

The Dragon's Tooth

Literary and Arts Magazine of The Altamont School



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Angus Brantley 2	Scarlett McCoy 9
Elyse Crowder 8	Aadi Patel 15
Gillian Goodrich 5	Wyatt Sawyer 11
Ryan Holley 7	Abbey Sellers 3
Lizzy Lee 8	Noah Wolfe 11

Photographers

Rama Al-Balas 14	Lillian Le 10
MK Alvey 8	William Roland 16
Alina Habeeb 6	Wyatt Sawyer 7
Kendall Lawson 11	Jacob Sokol 2/3
	Eastman Tong 8

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The Life of a Neighborhood

story by Angus Brantley photo by Jacob Sokol

Taking a walk around the block can be a very bland thing if you let the mundane take over your path. However, if you pay close attention and let your imagination have its way, you may find your stroll to turn into something quite extraordinary.

I take my walking time very slowly, really soak in every moment. I watch the squirrels scramble in circles around the trees. I think of their lives, what they're doing in that moment. One of my favorite possibilities is that one of the squirrels lives in that tree. It knows it very well, branch by branch, and the other is a burglar squirrel in the midst of its biggest heist yet. The defending squirrel chases the thief with the ferocity of an enraged lioness, the bandit evading attacks as though it's a gazelle gliding through the savannah with ease and excellence. Their moves are so seamless that sometimes it feels like the whole scene is scripted, that maybe they're filming a squirrel movie. Maybe I've just witnessed one of squirrel-history's greatest performances.

As I continue from the squirrel show, I notice a bustling ant bed. What could the story be here? Suppose this ant bed is one of the greatest, held to the same standard as the Roman Empire. Each ant has its own job; without it, the fortress would be incomplete. Suddenly there's an attacker! A destructive, precise, hungry bird comes swooping down, using the bed to cushion its landing. The bird pierces the dirt stronghold with no difficulty. Uproar ensues. Ants come spewing out, ready to defend their home. Hundreds swarm the predator, climbing onto its feet and advancing upwards. The bird, however, has no reaction. It persists, keeping its eye on the prize. Strike two. The bird's beak stabs deeper into the nest, surely resulting in a delicious and nutritious mouthful of ants. This seems to suffice for now; the elegant creature shakes the tiny defenders off its body and retreats to a branch roughly fifteen feet away. It sits on that branch, waiting for the chaos to settle. I proceed on my journey.



My next stop is a beautiful koi pond set in the middle of a small sanctuary built up by the neighborhood. There is an intense glare on the water from my point of view. I move closer in order to see the magnificent beings that ply the rocky waters. There is a nice wooden bench that sits close to the pond, so I sit for minute to give my legs a rest – I fear I'm getting old. I've always loved the water; my father would take me out on a lake in a canoe as a child. As I watch the koi slowly glide around their habitat, I think of how their life has been leading up to this moment. I wonder where they all came from, if they knew each other before, if they came from a bigger place. There are so many stories that could be told about the lives of these beauties. I like to see koi as the embodiment of a soul; the way they float seems so purposefully aimless, just as a soul carries on after it's left the body, floating through the universe.

I rise from my seat, leaving the comfort of water to continue my walk before my legs stiffen up. I see two dogs playing in a field as I reach the halfway point of my journey. They remind me of my younger brother and myself as children. We grew up on a lake and were homeschooled by our mother. The two of us only had each other and would spend our afternoons in the front yard running around or exploring the forest that surrounded our home. Because we were homeschooled, my brother and I were never really exposed to the more unpleasant people of the world who would have diminished our free-roaming minds. Thus, my brother and I continued life with the childlike whimsy that most folk lose before they're able to fully use it. Sadly, my brother passed away when we were in our thirties; he had a brain tumor that wasn't discovered early enough to remove. Anyways, watching the two young dogs playfully tussle, unaware of the pain this world held, brings a tear to my eye.

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I sit and watch the dogs for a while, thinking about my brother and the time we'd spent together. Afterwards, I turn back towards my house and begin the trek back. On the way, I come across a cat prowling down an alley. The cat is small and has a fuzzy brown and black coat. It's creeping towards something, though I can't see what exactly. I begin to imagine what brought the cat to this particular path; maybe it's just escaped its confining home and is finally experiencing freedom. I envision the world through the animal's eyes. Every little detail is captivating – the green plants growing through the holes in a fence, bugs scurrying away as the cat approaches, the rough feeling of broken concrete under its feet – they all come together, breaking the chains that constrained the cat from fully experiencing life. I watch the cat rapidly understand its surroundings, tapping into its natural instincts. It's a beautiful scene.

I must get home now; my wife is waiting for dinner to be cooked. She fell into illness two years ago and ever since then she's been progressively worsening. We met the year my brother died. I'd fallen into a horrible depression and spent most of my nights at a bar until I was told to leave. I was especially bad the day we met. I'd spent the day stuck in bed, and then around five o'clock I began the trip down to the bar. The bar was only a five-minute walk from my apartment, which was quite convenient. I heard the bell on the door ring about an hour in and turned to see who it was. That was when I saw her. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Her beauty wasn't that of a model, no; it was more the kind of beauty that you feel when you see a field of flowers or a cozy house decorated with plants and paintings. We made eye contact for a split second, and she gave me a soft, kind smile that made me feel hope for the first time in months. It was then that I knew I'd stop at nothing to spend the rest of my life loving her. I put down my pint at that moment and haven't picked one up since. I went to introduce myself to her and she looked at me with a gaze that was full of curiosity. She really cared about what I had to say; she truly wanted to know me.

