.

Sandy's face gets red and while it looks like she might cry, it looks even

more like she might kill. Sandy lurches forward, straining against her booster seat, and snaps her hand out trying to grab Mickey from her mother's grasp. Sandy feels plastic meet her fingertips, and yanks like her life depends on it. Mom takes a half second to realize what is happening and just as Sandy yanks backwards. Mom does too- splitting Mickey's arm that Sandy holds, from the rest of his body Mom has. The pull makes Mom lose her hold on the inch and a half of yellow, and Mickey's body goes flying out of her hand.

Mom doesn't see him break apart, and Sandy immediately fumbles around putting the arm in her jacket pocket. Even if it is only a tiny piece of Mickey, that's better than nothing. Mickey is lost somewhere in the car now anyway, and Sandy knows this is making Mom late for her interview. Mom turns to face the road again in the parked car and takes a very long deep breath in followed by a very long deep breath out.

“We are going inside and I want you to forget about Mickey today, just try and make some new friends,” Mom states as an end to the conversation, opening her door, then Sandy's. She unbuckles Sandy’s booster seat and pulls the very grumpy 5 year old from her seat. They shut the doors and lock the car as they walk towards the entrance.

* * *

Mickey rolls out from underneath the back row and uses the mounds of fast food trash and other various items from the car to get himself to the driver's seat. From there, he scales the center buttons with great difficulty, and gets atop the dashboard to look out the window.

Out of breath and wheezing, he looks at his reflection, “No way that kid actually just walked off with my arm like it was nothing.” he shakes his head and groans to himself. Mickey begins to pace back and forth and as his legs sway they make a slight clicking sound.

“I mean, everyday I get up and am basically Sandy's babysitter anyways, with the tea parties, and the makeup, and the playtimes—I don't even get paid for this! All I get is my limbs thrown across the car. It's not like it hurts or anything, but still. I've let Sandy put Play-Doh in my limb holes to become part transformer—but straight up taking my arm outside of playtime? Absolutely not.” He glances out the window again and watches the double doors slide open as Mom walks out without Sandy.

The sight makes his eyebrows push down into a hard look of concentration as he flings himself off the car door and back onto the crumb-encrusted floors. He rolls under the seat again to avoid being seen, and when Mom opens

the door to climb in, Mickey jumps from the frame to the pavement.

He hides behind Mom's tire until she pulls out of the parking space, and Mickey lays hugging the curb of the grass patch they parked next to. Once she pulls out and there's no one in sight, Mickey stands and begins his trek to the front doors. There's really nowhere to hide. Once he starts sprinting, his little legs don't stop until they reach the double doors.

There is a trash can outside the entrance that he stands behind and looks down both sides of the strip mall. He notices a lady walking her dog right down towards him.

“This is gonna be too easy,” Mickey murmurs to himself. Once the lady and her dog get close enough to the entrance, it sets off the motion detectors and the gates to "all four limb freedom" open.

Mickey runs through the door straight into the lobby, each step clicking against the tiles. The lobby is made of stretched ceilings and obvious child-made art littering the walls. It smells faintly of cleaner which is a good sign for Mickey- he had never been to a daycare before. There is peaceful elevator music playing softly over the speakers, directly above the potted plant he is hiding behind at the front desk. The only person in the lobby is a 60 year old woman with short white hair playing solitaire on her computer. She pays Mickey no attention as he surveys the area, spotting the sign that says “Kids room” hanging on the second door in the hallway.

He makes his way to it and hears the bustling of chairs with the "clean up" song being sung in the background by at least 15 kids. Once he gets to the door he puts the side of his round head to the wood to listen in. He hears the squirrely-voiced counselor say, “Alright kids, great job cleaning up! It's time for recess!”

What the hell is recess? Mickey thinks to himself, raising an eyebrow against the door, pressing himself closer to it.

