MONTGOMERY COLLEGE

The Gryphon

Spring 2023

The Gryphon is a
mythical beast with
the head, wings, and
upper torso of an eagle
and the body, hind
legs, and tail of a lion.

THE GRYPHON

2023

The Student Literary and Arts Magazine of Montgomery College Germantown Campus

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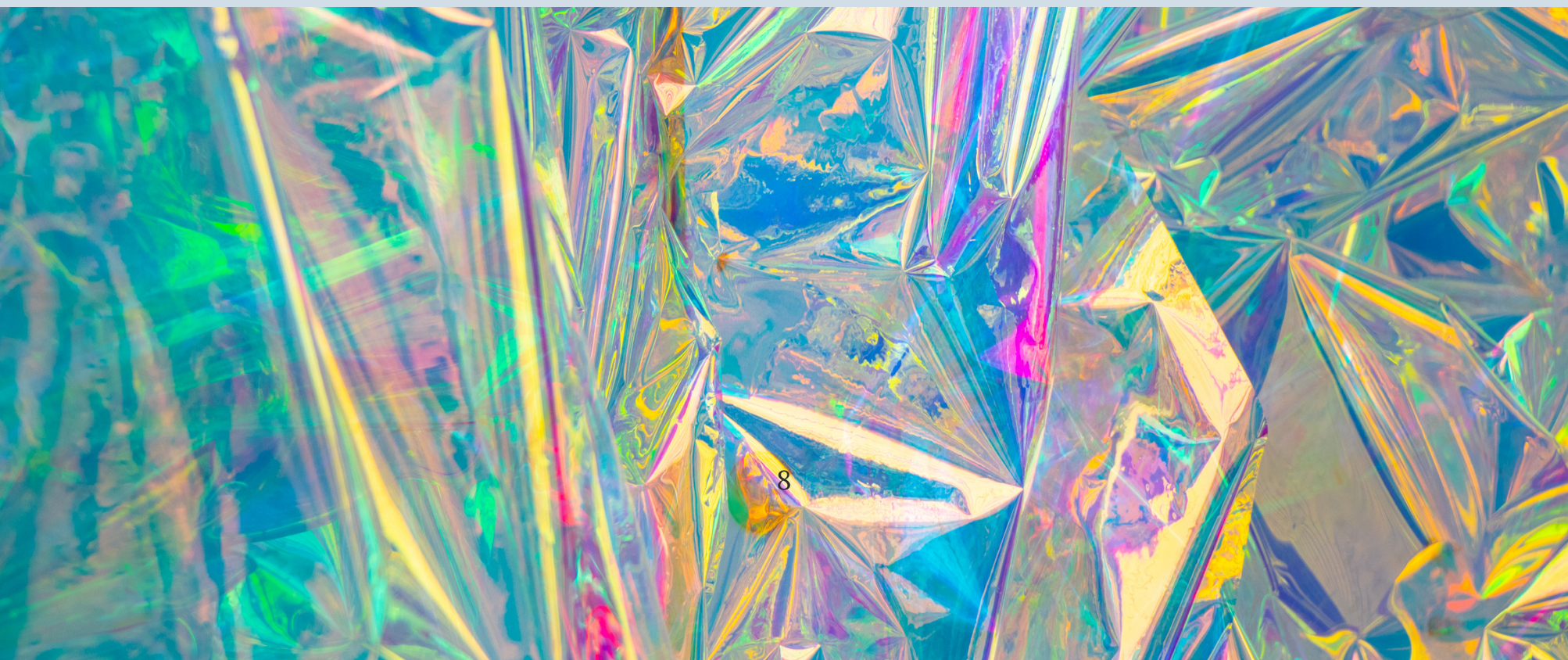
Reflections
by Abigail Ott

Sweet, gentle bird trapped in the cage like me behind my ancient walls,
How I wish I could as easily destroy my own barricades
As let you go, but I fear, if I were to try, that I would fall.
So I'll watch you as you wheel and swoop and soar, flying away.
Why do you sing, filling the earth with such a joyous ringing sound
While trapped within that tiny cage, behind those shining iron bars?
Then, unleashed from tethers that bind us mortals to the lowly ground,
You soar, flying far higher than the sun and joining with the stars.
I wish I were as free as you, to glide and sing over the land
Instead of trapped and chained, my wings pinned down with meager human cares.
I wish for someone lovingly to take my sorry little hand
And guide me up, and help me learn, and teach me to soar through the air.
But now, while I wait for my fantasies to be at last fulfilled,
No more of these unbreachable barriers will I sadly build.

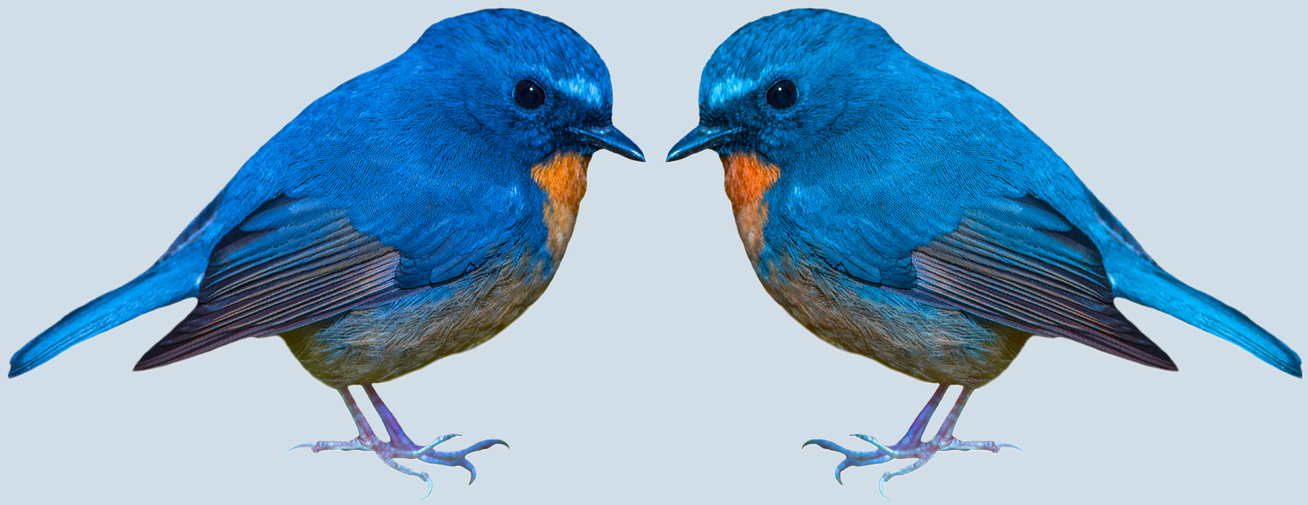
by Lara Gomez

I Am
by Mika Fishell

I Am
A minimalist with darted fabrics and renaissance collars
Fat fingers hidden with press-on nails
A slow-moving adventurer of the remaining wild
Art, creativity through textured freedom
Personified paintings with dangling pearl earrings.
My novels, binged and forgotten
Nature caged, limited, a forgotten purpose.
The dreams of realists, fantasized and life-blended like cliffs meeting the ocean
Doubts, expectations but urns decorating my life
Love, freely accepting, but unforgiving.
Places, prettier in pictures but more important is the memory
12 shots of blond espresso
The lit graveyard shift that melts the hours,
The heartbeat of teens slipping through the city night
A speakeasy, disguised to those who don't know me
Alive and breathing and thinking and forever evolving.



In the Dreams of Flycatchers
by Anuradha Malarachchi



In the midst of chaos, two young, dull, blue flycatchers managed to love.

The evening that we begin with is the last they would spend with their family until the next September or perhaps a September after that. A grand feast was prepared that night to feed the strength and vigor of all the young birds in preparation for the treacherous migration that awaited them. There was joy and laughter, dance and song that reverberated and shook the tree trunk of their dear willow that night.

After the celebration, there was a single whisper, all fearful of what lay ahead.Each pin drop that fell from the weeping clouds could be distinctly heard. The two flycatchers that lay in their nest together feared the most of going somewhere new, of immigrating to a place they had only heard of through the movies, in a shop's display, or through the subdued voices of passersby in the park they frequented.

Everyone thought it odd. That is, the idea of two flycatchers to go together when it was only natural for them to fly alone in their own company.