My walk is ending; I can see my house as I make my way up the street. Warmth fills my heart once again, as I know my wife is sitting there waiting for me to come tell her all the little stories I'd collected on my journey through the neighborhood. That was her favorite part of the day.

Changes

story by Abbey Sellers photo by Jacob Sokol

I really like J. Cole. Maybe that's an understatement. There's something about his songs that deeply resonates with my soul. Maybe it's his genius use of language to describe his brutal journey through life, or maybe it's the catchy beat. For all I know, it could be the fact that when I'm at home, and it doesn't feel like home, his voice soothes me and drowns out the noise when I need it the most.

His songs are therapeutic. When I listen to J. Cole, I feel like I'm listening to a grandfather give advice to his grandchildren. That's kind of silly because, for starters, J. Cole is in his thirties and secondly, he's not even a father. And let's be honest, it would be kind of weird if a grandfather used that kind of language around his grandkids. But still, I feel that pull.

Cole is passionate about his music, and his way of life. I always wanted to have something I'm very passionate about. I used to think it was soccer, or basketball, but as I grew older, I realized that no matter how much I love doing those things, playing sports is the only thing I really know. How do I know if there's something better out there for me when sports are the only things I do outside of classes? If you take them out of my life, there's a massive gap.

continued



It's like a black hole, except instead of sucking things in, it pushes things away. I want to find something to fill those holes, but I don't know where to begin. It's kind of scary to think that I might grow up and only go to work. What's even scarier is the possibility that I won't have the energy to want to do anything outside work.

I guess that's the main reason why I am so excited to leave for college. I used to not think about my future because I didn't consider that life could be any better than what it was, but between you and me, I am really looking forward to all my sports being over for the final time. It's not that I hate doing what I do. I am just exhausted. Life could be much worse, but this type of fatigue is one I can't stand anymore. It feels like I am living the same year over and over again but, as I get older, my mind remains the same.

J. Cole gives me hope. If there's anything I've learned from his songs, it's that he will find a way to carry his experiences with him without letting them define his future. I want to be like that. I want to go to college and try new things and find something I am so passionate about that I want to do it forever, pushing aside all the bad things that cloud up my mind. I want to take all those experiences and turn them into a ladder that leads to something beautiful.

It's overwhelming. I enjoy doing so many things but so few at the same time. I wish there were a formula that told me what I was born to do. You know what? I wish there were a formula that told me the first step to discovering my true passion. If there's anything I don't want to be, it's someone who lives a scripted life and cannot handle random surprises. If I did end up living a life like that, I would have to listen to the song "Love Yourz" by J. Cole often, to remind myself to appreciate it. I know there's something easy about playing the roles I'm expected to play. But I have seen illness, and I have seen death. I know that we are all going to die, and I'd rather die having done random and strange things, like J. Cole, than having lived an unfulfilling life where I was afraid to take any risks. If I die at seventy instead of eighty, then so be it.

Maybe that's what I'm passionate about; becoming a person who lives for me and not for all the people who expect things from me. Of course there's a balance, but why should we not get that piercing and why should we not draw on ourselves if that's what we want to do? It's not hurting anyone and if it's not completely stupid, why not try new things? Why not go on expeditions to Walmart and not buy anything? Why does childhood have to be the only time we have fun? I know money is an issue. But the most valuable thing a person has is time, and I will die before I let myself save all my money and end my life with thousands in savings that is just sitting there, not helping the world in the ways that it can.

Imagine how beautiful the world would be if we stopped setting expectations and judgmental standards for each other and we just lived the way we truly wanted. I'd imagine there'd be many haircuts that would become more common, and fashion would be more imaginative. I'd also imagine music would be different. I'm sure singers would sing from the heart and not for the chart and people would speak their minds loudly and clearly. Maybe that's what this world really needs.

I don't remember much about my childhood. I remember exploring the woods with my sisters and hating being at home because I could always hear my father yelling at one of us, but other than that, I don't remember much. I didn't know about music then, but once I found music in sixth grade, my life changed. All a sudden, I didn't have to hear the arguments anymore. I didn't have to acknowledge the trouble my family was in, or stress myself out over all the tiny sounds that bothered me. One thing's for sure: I definitely would not have done many of the things I have done if it weren't for music. Don't get me wrong. It's not that I do bad things. Especially compared to other young people. Music just calms my mind in a way that leaves me wandering around places where I should not be wandering around.

In ninth grade, I used to walk from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. every night. Yes, it was very dumb, and I genuinely don't know how I kept my grades up, but it was the best time of my life. I remember walking down the street and noticing the silence and darkness that consumed the houses. The stars shined so brightly they brought a glow to the water and trees surrounding my neighborhood. I think that was the time when I became the person I am today. I realized that if you take all the noise of school and sports out of the picture, life is so beautiful. You don't have to fill your life with so many things to live a fulfilling one. In the song "Love Yourz" by J. Cole, he raps about loving the life you live because there is no such thing as a life better than yours. You don't have to own the nicest cars or eat the best food to love your life. Simplicity is okay today. This song reminds me every day to be content with the life I live because it really is a good one and I genuinely appreciate everyone in it. It's important to me that I do many things while I still can, but it is just as important that I take time out of my day to find peace in the environment

continued

around me. I have added so much unnecessary pressure to force myself to become something great, but I don't have to become a superstar student or athlete to be a worthy human. I just need to be me.