Horrid grumbling from the floor beneath rattles Mickey, and it grows louder and louder, sounding like a rocket getting ready to blast off. Happy screams from the children radiate through the air. Mickey attempts to make a run for it, turning and clicking his feet. Yet the attempt is in vain, and the door swings open, spanking Mickey right on the behind and sending him face first into the wall parallel to the door.

Out of the classroom flow the screeching children and the underpaid, overworked daycare manager follows in toe to the double doors. All of them have been moving too quickly to notice him, but Mickey notices Sandy within the quick pace. He especially notices her smiling and babbling on with a brunette girl in a green sweater.

Once the hallway is clear, Mickey gets a running start and slides under-

neath the door frame. He stands and starts to look around the messy area. “How does it smell like boogers—” he begins, but is cut off by his own scream.

A seemingly gigantic hairy creature, with ears double the size of its body, is leaping straight for him. Its black dead eyes bore into Mickey's frightened ones as it stands on its hind legs with its ghostly lengthy body coming to full view.

“Hiya there I'm Benny, almost stepped on you bud, sorry about that!” He speaks with the utmost enthusiasm, resting back down and putting his head right in front of Mickey. Mickey has wide eyes trying to accept the scene in front of him.

“Never seen a bunny before pal?” Benny speaks again, tilting his head to the side. He moves around sporadically, sniffing at Mickey.

Mickey slaps his nose away and steps back. “No I haven't, and stop sniffing me.”

He retreats slightly, taken aback by Mickey's actions. Mickey starts towards the cubbies on the sidewall by the window to begin his search.

“Well whadda you doing here? I ain't seen you before,” Benny speaks, returning to his painstakingly joyful attitude.

“Looking for my arm,” Mickey states flatly.

“Oh, you should've just said so,” Benny says, running up behind Mickey, dipping his head down to swoop him up. Mickey gets tossed up and lands on Benny's back. He's about to start yelling at him when he realizes how soft his fur is. Mickey sinks into it for a second before realizing what's happened and tries to stand.

However, Benny begins to hop. “We have a whole section for toys just like you, I know just how to help.”

The roller coaster of trying to stay on the bunny's back while being thrusted up and around begins for Mickey and doesn't stop until they are on the other side of the room, on top of the counter by a painted shoe box. It says “Lost and found." Mickey doesn't notice the chairs around the box until they start to get seated. Multiple toys he's never seen begin to fill in the seats, from chess pieces to Bratz dolls.

Mickey doesn't realize what's going on until he sees Benny speaking into a thumbtack microphone.

“Hi, I'm Benny and I've been with Ava for almost seven years.”

The crowd speaks back in a bland unison, “Hi Benny.”

He clears his fuzzy throat before speaking. “Ava’s been distant lately. Our playtimes aren't as long as they used to be when she was five.” At hearing this, Mickey's ears perk up in curiosity though he refuses to give the sight his full attention. Benny continues to speak to the crowd. “I know she's starting to grow

to like teddy bears. It hurts but I've accepted it as a part of our journey."

The toys clunk their hand pieces together to make a clapping sound as Benny returns to stand by Mickey. Another toy goes up to speak when Mickey turns to face Benny.

"But Ava's gonna stick with you right, like even if she plays with other toys sometimes, y'all still gonna be cool right?" he says with a look in his eye like he intended it to be more of a statement than a question.

"Nope." Benny says with an unbreaking smile as he continues to talk. "Hey man, I love Ava and she loves me. But it's temporary, one day she is going to grow to love another toy more than me and when that day comes I need to be ready." He speaks with certainty and it's clearly something he's mauled over in his head. "So you're gonna go up and talk about your feelings?" Benny asks, pulling his head to the side with expectancy.

Mickey makes a disgusted face before responding, "What—no—I'm here for my arm and that's it."

Mickey walks to the shoe box and begins to dig through the countless various items.

"What about this?" Benny questions, shoving a LEGO Friends hand into Mickey's arm socket. Mickey shrieks and rips the arm off himself, throwing it towards the wall. The toys talking in the circle look over, startled.