Yet, only the two flycatchers knew of the bundle of dreams that grew in the belly of one of them, a dream whose heart beat full and loud. Only they knew already that they would let go of any joy or comfort they had acquired to see their dream grow to her full potential.

When the sun rose and they awoke from their slumber to the sound of a sweet morning dove wishing them a life full of beauty and sincere prosperity, they found their family, several generations, huddled together, weeping and praying, finding solace in each other's feathers. They cried and sang as the two lovebirds flew away towards the new life they were destined for in a different part of the vast world.

Their journey was a perilous one with waves crashing and thunder roaring whenever they flew across a sea. The only time they encountered refuge was when a ship happened to pass by. They would rest for a moment on the ledge, and then they would begin again. At times, they felt like two replicas of Icarus flying too close to the sun, with their wings feeling as if they were burning with the flames of a thousand rays. Nevertheless, they persevered, for their dear bundle of dreams.

Their destination proved to be quite contrary to their origin. The streets of Los Angeles blared music of American tunes which filled the air unlike the ones in their own country; different scents of different foods penetrated their noses as they attempted to understand what the cuisine was; and the women here wore cropped shirts and low-rise jeans unlike the saris they were used to seeing women wear on strolls in the park which they used to reside.

Days and weeks, they spent trying to find an adequate home for their bundle. They traveled in the sweltering sun from place to place; they struggled yet bravely attempted to meet the approval of glaring eyes belonging to cardinals, goldfinches, and sparrows. They would shake it off their mind, the feeling of disapproval as if they were shaking off the water accumulated in their feathers from the rain. In their mind, they had one aspiration: to give their bundle of dreams the ability to believe she could do anything. What others wanted was of no concern to them.

Once they found a home in a willow tree such as the one they used to inhabit after searching for what felt like years. They found that their bodies had become lankier, a couple of their feathers had fallen off, and they seemed to have aged by years.

Whether by mercy or fate, perhaps we shall never know, their soul was preserved within their frail bodies, and once in a home of their own, warm and safe, they were given an opportunity to thrive. Their days became better; the neighboring birds of other trees came by to say hello. Yet, the two flycatchers were

still on their own together. This was no matter for them, for they managed to thrive together and bathe in the sun's rays.They bonded and loved each other more than ever; they held fast to each other, and from this love, their bundle of dreams was laid into the nest the flycatchers had built together.

Every morning and night, the mother would sing to her egg, cooing the child out into the world with a promise that it is not as fearful as it seems. The father would hug the egg in an embrace with a promise that for as long as the two flycatchers lived, their child would be cared for.

Suddenly in the night with a crack and the emergence of two legs, the baby flycatcher was born. The parents shed tears in delight. To others, she may have been average, but to them, she was perfect and smelled of pristine youth and unsullied purity as all children are to their mothers and fathers. That sullen look the two flycatchers had from their long journey disappeared and was replaced with a look of regained hope.

The baby flycatcher grew slowly but surely. The mother brought her worms to fatten her up and put her wings around her child to
keep them warm. The father, with a new sense of strengt, began to expand their nest and boasted about his child to their neighbors, putting her above all else. Through the seasons, the parents sheltered their child from storm and harsh rays. This way, the two flycatchers thought, she will grow to have opportunities at every corner, to lead a life which her heart desires.

The baby flycatcher developed her own feathers, and her parents were joyous in seeing their child's prosperity.The time eventually came when she was ready to try her hand at flying.She struggled for a while to get out of the hold of her parents, partly by willingness, for she loved them deeply and partly because her parents loved her even more. Yet, when the two flycatchers finally let go, the baby flycatcher looked back to assure that her parents had not disappeared for all of us are children who need a final push of encouragement.

With that encouragement, the baby
flycatcher jumped out the nest and miraculously soared with her wings spread wide and unfearful of what was to come.

The two flycatchers shed a tear.

One said, "I fear for her. I fear she will not be seen or that she should hide or fall when she tries to fly."

And the other would say, "My dear, don't you see? What matters most is not whether we hide or fly or where our journey takes us, but what guides us home and where we come to land."

This story is dedicated to my mother and father, who sacrificed everything so that I could fly.

by Eleonore Hanssen

Burning the Cherry Blossom Trees
by Eleonore Hanssen

A symbol of peace between two nations
Sharing their love and affection, so swiftly
The sapling beauty is placed in the ground
Oh, the cherry blossom trees are so pretty, so pretty
As buds bloom and petals fall around
A reminder that brief beauty is such a pity
And the fleeting nature of their existence
Oh, the cherry blossom trees are so pretty, so pretty
Reflections are cast into the water
To show how perfect the symmetry
To see what our eyes can see
Oh, the cherry blossom trees are so pretty, so pretty
We discover rots and spots and knot diseases
To overturn the earth, and now feel guilty
And the smoke filled the sky as the Petals turn to ash
Oh, the cherry blossom trees are so pretty, so pretty
The President makes a call to ask for forgiveness
As he tells Japan the trees were diseased and sickly
The symbol of peace went up in flames
Oh, the cherry blossom trees are so pretty, so pretty
With sadness and generosity, Japan accepted our apology
The old trees are gone but new trees have come in a jiffy
And the pink petals grew as the cycle continues
Oh, the cherry blossom trees are so pretty, so pretty
Now the sakura trees have grown and
To the cherry blossom festival, we go into the city
How streets are filled with pink petals
Oh, the cherry blossom trees are so pretty, so pretty
And all around from far and wide
People can see what we show with pride to decree
My love for the sakura trees
Oh, the cherry blossom trees are so pretty, so pretty

Girl-Friend

by Lara Gomez

Pretty flowers swaying in the wind As the world sings its tune
I will wait ‘till tomorrow
Until evening starts to bloom
Pretty lady I see you standing by the lake I’ll miss your cheerful laughter
As I watch from the gate
You’ll leave me now like water lilies on water
You’ll drift away like your father’s daughter
And won’t look back to see the girl more than a friend
The only one who loved you ‘till the end
You’re too precious, You remind me of spring
Well, here it goes again, Me reminiscing
Nostalgia for a past I never held.
And tears shed for a girl that never bid me farewell

Little Miracles
by Abigail Ott

by Lara Gomez

Lightning bugs on a summer's night
Stars strewn across an ev'ning sky
Dew glittering in morning sun
Rainbows that 'cross the heavens run
The first flowers that bloom in spring
The birds that in the treetops sing
The soft whisper of a cool breeze
The bright sun shining through the trees
All the little miracles we fail to see
Are waiting to be discovered by you and me

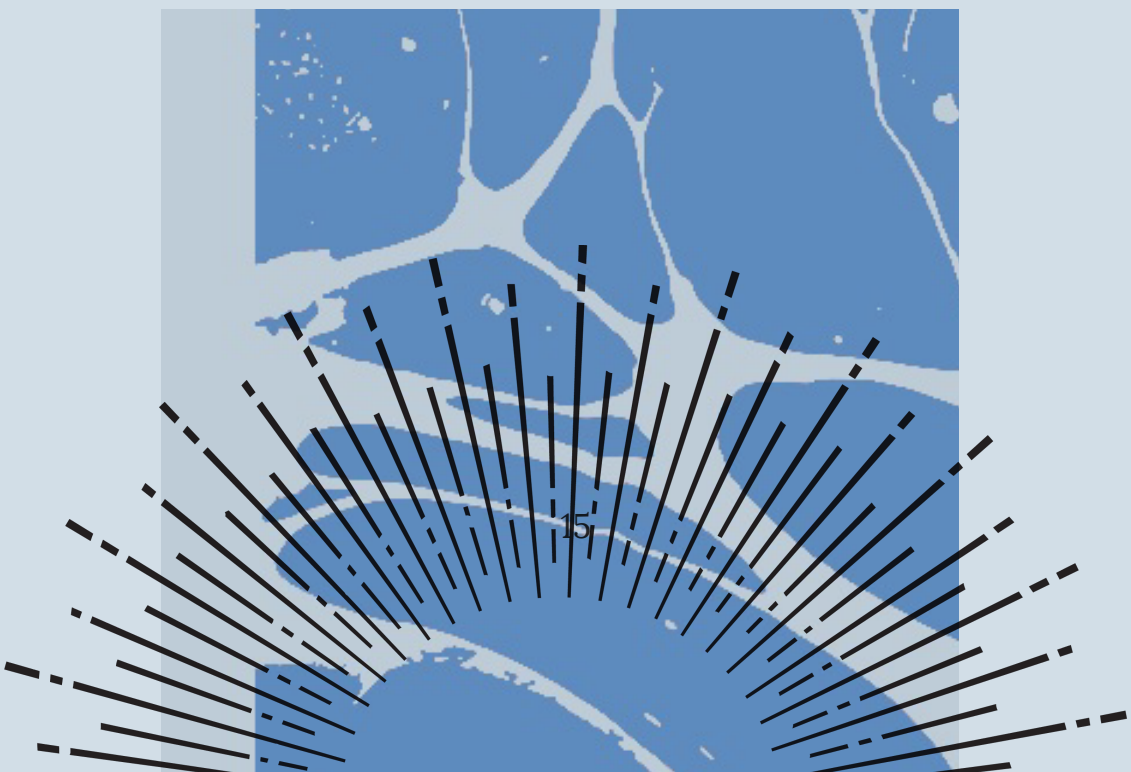
The joyful laugh of a close friend
A newborn babe you have to tend
A family member's embrace
The smile on somebody's face
The sweetness of someone's first kiss
Having someone whom you miss
Knowing that you are truly loved
Belief in something up above
All the little miracles we fail to see
Are waiting to be discovered by you and me