I love J. Cole because something about the way he raps lets you know he's okay just being him. I know one day I'll grow out of J. Cole the way I grew out of Queen and Def Leppard, but I'm looking forward to that day because then I'll know I'm entering a new part of my life. And I'll know he helped me.

A Day In My Cat's Life

story by Gillian Goodrich

I wake up to darkness. The only person I like in this house is still sleeping, so I sunbathe by the window until she wakes up. A few hours later, her alarm goes off, which means she is awake. I climb down from the window and jump on her bed for morning snuggles. My mood is ruined by the worst person in this house opening the door to make sure the best one has gotten up. She brings one of the fat, short, smelly dogs with her. She will never be forgiven. After she leaves, the good one gets up and out of bed. I wind around her ankles as she gets ready, and as she grabs her bag, we leave the room together.

I am greeted by my younger brother. He is annoying. He immediately pounces to play, and I respond by smacking him until he remembers his place, and then I walk away. The food room is loud in the mornings, with four people getting ready to leave for the day. I do not like being around all these people, but the one I care about is here, so I suck it up and wait for her to leave before staring out the windows, observing the birds. My brother returns, and I am feeling nice this time, so I clean him off after proving my power to make sure he never gets too comfortable.

The best window for sunbathing just so happens to be in the worst one's room, so I shoot my signature glare at her as I walk to the window. I spend the next hour watching birds from the window while she speaks to me in the same way she always does, desperate for my affection. I glare at her a few times to remind her she is nothing to me.

I get hungry, so I go to my brother's room to steal his food. Unfortunately, he is lounging on the chair in the hall and he takes my arrival as a desire to play, so I smack him.

After eating I return to my room to nap in the cat tower. It is right next to the window so I can nap and sunbathe at the same time.

When I wake up, I decide that I am willing to play with my brother for a bit, and I indulge him in playtime. He is very happy with my decision. But when I decide we are done, he does not take that cue and continues to chase me, so I must once again remind him that I am in charge.

It is nearing the time when the others return, so I go to the kitchen door to wait. I see the good one arrive, so I back away. I hope she doesn't think I actually like her that much. When she gets into the house, I kindly allow her a few moments to talk to the worst one before making her follow me up to my room for snuggles. She indulges me for a while before getting up and going to be sprayed with water. She is now wet. This is unforgivable.

She spends time staring at the screen that she pulls out of her bag. When she finishes, I indulge her in more snuggling. I thought we'd had an understanding that this was enjoyable, but she leaves to go downstairs. I follow her, and she sits at the table with the others as they are eating. I sit nearby and glare at her to come back. After a while it is clear to me that my glare is ineffective, so I decide to just watch the birds.

I spend some time watching the hamsters that live in a separate room with my brother. We are not allowed in. I contemplate ways to get in. I wonder about the taste of them. My brother gets bored quickly, and I decide to indulge him in playing. Until I hear someone coming and we stop playing. It is time for the people to go to bed. My brother is locked in his room, and I am taken up to mine. I spend the time in the room on the end of the bed, watching the only good one in this house get ready for bed. As she lies down, she picks me up for cuddles, and I snuggle into her as she goes to sleep. She keeps moving, so I climb out of her arms until she is asleep. Once she is sleeping, I climb in and snuggle up to her. I fall asleep, contemplating how to get rid of the others.