"The hell you starin' at, Lost and Found Anonymous?" Mickey shouts, and the **disgruntled grunts** are the only response Mickey gets as they return to their meeting.

Mickey faces Benny again and before he gets the chance to curse him out Benny speaks. "Mickey, I'm so sorry, I didn't know you'd react like that. But you oughta be nicer to the folks here, you want friends don't you?"

"First of all, shoving something in a man's socket is something that shouldn't have to be pointed out as at least impolite," Mickey states, waving the arm he does have in a pointed manner. "Second of all, I have a friend. Two, in fact, Sandy and myself."

"Well what about us? Ain't we friends?" Benny speaks excitedly as his ears stick straight up.

"You don't even know my name, Benny," Mickey responds, hopping on top of the books on the desk and walking towards the window.

Mickey looks outside and sees the playground where all the children are playing. He sees Sandy's blond hair whipping through the wind behind her. Mickey smiles as he recognizes the way she leaps around the playground in the same way she did when they used to play superheroes.

"She must be thinking of us right now, she's probably so worried about

where I am. I need to get back to her. Hey Benny—" He speaks, turning to where he expects Benny to be standing, only to find the bunny is hopping to the other side of the room slowly and sadly. Mickey brushes it off and turns back to watch Sandy when his eyes catch the color green zipping by. He squashes his face to the door in alarm, making a light thunking noise against the glass and fogging it with heavy breaths. *They're playing superheroes together,* Mickey thinks silently to himself.

Mickey reaches up and feels the dent he got on his head from last night and backs away from the scene ahead. He takes a deep breath in, and out. Slowly, Mickey makes his way off the counter to find Benny.

After maneuvering off the counter and into the nap corner Mickey finds Benny stuffed between pillows ridden with child snot. Mickey reluctantly keeps walking on the pillows until he reaches the very corner of the room where Benny is sitting. Benny has his ears folded over his eyes, and when Mickey attempts to say "hi," he turns away.

"Look Benny, I'm sorry for what I said. You've been nice to me and I don't want you to be mad at me," Mickey says quietly, looking around the room rather than at Benny. Benny draws his ears from his eyes, but keeps his body against the wall and turns away.

"This is the best of an apology you're gonna get from me dude," Mickey states seeing his unmoving body language. "Benny, come on." Mickey whines and stomps his feet towards Benny as his feet make a clicking noise that matches his quick pace.

After another minute of silence Mickey begins to turn away. "My name is Mickey, I'm gonna go now but it was nice meeting you Benny, you're a good friend," Mickey states before dragging his heels behind him, heading for the exit. Benny finally speaks up.

"You're leaving? Where are you going?"

"I don't know. As I've been told many times before, I don't have to go home but I can't stay here."

"Why? What about Sandy?"

"She's moved on. I have to leave. I'll find someone different. It'll be okay."

Mickey begins to move towards the doors again as his clicking feet start to shake. The horrid grumbling of the children is back. Mickey's head swivels back to look at Benny for a sense of safety or direction of where to hide from the creatures. However, upon gazing up at Benny, he saw a slight smile as he fell limp.

Mickey swivels his head back and stills himself as mounds of children rush by, each looking for their own toy for nap time. Green sweater girl zooms

straight past the LEGO man. *I wonder what kinda rag belongs to her,* Mickey thinks to himself. He sees Sandy sit at her desk quietly while the other kids go up to the counselors and ask for blankets and small pillows with their stuffed friends.

Her eyes lack purpose as they roam the room, until they land upon the speck of yellow. Sandy sits up with curiosity and climbs out of her seat. Walking quickly she crouches down and picks up Mickey.

“Mickey, oh my gosh, how did you find me! I knew-ed you'd come back.” Sandy hushes the last part when the counselor gives her a hard look and she nearly shrivels.

Mickey sits in astonishment as Sandy rushes them both around, grabbing a blanket and laying right next to the green sweater girl. *Of course,* Mickey thinks to himself, annoyed. As the restless finally settle, the counselors dim the lights. Sandy begins to whisper to Mickey in her quietest voice.