Why don't we see the miracles?
Is it that we have got too old?
How is it that we're too busy
To 'ppreciate the mystery?
How is it so hard to slow down
And just rest in the love we've found?
Stop worrying and just be still
And this moment with peace instill
All the little miracles we fail to see
Are waiting to be discovered by you and me

I Am

by Matthew Hassett

I Am
An ocean prospering with life
A jungle with an intricate, endless path of vines
The snow that falls fresh and bright
The cotton clothing that traps our warmth
A Honda's trustworthy reliability
A rocket ship's boundless level of freedom
The sushi rich with diverse flavors
The chef filled with culinary passion and love
A swimmer with determination
A scholar filled with a never-ending thirst for knowledge
The black hole's inescapable light
The paradoxes: ungraspable concepts and thoughts
A dog with simple joy
A cat with a thirst for exploration and fun
The desk with all its sturdiness
The tree nurtured to grow beyond its limits
A parrot's loud mimicking
A pirate whose greed is his motivator
The pool's refreshingness
The lifeguard's professionalism and maturity
A human in all its complexities and simplicities



Her Mirror
by Makia Adam

When she was in her homeland, every person she had met has always been a mirror of herself. When she first stepped on the soil of this new foreign country, the mirror started to crack.
Whether it was the diversity of the people or cultural differences.

As her eyes expanded, so was the world around her. Her first day at school in the foreign country made her feel like an alien. Very early in the morning before the doors of her school were officially open, she went with her parents and waited inside. As one of the counselors approached her, she could only understand the word, “Hello." The words that he spoke after that seemed so confusing as if her mind were going blank.

She couldn’t see herself in the man that was standing in front of her. Her mirror was becoming blurry. Her first teacher was an Asian lady. Her eyes were analyzing every feature on her face.She didn’t see herself in her, but to her, she didn’t feel foreign; perhaps she had seen teachers before. Finally, she came to her first period class. This class was full of people who spoke the same language as the early counselor; here she felt as if she was on a completely different planet.

Her mirror at this point became so blurry that she could not speak nor understand anything. As she moved on throughout the day in different classes, she was moved to a class that was full of people going through the same experience as she was. They were looking for their reflections as they stared around the room. She could see confusion, excitement, or even regret in their eyes. It felt nice for her not to be alone in that situation.

Her survival instinct was on alert.

She had to adapt in order to survive.

She had to assimilate. Luckily, she was a fast learner, and her passion for learning was stronger than anything other than her cultural shock of this new country.

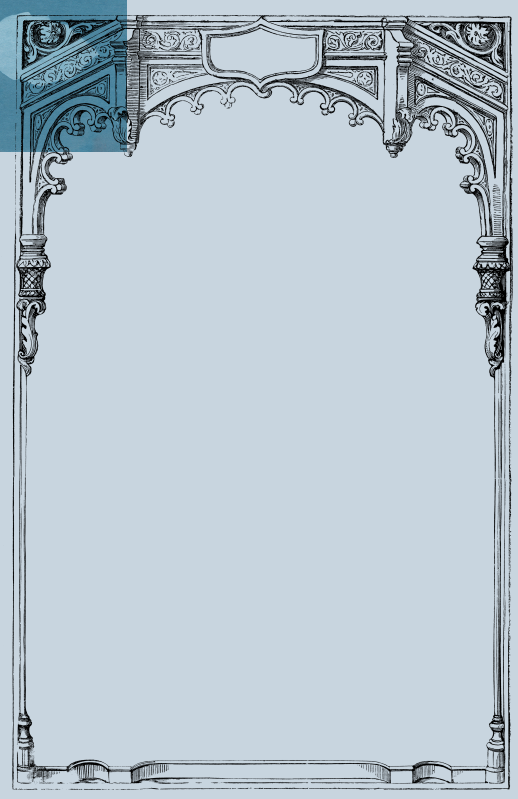
She knew that language was only a small obstacle to overcome, and she overcame it.With the barrier of diversity and cultural difference out of the way, she began to see herself in
people that were completely different from her.

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN YOURSELF IN OTHERS OR DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN HER?

I Am
by Gladys Munashe Chiraramiro

I AM
Black boots worn twice left to hide
An eagle, bald and ready to take flight
The savannah night air, cool and peaceful
An extra small dress hoping to fit in
The lifeless gold heirloom that cannot tell time
A black sweater that is ready to quit
Chocolate chip ice cream sought after the heart has had enough
A friendship full of unfulfilled promises
A flowery swimsuit waiting for summer that never comes
Fancy perfume racing towards a special occasion
A pair of stilettos pointing down and paining up
A spring on the mountain top ready to heal but none cometh
A mighty river gaining momentum with every flow
A love letter written yet never mailed
The desire for nothingness, the sweetest taboo
Preloved cargo shorts waiting to be loved again
The calm before a storm
A praying mantis ready to get the answer
The feet of a runner ready to sprint
A eulogy yet to be written

Insecure
by Lara Gomez



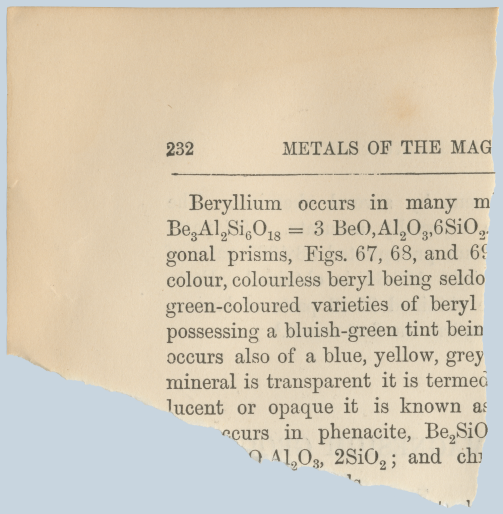
Succumbing to slippery slopes of self-psychology.
Words whispered
inconspicuously, weave personal unacceptance.
Mistaken for outside faults,
Caused by too much introspection.
But there was no fault in your complexion

Father

by Olivia Keller

He carried me on his shoulders and held me as I cried.
He watched me play, full of pride.
He picked me up from school, to get ice cream.
He kissed me goodnight and listened to my dreams.
He signed my forms and checked my grades.
He bought gifts and took me to Christmas parades.
He hugged and cuddled me, with all his might.
He said he would be back and then left in the night.
He returned years later when I was much older.
He was not welcome back at home, but he was closer.
He took me to eat, and we would go to shows.
He seemed to care, but only brought sorrows.
He lied and deceived, to get what he needed.
He got his way when tensions grew heated.
He went behind my back and through my stuff.
He needed all the power, he felt like a handcuff.
He said he loved me, with every bit.
He said it was for the best, and never quit.
He silenced my voice, so I couldn't be free.
He could not see; he was breaking me.
He felt me slipping away, so he pushed harder.
He denied and made excuses, but I got smarter.
His tricks and bribery were not working, he was stuck.
He knew I could not be controlled, I finally struck.
I took my things and left in the night.
I left for good, without a fright.
I ignored his cries and tried to hate him.
I hate myself instead, for the love I gave him.