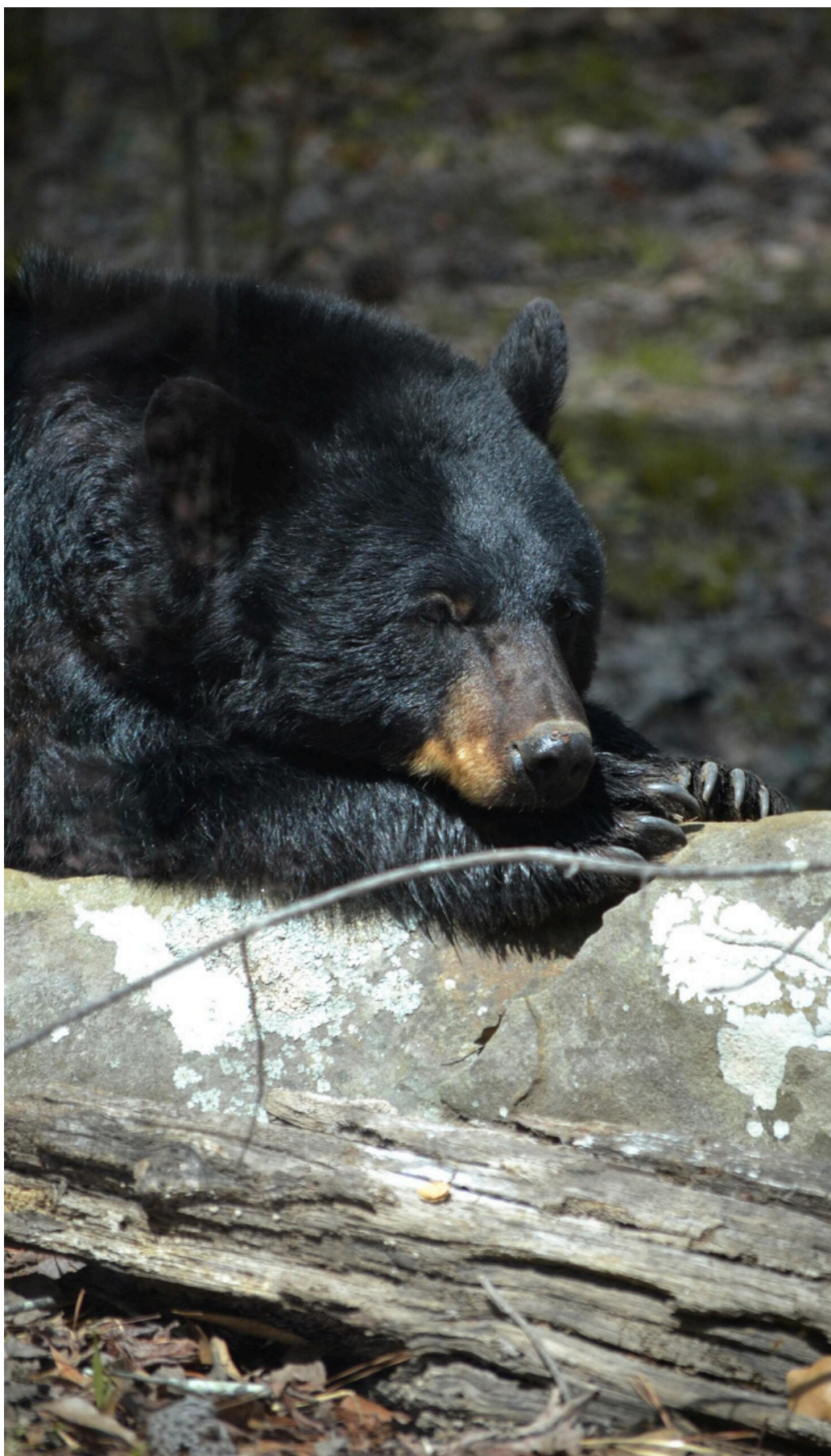


photo by Alina Habeeb

The Ice Cream Shop

story by Ryan Holley photo by Wyatt Sawyer



In the center of the town, there was an old ice cream shop. Most people went occasionally, hurrying between errands or stopping for a sweet treat. The shop had peeled paint and a rusty sign whose lights didn't work anymore. But the shop had been there longer than anyone could remember, collecting lost memories and stories.

A group of graduates once sat around a table, tassels swinging in their faces. Families cheered, and the shop watched as the group's faces shifted between joy and nervousness as they held their ice cream. They all left separately, some never meeting again.

One summer day, a woman sat in a wedding dress across from her new husband. Her dress lay across the floor, the ceremony over, but she needed a moment of silence. The ice cream shop could feel the happiness radiating from her. Her cheeks hurt from smiling. She tried a new flavor in celebration of her new last name. The couple moved to a big city, never visiting again.

A man collapsed into a booth in the back, loosening his tie with a frown. The shop did not judge the fact he had just been fired. He sat for a while as his ice cream melted on the table in front of him. He thought about what he would tell his family as the shop played the radio.

Once, a family gathered around a newborn baby, smiling wide. The baby's cries faded into the crowd's voice. The shop held the mother's nerves and joy. Her arms trembled, but she held the baby in her hands, letting out a sigh of quiet love. Shortly after, the shop watched the empty town struggle through the pandemic, hardly getting enough business to stay open.

On sunny afternoons, the store welcomed families, friends, and lovers. On stormy afternoons, the umbrella holder sat full as customers watched the rain while eating their ice cream. It never spoke but always listened. Although the paint peeled and the lights dimmed, the shop remained open and listened to the endless stories. It was never the main character, but without it, the story would have gone untold. And so, it continued to hold the stories of strangers.

Imagination

story by Elyse Crowder photo by Eastman Tong

On a hot summer day, I walked outside alone. The sun warmed up my skin, nurturing nature. The faint sound of the other kids on the playground could be heard in the distance. The thriving nature all around me was vacant of life aside from the trees and plants that swayed in the wind. Until suddenly, another girl my age ran out. She ran through the fields, laughing and having fun. She seemed to be having fun, and I wanted to make a friend, so I joined her. We shared our names, ran around the fields together, and quickly became best friends. We had ventured far away from the playground, but I knew that nobody would come looking for me. After playing tag, hopscotch, and hide-and-seek for hours, the sky had become filled with dark, gray clouds. We were tired, so we decided to head back to the playground where we were supposed to be. I tried to link our arms together while we walked, but I froze. I felt nothing on my arm. She slowly started to fade away as my imagination dissolved. That's when I realized I had been alone the entire time. My eyes filled with tears, as the first droplets of rain fell to the ground. By the time my tears began flowing out, a rainstorm had begun. On my slow lonely walk back, I passed by the flower fields again. This time, I noticed how alike most of them were. There were a few that stood out, but many had torn roots from the people attempting to pick them. The most peaceful ones were those that blended in, that didn't get picked on. The flowers represented everything I ever wanted; maybe if I blended in like them, I could put my imagination to rest.