“Mickey, I met a girl named Carmen, she has LEGO sets at home that we can play with. I'm thinking of asking Mom if we can go to her's after daycare. I almost forgot—” Sandy shuffles slightly and digs in her pocket before revealing Mickey's missing arm. She puts it back in the hole and curls Mickey up next to her.

Quietness covers the room as all the kids fall asleep. Carmen turns in her sleep and when she does, none other than Benny himself flops to the side of her. Benny lands right next to Mickey.

“No. Way,” Mickey mouths to Benny, who purely smiles back. Mickey shakes his head and flips him off with his renewed arm, which is really just him lifting his arm in the air with a joking manner. Benny smiles.

“Finally,” Mickey says as he drifts to sleep with a quiet mind, smiling while cradling the dent on his head in Sandy’s hands.

Star of the Sea

Sofia Fitzgerald | ‘25

It felt impossible to break from the hypnosis of his cold, dead eyes. The pupils fixed upon her, accusing her, and Marion shuddered with agonizing horror. His body bobbed atop the lull of the waves, inching his way towards the shore in the lethargic back-and-forth of Galway Bay. Silent words sounded from his mouth, agape as if in a call for help, or a final breath. She would never forget the fingers. Warped and almost unrecognizable, they curled in a defiant grip, mud and debris caking the undersides of the nails. And the skin—rotted and sliding off the bone like the meat of a well-cooked rib. Small openings in the flesh revealed pearly white bone underneath.

Marion fell to her knees, legs collapsing under her like the willowy limbs of a marionette doll, and was suddenly ill. She bit down on her knuckle, to stop the shaking, or maybe the nausea, or the scream she could feel bubbling up within her, threatening to spill out. “Da…” Marion’s throat clenched in an unexpected wave of grief, and she cradled her weeping face in trembling hands. “Oh, Da…”

She stood back up, tentatively, wobbling slightly in a light-headed haze. *Oh God… How long has he been here?* She risked another glance at the floating corpse and her stomach churned again. *At least a day, maybe two…*

“Marion, what is it?”

She turned, startled to find her little brother climbing carefully towards her, navigating the rocky terrain. His bright blue eyes were wide with innocent curiosity.

“It’s… it’s nothing, Art. Don’t come over here,” Marion said, hurriedly wiping away the tears that now caked her face in salty residue. She grimaced at their briny taste, and forced a tight-lipped smile. “Go back inside, now.” With one last look behind her, she quickly ushered Arthur towards their seaside cottage before he could see what remained of their father.

* * *

The coroner came at a quarter to noon. He was a burly man of a towering stature, and he stooped over with an invisible weight upon his back. His black coat swallowed him whole and the brimmed hat darkened his eyes, but his face was kind enough. A neat, gray mustache covered his upper lip, and his forehead was creased with years of sorrow.

"This the Doherty residence?" he asked.

"Aye." Marion reached to shake the man's outstretched hand.

"I'm sorry for your loss." "The name's O'Reilly, but please, call me Bill." The man took off his hat and bowed his head. "It's a shame that we're meeting under such unfortunate circumstances." Bill studied Marion for a moment, then the younger boy peeking out from behind her. His mustache twitched. "May I speak with Marion?"

"Yeah, that's me."

Bill coughed nervously into his fist. "Alright, then, what about your Mam? A parent or guardian?"

"I am our parent or guardian."

Bill's face hardened, and he let out a sigh. "Your father… Can you show me where you found him?"

Retrieving the body from the Bay proved to be difficult work. Bill struggled to drag the dead weight despite his sturdy arms and commanding grip. He sloshed through the water's current in rubber boots and gloves. The body's stiff, dummy-like legs kicking up in the waves made Marion grimace and turn away in disgust. She pulled Arthur tighter to her side and shielded his eyes.

Bill heaved the body onto the shore with a grunt, and pulled off a glove to wipe his brow. The corpse was comically bloated with gasses, like a gruesome balloon.