I Am
by Marie Well


232 METALS OF THE MAG

Beryllium occurs in many m
$Be_3Al_2Si_6O_{18} = 3\ BeO,Al_2O_3,6SiO_2$
gonal prisms, Figs. 67, 68, and 6
colour, colourless beryl being seldo
green-coloured varieties of beryl
possessing a bluish-green tint bein
occurs also of a blue, yellow, grey
mineral is transparent it is termed
lucent or opaque it is known as
ccurs in phenacite, Be_2SiO
Al_2O_3, $2SiO_2$; and chr

I Am...

Somewhere between I was and I will be

Muslim Christian Baha'i Ashkenazi

Sappho writing not just for loving girls

Cousteau advocating for fish in swirls

On a mission from or to destiny

I am but who am I ever to be?

Hugo's optimistic social reader

Ready for Gavroche with a tall prayer

Beyond the voice that hums a louder sound

Dansko rather than some boots on the ground

Behind the mask actor and character

Before the task factor and director

Rousseau for the defense of a contract

Rimbaud in red and raw and rough impact

Old shelves of Voltaire Baudelaire and Moliere

Now Shakespeare Twain and Frost filling the air

Bolero any Sunday as a pact

Hoping to keep the memory intact

Planting caring seeds for Gentle Future

Crafting tomorrow's spiritual food

And no more by design than by nature

Singing how life is but an interlude

Not here to succeed or fail only learn

Alive on splendid earth just an intern

Among every unique tree so grateful

For every unique you makes life hopeful

Rene Descartes for a new Renaissance

Ever avid of further learning caught

Practicing reflection with eloquence

None without your reading of my thought

So much to live and yet so little time

Assignments! – hearing the call of the bell

Thoroughly heartbroken to end a rhyme

Well...with a double u and double l

Sum.In joy!... Therefore, I think, I think

MOVEMENT

By Olivia Keller

Have I Wasted a Decade...?
by Otto Neil

I should've expected the worst when I realized the HR guy was in the room as I walked in.

I was tense and nervous walking into the principal's office, almost as if I was a student at this school again. But no, even as a man I was terrified to sit in front of him – at least right now. The same man who hired me, the same principal from when I was a student here. The hollow pleasantries the three of us exchanged were a blur compared to what the principal said next.

"So, Javier, we're here today in response to the lessons you've been teaching here. I know I told you to... take the last few days off from school, but in that time, I had, uh, several meetings with your department chair and the head of service. And eventually I had to discuss the issue with the bishop's office..."

My heart was sinking. He wasn't making eye contact. This was a long wind up for exactly what I dreaded.

The principal continued looking down. "We have come to the conclusion that you are unfortunately not a good fit for our school, and it would be best if you continue your career elsewhere."

"So... no... you're firing me?" I croaked out weakly.

"Javier, I'm sorry, but I've gotten dozens of parents complaining via email- "

"But we could work something out! I thought the point of this suspension was so I could work on how to fix my lessons moving forward! You gave me that worksheet from the

Church to give to my students, then you gave me packets of reading to do while suspended.I thought the point was to 'fix' things moving forward?"

"Javier, I'm sorry," he repeated himself again, trying to sound sympathetic. "But we saw the slides you presented. The discussion questions you made. The comments you let your students post. There's so much that's blatantly anti-Catholic Church, and the bishop said-"

"I'm opening up the floor for conversation! These students are agreeing with me by the way. I'm not forcing them to rebel; they're already not on the Church's side!"

"Javier, the students might just be agreeing with you just to please you; you don't know-"

"I literally have students who have admitted to me they're a part of the LGBTQ community!" I realized I should never give their names, so I quickly added, "Or they have family that's a part of it, or their own parents, you know? I'm not saying anything evil-"

"There are clear slides where you present the Church as in the wrong, and like I was saying, the bishop's office said we need to separate entirely instantly."

"But I haven't seen the parent's emails, and the kids agree with me, and I haven't talked to my department chair, and-"

"They... do not want you to still teach here. As soon as possible."

The slow realization dawned on me. I was naïve... but...

"Wait... so I don't even get to finish the school year? But it's the middle of April; it's right there..."

The principal continued in the same grim, sympathetic tone. "We, here at the school, have come to an agreement though..."

"I can finish the year?"

"No."

“Then is someone else co-teaching with me?”

"No."

“Am I transferring to another department, like History or English? Can I be a substitute?”

“Javier, I’m sorry, but the agreement was to pay you your check until July and list you as on administrative leave. And then we just don’t renew your contract. So, you’re not fired. You can read about it on the paperwork here-“ The HR guy leans over to try and pass me papers.

“No… no… so you still want me to leave right now?”

“Yes.”

“But what about my ideas. I can transfer departments. I’m sure I can teach English or History just as well as Morality and Ethics, and if you want me to get another degree, then I’ll be a substitute here in the meantime, or at least I can just sit in the classroom until May then-“

“Javier, I’m sorry, but-“

“No! Just talk to the students! Please just talk to them! They’ll tell you I’m one of the best teachers here; they’ve told me to my face. They COMPLAIN about the other religion teachers, they-“

“We can’t consider the complaints of students if those teachers were following the archdiocese curriculum-“

“The curriculum is a joke!” I threw out without thinking. I realized I’m sinking myself and this could be causing other people – no, my friends and colleagues – problems, but I felt the adrenaline urging me continue. “They laugh at this curriculum in our department room. I was told from the beginning that it was more of a guideline and I can do what I want.

Did you know that? That my department chair told me that? You observed me - and so did she, multiple times! – and never once was the curriculum brought up. And now you're saying this thing we laugh at and ignore is the reason why I'm being fired?"

Finally, silence fell on the principal, like I just said something that hurt him, and in that moment, I hoped it did, more than I was worried about the backlash I might've caused my department.

"That may be so… but the parents raised real concern about your lessons on sexuality and gender identity-"

"Talk to my kids."

"Excuse me?"

"I said talk to the students. Give them a survey. Put them all in a room and talk to them."

"We… could do that… but I don't think it'll change-"

"Here, I said, pulling out my Hail-Mary-play, reaching into my bag to give him proof. "These are Thanksgiving and Valentine's Day cards from my students to me. I didn't ask them to write them to me. They chose to. Look at all of them. There's real emotion and care put into those."

He only takes a moment to shuffle through the flimsy paper notes to me. Notes those teenagers chose to be vulnerable on. I see it's not helping enough, so I go to my phone.

"Look, while you kicked me out these past few days, my students emailed me a video saying they missed me." I fumbled with my phone, trying to open the email, only to get a network error. The video of those girls saying they hoped I would come

back soon gave me resolve during these past few days, but now I was begging the video to play and get my point across. No luck. Network error.

I returned to my seat with the letters and the useless phone. A silence fell on all of us. I was running out of pleas, and I didn't care about this HR guy still trying to hand me papers.

"Please…" I weakly said. Tears were coming down now. "Easter is literally around the corner. Isn't this supposed to be about forgiveness? This whole religion? Second chances?"

Another silence. My own tears might've confused me, but maybe the principal teared up too.

"Javier, I can talk to the bishop's office again, but I really wouldn't get my hopes up."

I knew he wasn't going to. I knew as soon as I took those papers from the HR guy, still just awkwardly sitting there, this issue would be resolved. There would be no need to talk to the bishop's office again about me.

Last chance. My last chance.

"I… this school… here was the reason why I wanted to become a teacher. I devoted a decade of my life since coming here to become a teacher. I was… inspired to put my students first. Their needs. And I struggled… so much… to come back here to teach again. And you hired me, you cried when I explained my devotion and my struggle. I just… all I did was… it was the needs of the students that I put first. I care so much about them, and you could talk to them too; these issues matter to them. They wanted me to talk about them… they needed someone to tell them things could be okay. Please… let me at least finish the year with them. And you don't have to tell the bishop's office. You even said you're still gonna pay me anyway, so let me be here, in this school, with my kids. I… I won't talk anymore about controversial topics. I won't say anything about being fired. I just… wanna be there with them at the end. Please."

There was no mistaking it this time. He was, in fact, crying. For what though? HR guy had his head down now, staring at the papers he was trying to hand me.

The silence lasted a lifetime. The silence tortured me for the years I spent to get here. The silence was threatening to take away what I cared about most in the world.