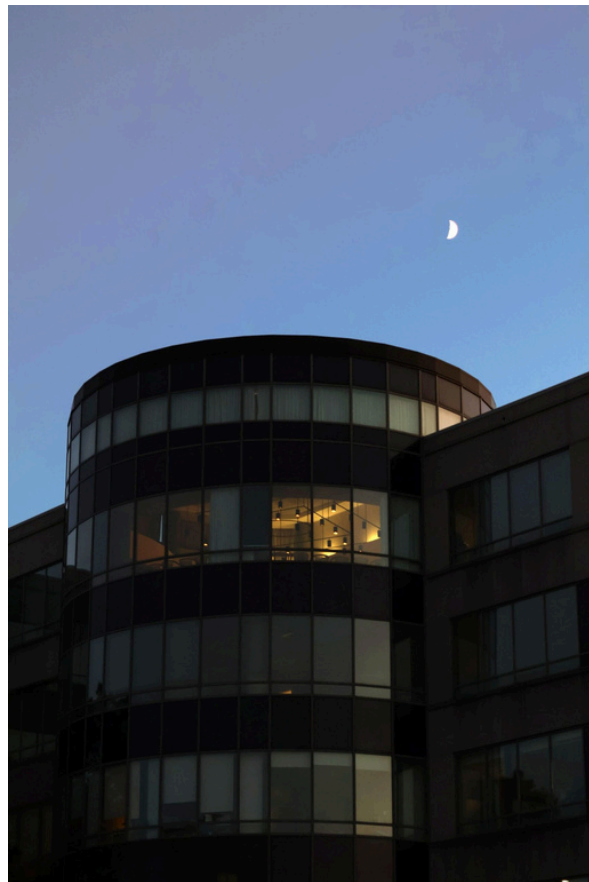


photo by MK Alvey



Known

poem by Lizzy Lee

to be loved
is to be known

you notice my dimples
when you make me laugh
you buy me food
and in return I share half

you know my antics
and let nothing slide
you support me endlessly
and give me a ride

because I don't have to
hear three words
to know who
your love flows towards

Met With a Soft Melody

story by Scarlett McCoy

Asha sat at the end of the world, never sure of what to do. When she had come to this town as a young girl, everything seemed okay. Her sisters and her brothers all told her that things would “figure themselves out.” She never knew what that meant.

When Asha was young, she was told that her future held beautiful things, and she viewed it as framed artwork with her father as the artist. This was alright to her. She soon concluded that she would be blessed if her future had already been laid out for her, and so she fought against thoughts of contradiction.

Her father had been an excellent artist since the moment he learned how to walk. Asha was not present for this, of course, but she was told stories that made her feel as if she was. Unlike many children, Asha always knew what her father was. She knew his faults and his accomplishments, and how he never kept promises. She knew all of this through stories. But this was okay to Asha. She felt she was blessed for her life to follow directly behind such an honorable legacy. She felt this way despite never wanting to paint. Asha tried, and trust me, her father tried, too, to ignite the love of painting in the depths of her life. Her father loved her, but not as much as you think a parent should love their child.

Instead of painting, Asha's heart chose dance. She never knew why he wanted her to continue his legacy, and not her older, more respectable siblings. He yelled and punched the air when Asha picked up a paintbrush and could not paint in a straight line. She was okay with this, though, and kept painting until she slept in front of the easel some nights. Asha never enjoyed painting, despite how much of her life she spent doing it. Choosing and mixing perfect shades, saving up and trading for better paint brushes. Asha never accepted the idea that painting was not for her and deflected the blame onto inanimate objects. Her father never accepted this either.

“You're destined to succeed” is what many of the women would say as they stood in front of a canvas with splattered colors, the canvas refusing to form into a coherent image. Her father nodded in approval as he ignored Asha's clicking shoes in the distance. Asha was never beautiful, and Asha was never smart. The women said these things in mock sympathy, almost pity, as they hoped that this kind little girl who was full of life would find her worth in something to make themselves feel better. This had all been alright to Asha, because she had the marvelous secret of dance. She was convinced her father had no clue as he tried to make abstract sense of whatever Asha had presented to him. He always knew about her dancing, and he also always knew that Asha did not enjoy her destiny of painting. But he would not accept it. He picked up the canvas from the easel, which was blotched with childish, incoherent colors, and broke it against his knee, throwing the wooden frame across the room.

For a few years, Asha stopped dancing. She focused on painting, and soon enough, her sad excuse for abstract art developed into depthless realism. Despite her being conventionally talented, those who saw her paintings could tell she was not born with it. There was no meaning behind her paintings. Asha knew if she kept on this way, her life would soon mean nothing. Her legacy would become only a sad excuse for the one her father left. Despite this, she kept painting and painted her emotions onto the canvas.

When she painted in the dark room her father used, she would glare over at her father's paintings and glare back at her canvas, feeling the same disappointment her father did as she continued brushing the bristles on the canvas. Her father saw her, sometimes in the middle of the night, hunched over an easel, only guided by candlelight, her eyes tired, and he nodded in approval. This moment of glory didn't last long, as Asha's talents faded away when her love for dance came back. Sometimes, if she painted long enough, the brush strokes against the textured base of the canvas would almost sound like pathetic tunes of music. As she painted, Asha would tap her feet along to the phantom melody and keep painting.