"Looks like he's been floatin' out there for a while. Good thing you found him when you did: another hour and he would've been food for the fishes." He gave a dry chuckle, cleared his throat, and continued: "So what does your father do for a livin'?"

"Da was a fisherman." Marion couldn't bring herself to meet Bill's eyes. It wasn't much of a living, nights of drinking and yelling and days of fruitless casting. She stood in a state of dreamy weightlessness submerged beneath hundreds of feet of water. "He had been gone for too long. I was worried. I…" She choked on this word, the self-denoting syllable catching in her throat, like a barbed hook grappling the gills of an unsuspecting cod. *I… Aye, there's so much to be said about I…*

Bill rested a hefty hand on her shoulder. "It's alright. You're doing great." He patted her back with such a force it nearly threw her forward. "How long is he usually away?"

Marion pulled at a loose curl of her hair, a nervous habit she could never learn to kick. "I don't know… Most of the day, I suppose. He comes home at dusk. I don't know." Marion realized that she didn't really know much about her father's fishing schedule. It was when he was present that mattered. That was when he

made himself seen.

The rest of the day dragged on with unbearable monotony. Hours seemed gray and dreary. Much of the time was spent answering questions, filling out papers, and sitting around. But Marion could not rest: when she closed her eyes, saw her Da's staring right back, with his awful, rotted hands reaching out to her.

* * *

The line labeled NAME OF MOTHER remained blank. Marion, pencil in hand, sat frozen as she tried to recall. With some disbelief, she wondered how long it had been since she had even thought of her Mam. Hers was a story Marion had heard many times before, mostly because her father loved to remind her of it. She was a lovely woman, he had said, a selfless soul with the face of an angel. Her skin was soft as a cloud, and when she moved, she glided as if floating above our world. "The only woman I'll ever love," Marion remembered her father saying. "But that was before you were born—Aye, such a beautiful woman, taken from us too soon. She traded her life for yours, and don't you forget that. Don't you ever forget that."

Marion didn't forget. In fact, the story of her mother's death plagued her for as long as she could remember. Often when she woke up in the mornings she would think of her, the woman she never met that was sacrificed so she could wake another day.

"You're thinkin' about her again."

Marion shot up. A crash sounded as a lamp fell to the floor, shattering its ceramic frame beyond repair. *Da'll kill me for that one*, she thought dumbly. "Who's there?" She searched the shadows frantically, eyes straining to see across the dimly lit room.

"Look harder." It felt as if the gravelly voice were coming from all directions, and it echoed within the cavernous tunnels of her head. As her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, she could make out an arched figure in the sitting room rocking chair. The figure's shadowed face slowly came into view and Marion nearly stumbled backwards in horror.

Seated in the chair was her Da. The sight of him was appalling; a strangely animated mass of rotted flesh and ocean grime. His wet hair lay plastered against his forehead, slimy, yet coarse with the clinging residue of algae and sea salt. The skin on his face was eaten away around the nose, the eyelids, and the mouth, giving him the frightening appearance of a skeleton. His jaw just barely hung onto his skull, held together by the flimsy sinew. Hideous bony fingers gripped each armrest with frightening strength, the tendons tensing alongside the

exposed knuckles.

"Da, Da, you're not supposed to be here… I-I saw you dead, you were dead, Da—!" Marion backed away slowly, unable to pry her eyes from the living corpse of her father.

"But you're still alive, yeah? Well, praise be to God, there must be some reason He thinks you're worth savin'." He let out a mad cackle, throwing his head back and baring his yellowed teeth. Marion cringed and grabbed at her hair in frustration.

"*Stop it!* Stop, stop, I didn't ask for this…" Da's laughter came out in short, wheezing breaths.

"Did I? Did your mother?" He licked his lips and sat forward in his chair. "You've always been a selfish little scut, you know that? You think I didn't know about your little boat stunt? You think I wanted her dead? You think I wanted to drink, get off with all those women, or have another frickin' kid?"