“Javier… I’m sorry, but…”

The rest was a blur. The apologies. The paperwork. Clarifying my email was cut off this morning… can’t even go back to replay my kids’ final message to me. The explanations of what legally happens now. If I talk about this publicly. The end of it all. I can’t even tell if I even said this out loud, but it was like I was forced to speed through all five stages of grief in this godforsaken office.

 In that moment I felt what I never believed in, an out of body experience. Half of me was reading the paperwork, realizing I had no time to go to a newspaper or anything without walking away from the money that I sorely needed. Wondering if a paper would even help. That half was finally listening to the HR guy while wiping away my tears. But the other half of me drifted elsewhere.

 The chapel. It was right nearby this office, one of the first things you see as you walk in the school. I was in 9th grade. My religion teacher at the time said something. Something. I could never remember, but I remembered the feeling. Being a teacher is all I ever wanted since then, especially back here at the same school. The other half of me was in that chapel right now, breathing in the stillness of it all.

All of a sudden, we were all standing up, my mind melding back together in that office. My chest was hollow. Eyes dried out. Why did I just shake the principal’s hand as he wished me luck elsewhere? There’s no way the bishop’s office didn’t keep a record of my name. How was anywhere supposed to be different from here, the school that shaped me, the school that should’ve cared for me? This should’ve been the least likely school to fire me without a second chance, and yet…

I turned out the door. I can’t remember what the last thing I said out loud was at that point. But I wanted to leave something meaningful behind. Something, anything I could say that mattered.

I looked one last time to the principal. I don't know what my intention was. To hurt him? To fight back? To show I still care? To impress him to rehire me? To say anything at all to let him know this was unacceptable? That it can't end like this? That it won't end like this?

"My kids aren't stupid."

"What was that?"

"My students. They're smart. They'll figure it out. They'll know what you did. They'll know the Church was involved too. You can't just have a teacher give a unit on LGBTQ+ rights in a Catholic school, force him to pass out someone else's worksheets that contradict what he just taught, then suspend him without explanation, and then replace him for just a month and think no one will realize what happened. They will. Especially when I don't come back next year. And when the students realize, then it's on you. You've done way more harm for their faith than I ever could have."

Silence. For the last time between us.

"We'll just have to see how that turns out," he said. Tired. Defeated? Done with me.

The door closed, and I faded away.

The chapel greeted me one last time as I walked toward the exit. Doors were open. The silence floated around it without students around. I really considered stepping back in there, to the place that changed my life this past decade, one last time.

▯ Funny enough… I never once took my kids down to that chapel. We stayed in our classrooms, with our desks in circles, ready to talk and debate the next problem. Some days, not a lot of days, but some… I didn't even have to say anything. My kids shared their… opinions… feelings… gossip… jokes… confusions… their truths on their own. And I just listened.

▯ So, I left the chapel behind, hoping that I was taking what really mattered with me.

by Makia Adam

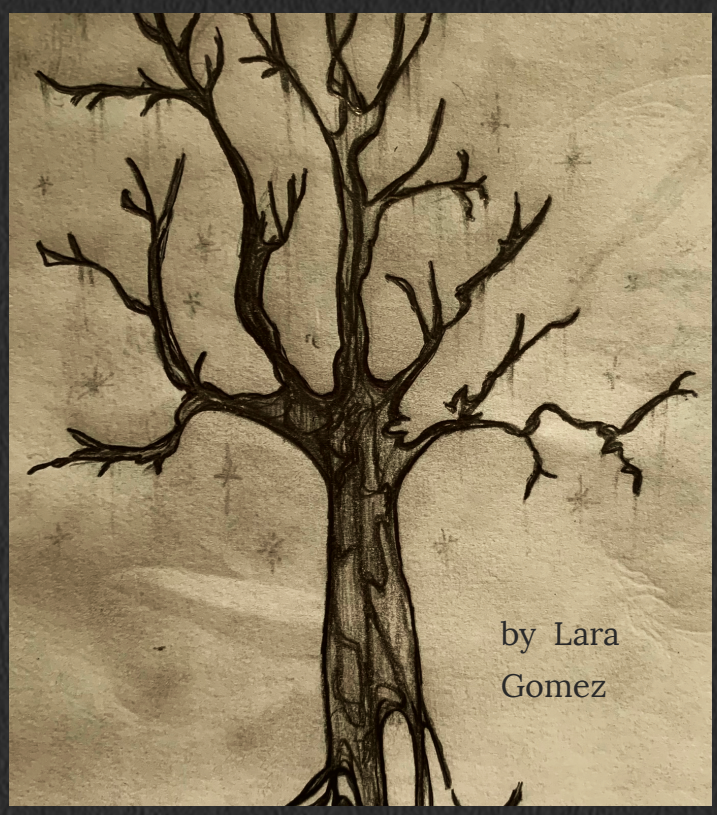
Nation's Burden
by Olivia Keller

Accept the Nation's Burden,
An assorted breed to our core,
With our stolen shores
Still bleeding more –
While the age is new –
We are still to blame.
Proving once again,
The White Man's game.
Accept the Nation's Burden,
The tradition that remains.
How could one deny it,
It's rooted in our veins.
The plains we callously ripped,
Had a fatal toll.
The savages we claim,
Were a product of our role.
Accept the Nation's Burden
Built on their backs.
When we came
To strip the riches, and cover their tracks,
Whilst tainting their quarters,
And sickening their sprouts.
We saw the reward of our might,
As we conquered, without any doubts.

Accept the Nation's Burden,
Which carried thick and through.
With every suppressed revolution
In hope of liberation, they knew.
We fought it every step,
But they had the right!
So we gave them just a taste
And carried on in spite.
Accept the Nation's Burden –
Of sinful folk that sought
Pride and satisfaction –
As we swept the lot.
We boast and argue –
By the God Almighty –
For our kin to come
Behold, our righteous duty.
Accept the Nation's Burden,
Our hands are stained.
Was it worth the forbidden fruit?
Promises were not maintained!
Our habits linger,
Regardless of the day.
The chain is unbroken with a longer leash,
We are the true devils at play.

by Olivia Keller

Death's Cold Touch
by Lara Gomez



The sun had retreated behind the sad clouds in the sky, hiding her radiant face. The world seemed to silence itself for the first time, and everything became still. The lake's surface froze over forming a glimmering mirror, and the once songful birds became silent as they wept quietly in despair. The Great Tree of Life slowly mourned in agony as its branches twisted desperately from the cold, hard air. Frost began to cover the tree's bark as it slowly dipped into a state of coma. Snow fell from the sky in soft puffs, but the weather was deadlier than it seemed to the naked eye. Sharp shards of ice slowly became stalactites on nearby birch trees, and animals hid from the new world. Evil had crept up into the land and death had silently slipped into their mists unnoticed - until now.

Four White Walls
by Olivia Keller

Four white walls,
Standing tall.
With the sunlight sneaking in,
Then slowly falling thin.
One second after another,
Will it come bother,
This restless ward,
Where one is stored.
Then comes the inflows,
Of ecstasy to fill the hallows.
Thus, recalling the inevitability,
Of my tranquility.
As the sun departs,
And time restarts,
Agony forever stalls,
In these four white walls.

DF2

Traumatized Child
by Lara Gomez

The earth was scorched. There was a burnt look to everything I saw, and it smelled of charcoal and blood.They... The boy rose from the ashes, unharmed, but debris fell off his clothes.Peculiar. You could smell the rust in the air. A nearby crow cawed. A messenger from death himself- how wonderful, I thought. The boy coughed and wiped his face as he peered at his surroundings not perturbed. Huffing, as if in annoyance, he shuffled out of the destroyed
remains, casually kicking aside charred wood that was still scorched in the memories of childhood. Safe, that's what they were, but not him and not I. They had possessed the poor child.
Multiple monsters had been awakened from the wounds of a past life and now their souls were forever encased in a human child. Quite frankly the perfect perpetrator. Children were beloved and innocent until proven guilty and even then punishment was lenient. Now set free, their rage fueled by one girl's desire to bring devastation to a society that never showed an ounce of kindness had torn the world apart. And here they stood, apathetic to the devastation. Why do I feel like I should feel guilt?

"No guilt. Not our problem. I did what was best for us," a voice answered. Spooked, I turned to my side and saw no one there. Hearing voices now? Wonderful.