Soon enough, she proved the women from her childhood wrong once more. Her paintings became exactly what they were before. Asha was never talented. But she plastered a sad name on the equally sad painting and called it contemporary art, which impressed her father and many others. She would put the paintings on display and watch as passersby gawked at whatever she scribbled onto the canvas. Her father spent the many nights he couldn't sleep looking at her paintings, impressed that even he was unable to understand them. It formed a human... or was that the morning sky? He never knew.

continued

Her father died doubting himself. When her father died, so did whatever love for art she did have. Despite that, she kept painting. If she stopped, she was afraid her father would lunge himself from the heavens and throw her canvas the same way he did when she was young. So, Asha kept going. She tapped her feet along to the rhythm of the paint strokes, humming a sweet melody that complimented the sounds, which only she formed into a song. As the years went on, the melody continued, as she brushed up the canvas, this way, that way, and over back again. As Asha stepped back from a particular painting, the rhythm never ceased in her imagination and she would sigh. The melody in her head had seemed so sweet; it had to have formed an equally worthy piece of art. She was wrong. She, once more, plastered on a sad name to match the equally sad excuse of the legacy of her father.

As Asha left her father's art studio, which she never called her own, she began thinking. She went back the next morning and realized her life had been wasted. The splotchy strokes of her paintbrush resembled her wrinkled skin. Asha had never had children, and Asha had never found love. Asha had never made art, and most of all, Asha had never danced. As Asha grew old, her canvas followed her to her bed, which she soon became trapped in. She felt just as disabled by her father's legacy as she did now, all curled up, helpless. Her siblings took care of her and felt guilty that they'd told her things would figure themselves out, because they never had.

As Asha's heart slowed, so did her rhythms. Soon enough, they stopped completely. Asha took one last breath and painted her last stroke. As she exhaled, she heard a sweet tune that mimicked the ones of which she'd convince herself when she'd painted.

She finally understood why her siblings said that things would figure themselves out. As they found her, her skin a light shade of yellow and her eyes closed peacefully, she looked more beautiful than ever. In front of her was a painting. They were surprised. For once, they could understand the half-finished painting that stood on the easel in front of her death bed. Those who knew Asha had always just accepted that what she did paint was beyond the artistic dimensions of their minds, that they just did not have the love for art needed to process such work. This was never true, of course, and Asha blocked the words of these people out with the music of her mind. But as they all stood in front of the easel, they saw a magnificent image of a young girl, sitting on a cliffside, a golden harp in the distance. Asha hadn't died doubting herself, as even at the end of her life, she was met with a soft melody.

photo by Lillian Le



Return Home

poem by Wyatt Sawyer photo by Kendall Lawson

On the drive home,
 I like to imagine beautiful landscapes.
 Taking in the views of
 The miles of shoreline.
 The crashing waves,
 As the sun falls through the horizon.
 The rigid mountains,
 Snow falling slowly,
 Onto the frostbitten ground
 As the sun fell through the horizon.
 A green pasture
 Full of bright flowers,
 Some withered more than others,
 As the sun fell through the horizon.
 But eventually,
 I had to return home.
 My eyes had to open.
 I hoped.



A Green Jail

story by Noah Wolfe

I awoke to my blaring alarm preparing me for another day of university. I rocked myself up from my bed and squinted through the bright light of the morning. I moseyed in a daze over to the kitchen in my dorm. I prepared a coffee mindlessly. It was scalding. I looked out my mezzanine window. There it was, as always, the bronze statue of The Founder. It glimmered. The sun seemed to hit it just right. People walking by didn't spare it a second, but I felt the pull to admire. He was freshly polished every morning, shining with an intensity that touched the back of your eyeballs. I was snatched from my reverie by a fleshy man. He dashed past the statue and into the dorms. He moved so quickly; I could barely make out his face.

I looked down at my watch and realized it was already five minutes past eight. I launched up, grabbed my backpack, opened my door to the long corridor of the dorm hallway and sprinted towards the elevator. I smashed the button, hoping it would somehow open faster. The long metal doors slid open. I was met with a man staring aimlessly through me. He stood contrapposto with one hand resting on the elevator railing, the other in his pocket. He wore a black suit and tie with a clean white dress shirt. His eyes met mine, and my mouth dropped open. He looked just like me. He was me. But something was off. He stared too intensely. Oddly, he preserved his relaxed demeanor even with his dagger-like stare. I quickly stepped into the elevator, pressed the lobby button, and watched the doors close. They met, forming a tight seal. I glanced behind me. Our eyes locked, and the descent began.

The elevator was moving. Either at supersonic speeds or slow as a snail, I couldn't tell. Adrenaline and dread began

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dread began to mix into a rare elixir of anxiety. I was almost completely frozen. The elevator reached the bottom. I tapped my fingers, waiting in anticipation for the elevator doors to screech open. I was preparing to rocket out of the elevator, but when the doors opened, I saw... a jungle?

I stood, awestruck at the dense greenery before me. I looked back and my doppelganger was gone. I searched the button panel, smashing each one. The elevator didn't move an inch or even seem to have power anymore. The regret started seeping into my mind. I was wishing I had never rushed to class, wishing I had just taken the stairs, wishing I had stared at The Founder for a second longer. Maybe I wouldn't have been thrown into this strange dream-like hell. I lowered my head. I decided I should just wait out this terrible situation in the elevator, and maybe the power would suddenly come back. So, I waited.

I watched the sun tear from the east and tumble into the west, silencing the loud jungle. I was left in complete darkness, with only a few screeches and howls to keep me company. My adrenaline had flatlined and I was finally starting to feel hungry. I grabbed a protein bar and water bottle out of my bag. I realized that if I had to hunt, I would go hungry.