Marion grabbed a shard of the broken lamp and hurled it across the room. It clattered in the shadow where her father had just been. The rocking chair swayed slightly with the force of the impact, filling the empty silence with the creaking of tired wood. Her chest heaved in heavy gasps as she tried to pull herself together. She swallowed and began to shuffle away when she spotted young Arthur hiding from behind his bedroom door. His eyes sparkled with that same innocent eagerness.

"Marion, who were you yelling at?" His attention flickered to her clenched fist. "And what happened to your hand?" Marion looked down to see blood running from between closed fingers, and she quickly hid her hand behind her back.

"I'll be alright, Arthur. Come on, it's past both our bedtimes." She smiled wanly and crouched down to her brother's height, glancing at her reflection inside his azure eyes. Different from mine and Da's, Marion thought with a bitter sadness. How was it that they were so different, yet so much the same? Him, the unwanted product of a messy, beer-fueled one night stand, child of a lonely father and a washed up hooker. Her, the bringer of her own mother's death.

But he would never know. Marion would make sure of that.

* * *

Even as the faint light of a cloudy morning started to peer in through the window, Marion lay awake, consumed by her thoughts. *What had Da meant by my "boat stunt"?* She mulled over her dead father's cryptic message from the night before, struggling to comprehend its meaning. She could just barely recall an

image—though she did not recognize it—of a pinprick hole being carved into the base of a boat by a pair of hands feverishly gripping a knife. She played this image over and over in her head, but derived no further sense from it. Were they my hands?

A heavy knocking on the door shook Marion from her trance, and she dragged herself from bed to answer it. Arthur, already awake, ran to see who it was. Bill the coroner stood in the doorway. He looked around to see who had opened the door before noticing the small boy below him. He chuckled and gave his hair a ruffle, reaching out his hand to greet Arthur. Arthur stared at the looming figure in a bashful silence before shaking it quickly and racing back to his sister. Bill nodded at Marion.

"How you holdin' up?"

She managed a small smile and motioned him inside. "Alright, I guess. What brings you back here?"

Bill sat down on the sitting room sofa with a sigh. "Well, I don't know how to tell you this..." He smoothed his mustache and appeared to think over something. Marion shifted uncomfortably. Bill's eyes dulled with a kind of solemnity. "I'm sure you know you can't stay here."

Marion blinked. She hadn't thought about what would happen afterwards.

"You're not a legal adult yet, and someone needs to take care of you and your brother." Bill watched her closely, forcing her to meet his eyes. "And in a situation like this...well, we need to intervene. I've been asked to come and take Arthur from your custody." Arthur stirred at the sound of his name.

Marion put a protective arm around her brother's back. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Don't worry, we'll get you to a safe place too, but the foster homes don't have a lot of space. We wanted to get Arthur into one as soon as possible."

Marion gripped Arthur tighter. "You can't *do* that! I... This isn't fair!" She sputtered frantically, trying to explain. "I've taken care of Art forever, always, he's my responsibility! He's my *world*—"

"Marion, Marion, calm down." Bill held out his hand to quiet her. He then pulled out a paper labeled Tusla Child and Family Agency, and gave it to Marion. "I understand your frustration, but Arthur will be in good hands, even if he's not with you. I promise."

He took Arthur by the hand and started towards the door. Her brother's blue eyes were wide with shock and powerlessness, like a trapped animal, as he followed behind Bill. Marion started after them in frantic desperation.

"Bill, you can't, you can't..." Marion sobbed as she tried to pull Arthur back. Bill was stronger. He looked at Marion one more time before he left, a look of genuine sorrow, and then he tugged Arthur from her grip, leading him towards

his car. He left Marion in a cloud of dust and crushing helplessness.