Suddenly I flinched as a soot spark burst into flames to my right, its presence reminding me of the terror. It's him, the dealer. Critically in haste, I crawled through what was left of the
town. Patches of leftover flames still thrived in corners, as cloth, wood, clay, and metal created jagged mountains, and a black carpet covered the earth. I passed by a clump of junk with a
bleeding, protruding arm. I merely glanced over. My heart pounded, and my adrenaline raced high. No green in sight, not even one tree left to stand. Everything was barren, dead, and hollow. The sky was a gloomy grey, its clouds overhanging like a mocking crowd. I sought out any signs
of life under the desolate wasteland. I was utterly and inevitably alone- not even that boy was human. No crying baby off in the distance... nothing. My presence must be held secret. I paused.So some shady deal went wrong, so what?

After weaving my way over and under demolished metal structures for quite some time, my energy began to die down and my senses were not as sharp. I stumbled over a rock. Then, something shiny caught my weary eyes and hesitantly, still watching my peripheral vision, I leaned closer to inquire.Around a lifeless woman's neck was a dainty gold necklace.How pretty! I snatched it as a grin took over my face. I never owned anything so fancy before.It's like a scavenger hunt--

"Ack!-," I started to scream but clamped down on my mouth, biting my tongue immediately, silencing my pain. You stupid, stupid girl. My eyes darted from left to right, alarmed. I kept my body still as a stone and my breathing slow and steady. My ears listened for sounds of movement. Nothing, but my heart raced. Oh no... Suddenly, I felt liquid on the back of
my calf drizzling down like the scales of a snake. I could feel the reopened cut in my flesh revealing my already thin muscle. How come I didn't feel it before? My eyebrows knitted together, and my face contorted into agony. Not this, not now!
Indifferent about my goal, I forced myself to trudge forward gritting my teeth. I could feel the ripping of tendons with every drag of
my foot. My hand balled up in a fist around the gold chain. I tried to distract myself in vain. The heat from embers still alive burned the soles of my feet.

"Not improving," I said, huffing in aggravation.

Finally, out of the labyrinth maze, I could see a tattered red flag moving pathetically in the wind as if to say, "Hey, look, there's still hope!"

I scoffed and rolled my zombie eyes, "You can dream all you want but my Armageddon has a deadline. Otherwise, I expect a full refund, and that includes any last-minute cancellation fees."

I scouted the dust road that split the town in half but saw no signs of life because of the deadly smoke that obscured my view. Grey ash flecks gushed by with the wind blowing through my hair, further blinding me. I reached out to grab my loose strands. Then I noticed the blood on my hands, leaking from little scratches knit together like patchwork with my already healed scars. Welcome to the club. I looked back across the street, and then, out of the dust storm, I could
make out a figure ransacking recklessly a street vendor's stand. Must've fallen in the chaos. Rice
spilled out of great iron pots, while cut-up cabbages, carrots, and turnips littered the ground. My stomach growled. I forgot all about my wariness, and only one of my instincts took over. I stumbled across the road, kicking up soot and rock in my pursuit of survival, blood still flowed from my gash, but my adrenaline pumped. I collapsed before the banquet and before I

even caught my breath, my windpipe still tight and my chest heaving up and down, I began to greedily grab fistfuls of rice, stuffing my mouth.I barely swallowed before the next mouth full.I was so hungry that I carelessly dropped and wasted grains of rice due to literally biting off more than I could chew. I was so consumed in my little world I had forgotten all about the stranger. Upon realizing my mistake, I slowly turned my head, meeting the widened eyes of a young boy with his mouth half open with rice falling out. He's back? Perplexed, I gawed with the same expression. Finally, regaining my common sense, confusion was replaced by fear. Terror shivered my spine and my veins tightened. Yeah, right?! I darted around the cart, but not without taking a fist full of rice with me. It was him; he's seen me. It's over. Well, at least I had a good meal, right? I swallowed the rest of the extra rice immediately, but my eyes never ceased to dilate in size.

"Coy, is that you?" I heard from around the corner as slow strides drew closer. I tightly closed my eyes, hoping it would go away. I made a stupid deal so what! No one loved me anyway. No one cared! Why should I suffer alone while everyone gains?!I could feel light breathing on my shoulder. Don't look. I turned my head and looked. I was met with two curious eyes laced with something far from innocence. For a split second I saw the young boy, pleading for help in the deep pools, trying to fight and take back control. Please don't take him away! But then suddenly, without warning or explanation, I faded to the back of my head and I could feel someone else taking control.

"You!" she screamed, but the tone was rough and foreign. She snatched the boy's dirty shirt, drenched in innocent blood. Her knuckles, or my knuckles, whited and I could feel my face getting hot with rage... or her rage? "You MONSTER!" she screamed with disgust. "You killer, you PSYCHOPATH! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO OUR HOME, OUR COUNTRY, THIS WORLD?!" Rivers of tears flowed down her face. But I felt no longer attached to myself. I felt suspended in the air as I continued to watch. Her mouth quivered in rage. "YOU! You lied to us!You promised we would gain a great reward for finding you a vessel! Was our brother not enough? You promised we would be loved, you, you liar!" She looked so broken, but it was evident she had experienced worse. I just wanted to reach out to her and tell her it was ok.

Then, I blinked.

I opened my eyes and was back on the ground though my head was foggy. What happened? Such an odd feeling, almost as if I had experienced it all through a dream-like state with my vision grainy the whole time. I let go of his shirt, feeling extremely weak.I sobbed into my hands.Hopelessness and confusion took over.

"What have you done to my brother?" I asked so quietly the wind stopped to listen.Time froze just to grieve in silence for humanity.This was it, the end of our line and reign over the earth. Life is lost in just brutal ways. Why is life so cruel and unfair? It can all be turned into nothing. He lifted my face to meet his. His eyes were now a demonic red with hundreds of shadowy faces mocking me as they spiraled the rim of his irises. My breath hitched. He's gone.

"You wanted a battle, so I gave you a war. You wanted love. I wanted loyalty. And you freely kneeled before my throne of lies because you were desperate. But your haste left your reasoning behind, and now you reap what you sow," he said in such a vile tone with such a sadistic smirk, that my soul felt like leaving my body (and I wish it had).

And with that, dark red, almost blood-colored wings shot out of his back. They were sleek, but sharp looking, as if outlined and highlighted. It happened in such a short time frame I couldn't process a reaction. He yanked me off the ground and flapped his wings in such a large, vast, sweeping motion we shot out into the sky like a rocket causing so much wind, a whole black cloud of unsettled ash swallowed the continent.

We shot through the atmosphere and plunged into the starry heavens. My tears left a glittering trail of crystal spheres as we zoomed through stardust. The last time I ever saw Earth was right before it was engulfed by the sun's whipping flames. That was 17 years ago.

Melody Perez - “Insensible Senses” - charcoal medium assembled with photoshop - 02/24/2023

Rare Porcelain Beauty
by Gilian L. Castro Escalon

A soft knock at the door. Hmm.... Mama is cooking dinner, and Papa should be busy working at the fancy house. Then who could it be? The soft knock becomes louder. I quickly get
up and carefully put my dolly on the chair. She's a rare beauty. She seems to have been made with materials and fabrics more expensive than my bed. My father gifted her to me after working really hard, saying she and I look alike, which means I have to make sure to keep her charm
forever lasting. Maybe when I go off and get married one day, I can leave her so my parents can have something of me with them at home.

Mother opens the doo, but before she can ask anything, the tall man with a fancy suit that makes him look like a penguin, hands my mother what seems to be a well decorated card. Can it be an invitation?I snatch it out of my mother's hand and rip it open, resulting in cutting my finger and one drop of blood seeping through the letter.I am so excited that I don't pay much attention to it.

"An invitation? An invitation to a birthday party!" I am invited to a birthday party.

"Mother!! Can I go? Can I go?"

Without looking in my direction, she nods in acceptance. That is when the penguin gentleman hands me a box with a gorgeous dress similar to my dolly's. Perfect for one of those so called "balls" my father always complains about being a hassle to clean up after. Oh, I am filled with excitement!

While I hold the dress against me and twirl repeatedly in happiness, the penguin gentleman says,
"I'll be waiting in the carriage. Please, make her look her best."

Mama nods, quickly washes me up and dresses me beautifully along with the dress I was gifted. I feel pretty like a princess. I pick up my dolly, hold her close to my waist, look in the mirror and my goodness I can hardly tell the difference between my dolly and me.