The only lights I saw were the stars speckled on the sky above me. Each dot reflecting a remembrance of home. My brief reverie was cut short by a particularly alarming and monstrous howl; a beast was nearby. My entire body was littered in goosebumps and pumping adrenaline. I felt the heat, the heat of the jungle. I was inside of it already, ready to be consumed. I popped my head out of the elevator to try to see anything, but it was too dark. I decided my best bet for safety would be a tree, so night-stalking predators couldn't easily attack me. Maybe I could even catch some sleep up there. I crept outside the doors and took a step into the eerie night. As I made my way to a tree, I started to realize how ginormous it was. It was as tall as a four-story building and mossy, with dozens of branches spraying out erratically like lightning. While I was looking at the strange tree, I realized: there was no sound around me. No locust chirps or cicadas buzzing, no winged creatures of the night cooing, no howls of the nocturnal beasts declaring they were there, hungry. It was silent.

This ominous realization led me to quickly hoist myself up the side of the tree. I was disconcerted but felt that if I didn't hurry, something worse than a stressed soul awaited. I couldn't get myself to climb to the highest branch because I was a little scared of heights. I found myself a large, thick branch, possibly a place to sleep. Once I had settled myself in, I slumped down and closed my eyes for a moment. I heard the creak of wood bending and a slight breeze ran over me. On brink of sleep, I heard a rustle and looked over to my left. A hulking ape sat staring at me. It was still, tense, and huge. It squatted with its hands between its legs. Seeing an ape so close made me realize how muscular they are. Every fiber twitched in readiness. Its muscles rippled. It gripped the branch with a vengeance. This monkey could pull my head off, but it just continued to stare, making no sounds. I propped myself up in anticipation. I began to move towards the trunk in hopes of climbing up, but then the ape launched itself onto my branch. My back was against the trunk of the tree, as the monkey was coming towards me. Fear curdled my blood. The monster walked forward with a balled fist and rounded shoulders, looking ready to obliterate my existence. But I looked up and saw the glint of a pair of eyes staring down from above.

As the ape moved closer, I felt death approaching. Its face was an inch from mine. It smelled rancid and was God-awful ugly. I was prepared to die. Then, from the branch above, another ape slammed down on it, causing both of them to ricochet off the branch. As they fell, they swung their arms and legs wildly in hopes of catching something to slow their fall. One of apes was met with a crushing blow as he slammed through a large branch; the other was caught by nothing. They both landed with a thump and crack. Neither of them moved afterwards. As I stared down at the gory carcasses of the two freshly broken apes below me, I heard a rustle in the distance, far beyond what I could see in the overwhelming darkness. Its steps were heavy and rhythmic, like a dancer. It continued to step forward in a metrical pattern. After my last encounter, I assumed it would not be best to find out what was approaching. I climbed down from the tree and began running in the opposite direction. I could tell it was following. I ran, smashing through vegetation and tripping on roots. I continued to run through the storm of plants until I came upon an overhanging canyon wall.

I turned my back to the wall and tried to peer through the overgrown foliage. Squinting back at me were two glowing eyes. Then it became apparent. A crouched posture and a pair of destructive stripes layered the pelt of the beast. Damn. I began climbing the rock wall. With each crevice I stuck my hand in, the more helpless I became; I was approaching the overhang. The beast was so close I could see it now; the tiger could climb. I was horrified. It tore through the rock, scaling up to consume me, but suddenly it stopped. It cried for mercy and fell off the rock wall. It scurried back into the dense forest. I was curious but was not in the mood to solve a mystery, so I decided to

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run back to the elevator, as being out in the open was apparently a death sentence. I began to trot back to the elevator, scared and lost.

After fighting through clinging vines and ferns, the sun rose, and I had made it back to the elevator. I walked through the doors and sat inside. I was defeated but alive. I finished the protein bar in my bag and guzzled my water. I accepted that death would soon come to me and felt the weight of not escaping this prison. But the two metal doors began to creak, and the buttons lit up. The doors moved slowly together and formed a tight seal. I had never felt such relief and happiness. I was going to live! I clicked the lobby button. I began to move.

As the elevator came to a stop, I thought about everything I would do when I got home. How would I try to explain this to my professors? What a terrible lie. But mid-thought, the doors screeched open. I wasn't met with the university, but a stark white laboratory. Technical equipment and boards of big red buttons filled the room. Test tubes labeled and incubating, resting in their special holders. Bunsen burners freshly lit, and overhead lights that emitted a sickly white light. I stepped into the lab. An English major was definitely not supposed to be here. After I entered the room, I saw a huge window. It surveilled the giant jungle. A button was labeled "sound." I clicked it, and the jungle began to roar. It made me flinch and trip over my feet. I got myself up and looked around again. I entered a door that led to a corridor. There were miniature windows on each door meant for leering into separate rooms, which contained beasts.

As I walked past each room I saw different creatures; some I knew, some I didn't. Odd looking beasts with numerous rows of teeth and four eyes. I was thankful for not encountering these blasphemous monsters in the wild. There were tigers that pranced about the room in a familiar rhythm. Buttons laid beside each enclosure on small panels. I pressed one and the jaguar inside yelped and started launching itself around the room. I felt bad for him but continued walking down the corridor. I came to the end of the hallway, intrigued by what else was hidden here, and was met with the back of a man. He was looking into a giant enclosure and wearing a lab coat with white-collar clothing underneath. He had an IV drip on wheels and a cane. He looked quite sick. I walked forward, wondering what he was watching, and saw what the enclosure was holding. It was me. He looked exactly like me, head to toe. An exact copy of my physiology.