She shook with heaving gasps of anguish as she watched her life fade further into the distance. They were finally free, she had freed them, and now she was alone again. “Arthur…” She called out for him, searching for the voice of her younger brother, her darling brother, but was met with silence. The nothingness drove her mad, she needed someone, something. She screamed and screamed until her throat bled. *He was mine, he was mine…*

Then a voice joined hers. Though it was almost human, it was a sound she could not recognize. It lilted and rose like a birdsong, but roared with the intensity of the wild Irish wind. It was beautiful and terrible, raw and perfect. Marion had never heard anything like it. Gradually, she could make out words:

S'airiú
Agus a leanbh
Cad a Dhéanfaidh mé?
Tá tú ar shiúl uaim

Marion felt herself pulled to the sound, an enchanted siren melody that rattled her bones and caressed her ears. Her legs moved her towards the sea, following the source of the song.

Agus airiú
Agus anuiridh, níl duin ar bith agam
'S airiú

Suspended on the ocean horizon, almost floating above the world, was a woman. Her complexion was a stark pale white, and she was draped in a flowing gray cloak. Her hair streamed to her knees in long waves of red, and she was crying—no, not crying. Keening.

Agus mé liom fein
Dá mbeithea go moch agam

As Marion approached the woman, the waves of the bay washed closer to her feet. The chilling ripples felt like sharp knives digging into her skin. Looking upon the divine figure, Marion realized that this stranger looked like someone she’d always known. Face of an angel. Soft as a cloud. She stepped further into the ocean’s arms.

Agus och, och, airiú

Yes, Marion thought. Yes, this must be her. She closed her eyes and felt the water fill her lungs. At last.

Gan thú
Gan thú

Where I Ought to Be

Jet Gillan | ‘25

This is a brightened,
heightened trove
that even I am
not frightened of
The path to eternal
calm—covered by a crowd
of conifers that
collect the chaos of my life.
This is peace—a sun-speckled
road to wherever I want.
My feet pull me forward--my
mind wanders along with.
The sun does not attack me,
but instead, he
lets me see where
I ought to go.
I ought to go.
I ought to go.
A silver river flows through the
serenading foliage,
covering stone after stone, which I
hop over.
On the trail, I nearly trample
a trying tree, sprouting
from the leaf-patched earth.
For I know I
once was that very same bud--
a crowded, confused, cotyledon,
deserving of an opportunity.
Deserving of
the ability to grow.
As I begin to
retire from the singing growth,
the brook still babbles behind. I
decide to craft an oath—I
will always come to find this
place when skyscrapers cease to excite.

Darkness Rises with the Waves

A Tapestry Poem by the Creative Writing Class of 2022-2023

The moments of kindness are quiet bliss
Brought forth by my past love,
Lulling me like a child rocked in its cradle.

Warm calm before the storm and then
Motion sets on the sea,
Never is it good.

As the moon shines on the waves,
And it seems unsettling,
Like a lingering tremble
Under the water.

I try to swim away from all who swept me off my feet.
The current pulls and snags at my heels.
Fluid floods my fingernails.

Mouth filled,
Thrashing, I choke and cough on words
That I don't have the strength to say.
Only the noise of waves crashing
Can be heard.

I am lifted into unkind arms and shaken,
Pulled back upon reaching my craving,
Like rattling dice in a gambler's fist, and it is up to
Chance whether the dawn or dusk bleeds red.

Darkness rises with the waves of hope.
The mighty ship groans and struggles as the
Creature grips its sides
While her full, billowing sails look on,
Taking the full force of the storm.

My arms ache as I turn towards port,
The shimmering, glistening scales of my free fellow fish
Glide by through the ruins.

But the blackness,
Shrinking and expanding,
Can be felt all around,

And I know now there is no use–
No captain or vessel can weather this tragedy, this monster.
The horrible tentacles squeeze again, and I see the ship splintering.

I grasp for an out,
But it seems my fins have given up,
Pushed around and unable to move.

And so I float, a buoy who can't even save itself,
Picked up by the foam-ridden water.

I raise my head high,
Breathe in the sea one final time,
And as she tears in half,
And drops, yet again,
I let myself fall.

Let the decayed rest
Let me rot.

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