"Almost identical," mother murmurs with a sadden look.

"I won't take long, Mother. I'll be back and bring you all sorts of treats and tell you all about it. Just don't forget to have the tea ready for the treats," I say with a smile and slight giggle.

Mama bids me goodbye with a tight hug and kiss on the forehead.

"Please take care of her for me Mama," I ask her while carefully putting my dolly in her arms. I
give Mama a kiss and say goodbye.
The penguin man lets me in the carriage, and we are on our way to the party. I can't stop swinging my feet in excitement.

As we are getting close to the fancy house, I look outside the window and see so many elegant people walking towards the fancy house. When the carriage stops, I kindly ask the penguin if I'll be able to see father here.

“House servants and guards will be the only workers here for tonight” he answers.I am a bit disappointed, but I understand.

“No worries, I’ll see him later after the party,” I gleefully reply.

The penguin man brings me inside the big fancy house. While inside, we walk towards a pretty lady, and the penguin man speaks to her. He is most likely giving her an order, but I am too astonished with the luxurious scenery of the place. Lights so brightly hang from the ceiling. The pretty lady looks back at me, smiles, and kindly directs me into a humongous room filled with many toys of all sorts of sizes, colors, and materials. I am completely amazed! It is like a toy wonderland. Any child’s dream. MY dream.

“Please, walk this way,” she says while directing me over to a gold throne in between two huge gingerbread-brown teddy bears taller than two or maybe three adults.

“Please, take a seat here and wait patiently like a good little girl,” she says with a smile.I sit. The pretty lady fixes my hair, then leaves.

I don’t pay attention to how much time passed by because I am distracted by the toys. Suddenly, I hear footsteps. It’s the penguin man! Before I can call out, so many people walk in after him as he directs them to spread out in the room and face my way.

I’ve never had many people looking at me and chatting. My heart is beating fast. Feels like it is going to burst out of my chest in any second if they keep looking at me. I can feel my face getting warm. What should I do? Why are they just staring at me? I should ask a servant or the penguin man what’s happening. But I have been told to sit still.

“Right this way, my lords,” he says while motioning his hands towards me.

Two boys, so beautiful, identical to each other appear before me holding hands. Twins? They seem to be my age but way more well kept than I. Why are they just standing there? Immediately the room goes silent.

“A toy so precious and rare, perfect for my two perfect sons. Enjoy this gift you’ve been bestowed with and may you continue to be blessed with many more years. Happy birthday, boys.”

“Happy Birthday!” the whole room cheers.

“Gift? What gift? What is going on?” questions flood my mind.

“Hmm,” they both say while looking at every little detail on me.

“A rare beauty, isn’t she?”

“Yes, indeed she is.”

“I love it! Thank you, father!” say the twins followed with a tight hug squeezing me from both sides at the same time. I can’t breathe. I want to leave.

“Now, now, be careful. A doll like her isn’t so easy to maintain and definitely won’t be easy to fix if you break her. Always share and be nice, you two.”

“Yes, father,” the twins respond, then release me.

“Please tell me, what is happening? Why do you all address me as a doll? Are we playing pretend? Please tell me! I want to go home!” I cry to the twins.

“Father gifted you to us so we can play, of course,” says one.

“What?”

“Yes, that means you’ll be staying with us so we can play everyday!” says the other.

“It’s going to be so much fun!” They cheer while holding mine and each other’s hands,swinging.

“But what about my mama and papa? Will I see them? I want to see mama and papa!” I say, panicked.

“Hm? Toys don’t have mamas or papas. Silly doll” they giggle.

“No, no, no, no, this can’t be. Please! Take me home to mama and papa!” I beg on my knees to the penguin man. He smiles, picks me up carefully, and sits me back on the throne, saying, “Things change, my dear. Be a good doll, and you’ll be well.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I want to leave but I can’t move. My body disobeys my wishes. Already, I’ve fallen into my role. Mama. Papa.

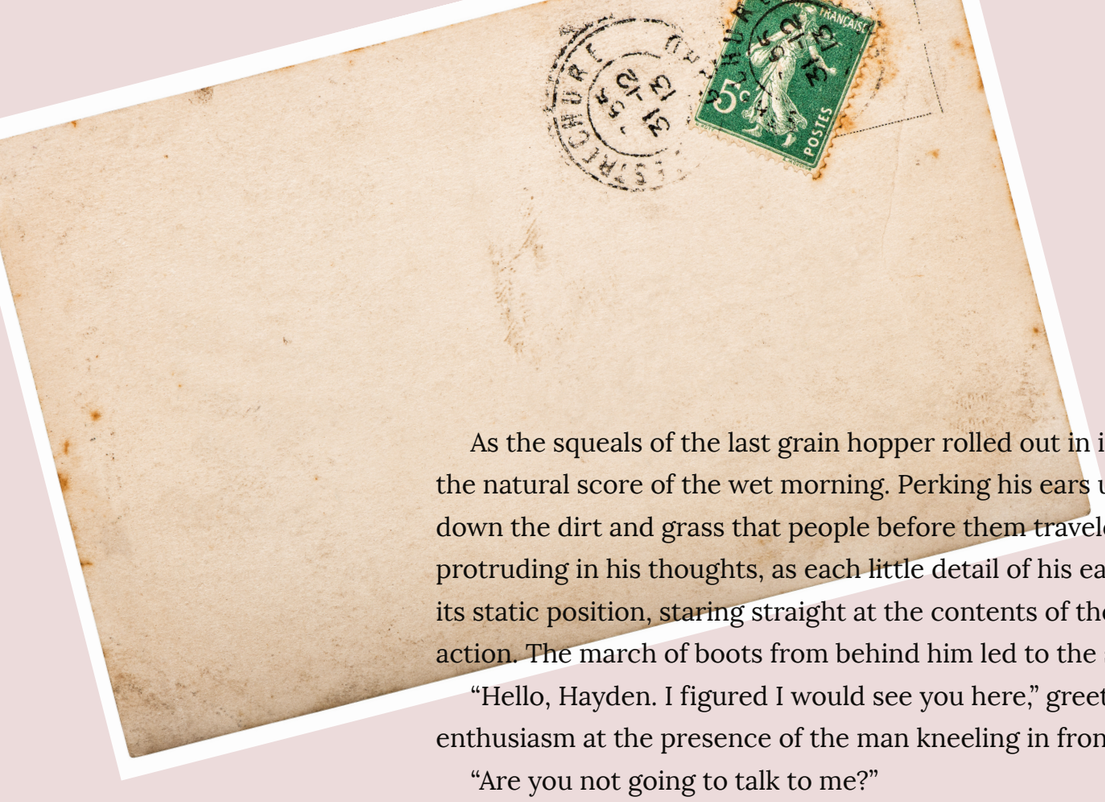
The soft rumble of the railroad across the street could be heard over everything else, with only the faint and comfortable songs of the mourning doves ringing out in protest. Upon the damp Minnesota soil flanked above the morning, dew was a young gravestone still displaying some of its original complexions compared to its counterparts in the field, as moss and dirt have begun to overrun their contents. Despite its new appearance, a fate like its peers had slowly eroded the pure, bright gray color the small, personal monument first had when it was first laid four years ago. A combination of residential snow and rainfall had stained the bright gray of its implementation, leaving it a moody gray, indifferent to the sunlight that peaked through the morning clouds. A combination of moss and attrition had obscured the last name of the eternally resting, yet Hayden knew the exact steps to find the small gravestone without fail. The graveyard itself was not terribly big; neither was the church, for that matter, so it was never a challenge to find his destination.

Hidden away in his jeans pocket, peeking out at the edge to give his overall shabby look a slight hint of yellow, was the same gift he brought every year to the grave: A small box wrapped in sheets from the yellow pages that he never used. Navigating the small grass field to avoid sinking his shoe into a small pool of mud, he reached the small work of stone he intended to see. Kneeling down on one of his knees and dirtying his jeans with smears of green and light brown, he wiped the moss off as best as he could, feeling the friction of the small hills and valleys residing on the grave to reveal the name Olivia Federau engraved upon it. Hayden remained still for a few seconds, intently gazing into its features as though it replayed the memories of days long passed. He subconsciously took note of the chips where the white paint used to be, the name fading away with the melting snow, and the image of the cross inside of a heart above the name being faintly visible anymore. Squinting his eyes proved to be the only tangible way for one to catch the outlines of it. There had been a designated member of the church whose duty it was to maintain their small graveyard, but routinely Hayden would see her absent. He believed that, in the middle of some autumn night, she drove off to another part of the country in search of herself, and the church never bothered to find someone else to clean the graves in her place.