I didn't think the man had noticed me yet, so I began to take a step back when he said, "Hello, Nathan." He turned towards me, and it was him, The Founder. He hobbled forward, asking, "Did you like my exercise?" I stumbled over my words, trying to be courteous but also baffled as to what this situation was. The Founder said, "Never mind, it wasn't made for your liking." He took another step forward and weakly pointed into the enclosure. "This is your copy, Nathan no.1. I copied your genome, and printed another you out, Nathan." The copy in the enclosure looked around with my body language and curiosity. The Founder said, "Your copy would have been going into the jungle after I'd acclimated his senses to the world. When they're fresh, you have to get them desensitized, like a baby." I turned my back on him and bolted out the room and down the corridor, coming back to the first room I entered. I went up to the elevator, popping the button to leave, but the doors didn't move. I looked behind me, and The Founder was at the entrance of the room, just outside the hallway. "You're not escaping, Nathan. Neither will I." The Founder turned to a panel of intricate buttons and screens. He said, "I'm dying" as he typed away and pressed buttons. "Once I'm dead, this will be found, and all the beautiful beings here will die as well." He walked towards me, "So I must erase, in benevolence." Through the window behind him, the jungle began to scream. Smoke rose from the center of the giant patch of green and began to flow outwards.

My hands trembled. The Founder turned to me and reached into his lab coat pocket as he was looking at the scene before him. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" He slowly pulled out a large revolver and raised it. He could barely hold it up. His sickly body revolted against the weight. "Walk into the elevator." The thick steel doors creaked open, and I stepped into them with my hands raised. The Founder moved into the elevator with me, and the doors shut behind him. He pressed the button, still facing me and pointing a gun at my head. The elevator rattled, and we began to descend.

The doors opened to the jungle. It was weeping. Screams of death echoed throughout the foliage. The animals trying to escape danced throughout the green jail, trying to kill the flames that burned through their reality. The Founder walked into the enclosure, still facing me and aiming the gun. "Walk out." I hesitated; I couldn't be stuck here again. I reluctantly took a step out. The Founder walked back into the elevator and said, "This was fun, Nathan. Until we meet again." He lowered the gun to his side just before the steel doors began to seal. I slipped my hand through the crack, gripping the sick man by the neck and yanking his body through. I pulled him back into the jungle. He flew like a paper bag, light as a feather. I swept him off his feet and slammed him onto his back. The revolver had fallen a few feet from him. The fall had smashed the breath out of him. It left him gasping for air and

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groveling towards the weapon. He reached out in desperation towards the gun, but I clamped his hand and pivoted on his delicate digits with my foot. They crunched. I kicked the gun farther than he could crawl. I stepped back into the elevator as The Founder was screaming a combination of curses and pleas. I pressed the lobby button, and the doors closed. The elevator rose, and eventually the doors opened. I saw the dorm lobby. Nobody was there. It was dark outside. I stepped into the lobby and closed my eyes. I fell to my knees covered in dirt, grime, and regret. I slept for a long while in the posture of prayer.

I awoke to piercing white lights. I was in a hospital gown and hooked up to an IV, entangled in wires. I looked around the room. A television hung from the wall. A journalist began speaking: "Breaking news! Robert Hoste III of Bridgett University is hospitalized with third degree burns over most of his body, and was alleged to be experimenting with genome alteration and copying, along with charges of illegal possession of exotic animals." I rocked myself up from the hospital bed and ripped the IV from my arm. I walked toward the door in my room and opened it. I stepped into a long eerie corridor. A doctor raced by, lost in thought, as I weaved alongside the walls. I came across a window that seemed to emit danger. I peered into it. The electrocardiograph beeped in rhythm. A patient was lying there, coated in bandages and analgesic balm. The little bit of face I could see was lathered in scar tissue, melted like a hot candle. Only his eyes were discernible from his visage. The look in his bloodshot crazed eyes was one of readiness. I was afraid he would suddenly bolt up and snap the braces that held him down. But no, he lay still and tense, uncomfortably.

I lowered my head and stepped away from the window. I walked towards the end of the hallway. I went through the push doors and entered the lobby. People were bustling and rushing past me, heading in and out of different doors. I saw the families scattered and moving about the rooms. I felt indifferent. I walked to the doors of the lobby and opened them. It was pouring rain outside. Still in my hospital gown, I walked to the street and looked up. The clouds were congested with rain and tied together into one piece. The rain slipped through my squinted eyes and blurred my vision. I looked away from the clouds and across the street. And there he was, Nathan no.1. The rain began to get hot; I could feel the jungle's cry.



photo by Rama Al-Balas

The Storm Before the Calm

By Aadi Patel

Often phrased “The Calm before the Storm,”

An inaccurate saying made to conform.

The truth hides in this deceptive lie,

The Storm before the Calm is a better eye.

Adversity is perceived to be certain during peace,

One believes that easy times are bound to surcease.

But one forgets difficulty can be suppressed,

amid disaster, peace is professed.

One is taught through suffering, through days of ache,

That hefty storms will spirits break.

But from the test, new light spawns;

The most trivial times will be withdrawn.

We must end the myth of fear in peace,

And carry the message of greater feats.

For a storm is suffering with great struggle,

But calm will follow in a fated huddle.



photo by William Roland