Mother's Day
by Brendan Gauss

When Hayden broke contact with the weathered white letters, he reached into his pocket to pull out the box. Evening out a small section of dirt, he silently placed the gift down in front of the deceased, slowly unpeeling the pages as he did so to reveal the contents.

"It's the chocolate you like," he started in a mumble, opening the box to reveal a small candy bar from Dresden, coated in a yellow and red wrapper that crumpled slightly at the touch. "Sorry I couldn't get the bigger bar as usual. Prices went up, and I just couldn't afford to spend that much. I'm sorry." He split the bar in half as he apologized, greedily sinking his teeth into a small section. He had not eaten all day, and the strains that pounded his skull were pleading for him to devour the bar whole. He gave a ravenous look at the second untouched section in his other hand, allowing his mind to wander as the soft texture and rich flavor danced in his mouth. He quickly placed the candy on the ground in front of the grave before the thinking of his stomach trumped the thinking of his brain. Just as he did, the low roaring rumble of a train, which he could hear faintly but never acknowledged in his trek, was inescapably loud. These events occurred at a sporadic pace during his visits, with some going very peacefully while others had two to three trains passing through within an hour. When these goliaths did pass through, Hayden always reluctantly sighed and waited for them to pass before he spoke again, seeing no point in continuing his one-sided conversation when he could not hear himself think.



As the squeals of the last grain hopper rolled out in its constant struggle against the steel rail, Hayden heard a foreign noise amongst the natural score of the wet morning. Perking his ears up just a tad, Hayden found it was the sound of a pair of boots slowly walking down the dirt and grass that people before them traveled upon, creating a path by their feet alone. Despite this new sensation protruding in his thoughts, as each little detail of his earlier thinking cracked as the tombstones cracked, he did not swivel his head from its static position, staring straight at the contents of the grave. He knew who was approaching him without needing to perform such an action. The march of boots from behind him led to the sound of a jacket scraping against itself before it halted just behind him.

“Hello, Hayden. I figured I would see you here,” greeted the person behind him in a dull voice, not invoking any noticeable surprise or enthusiasm at the presence of the man kneeling in front of the grave. Hayden nodded in acknowledgment, keeping his view of the grave.

“Are you not going to talk to me?”

Hayden remained silent. Allowing a sigh to escape his lips, the person behind Hayden walked to his side, folding his arms behind their back while looking at the grave intently. From the corner of his eyes, Hayden noticed that a small, cylinder object was being fiddled with in the person’s hands, moving from one to the other with a nervous yet well-hidden fervor.

"What’s that?” he asked calmly, taking a bit of chocolate from the bar. The man beside him chuckled slightly, bringing his arms to the front of him as he did so.

“This, Hayden, is my gift to Mom,” he explained, attempting to maintain his smile when asked about the bottle, but faltered as their explanation came to light. “I remember hearing once that mom liked to have some gin in the night after dinner, so I thought she might be able to slip some in from under the Lord’s nose.”

“Alex, who said that?” Hayden looked over at the man beside him, recognizing him.

His brother hadn’t changed much since he arrived home from that far-off country in seventy-two. He still wore the army green jacket provided to him with a Snoopy patch on his right sleeve, holding onto it as though it were the only jacket he would ever get in his life. Looking deeper into his face, Hayden detected that the bags under his eyes grew worse, sagging as though they were wilting plants. The facial hair that sprouted ever since he returned attempted to conceal his weary nature. All it did was enhance the attrition that this soul suffered.

“Well, I got a letter from a friend of hers while I was out, and she said that she saw her drinking gin once after you all had some food, so I sort of put two and two together.”

“Oh, I’m …. I don’t think that was gin,” Hayden rubbed the back of his neck in agitation, averting his eyes away from Alex’s, wishing not to see any form of complacent misery in them. “She usually had tea or something along those lines. I can’t recall any time she had gin.”

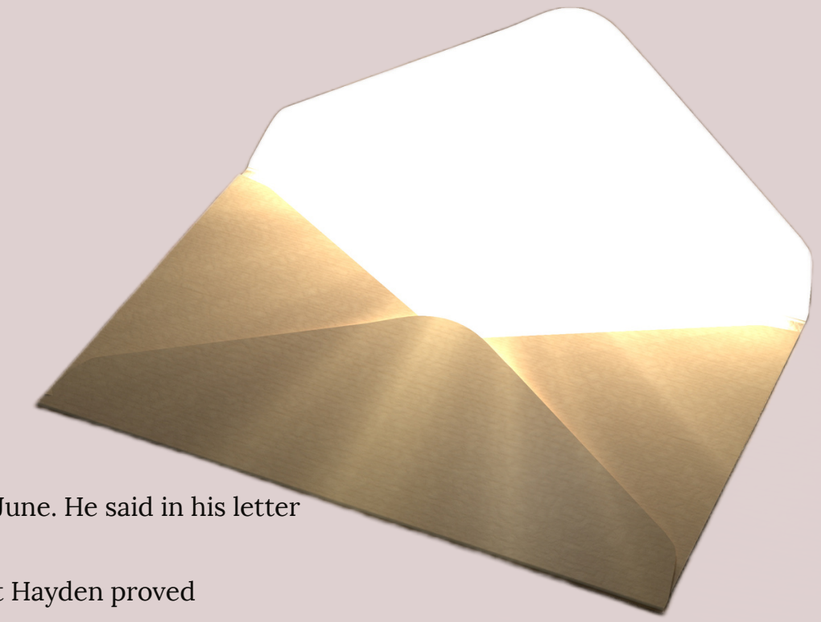
Alex tried to make a counterpoint, no doubt how she used to drink gin before he got deployed, that Hayden was too young to remember it. Instead, he fumbled with his words, ultimately conveying nothing. In lieu of speech, he opened the bottle of gin, taking a sip of it before proclaiming:

“Here’s to you, Mother. We didn’t deserve the kindness your soul gave us. May it find peace in someplace greater than us.”

Alex fell onto the floor of the wet plains, not caring if the mud and grass tainted his trousers in the process. As he did so, he moved his arm over to Hayden, offering him a sip of the drink with a small shake. The latter shifted in annoyed perplexity pushing away Alex’s bottle with a shaking head. The two allowed the next few minutes to be characterized by a somber ambiance, allowing the soft breeze to blow through their clothes and the bird’s calls to quiet their breathing.

Hayden quickly finished his side of the chocolate bar with reproachful attention, finding the bar to have grown bitter with each bite. Alex took another swig of the gin in his hands, allowing two massive gulps to funnel down his system. He groaned at the rush of his drink, screwing the cap back on the stainless-steel bottle before asking mellowly: “Did you happen to get a letter a little while ago from old Uncle George?”

“No, I haven’t,” replied Hayden, crushing his hand into a fist, forming a ball of the now empty candy wrapper he brought and shoving it in his pocket. “What was it about?”



“Not much. Just saying hi from Bismarck and inviting us to dinner there around June. He said in his letter that he will give you the hundred bucks he owes you if you do come.

Don’t think he’s forgotten about that.” Alex wagged his finger in a comedic way, but Hayden proved unrelenting in his unwillingness to meet his brother.

“Tell him it’s all right. I don’t care about the money anymore.”

“Why don’t you write to him then?” Alex looked over in sudden contempt as though his previous jovial manner was an attempted facade.

It wasn’t the first time Hayden had gotten interrogated with this question, and in every instance of its emergence, he could not think of an answer to write to him for, or not to write to him for that matter. He had no ill will towards his uncle, for he did appreciate him but felt no desire or urge to write to him as Alex proposed. In the end, he reluctantly sighed and said, “I’ll get to it sometime. There’s just a lot going on at the university.”

“I see,” was all Alex replied. Placing the gin on the tombstone, he picked himself up, wiping his hand across his bottom to clear away any grass that might have clung to his jeans. He turned around, uneager to make for the exit along the path. Yet, something held him within his place, resulting in him appearing aimless and confused as he stepped towards the gateway of the small cemetery before stuttering in his second step. Alex looked back at Hayden and the grave. His face contorted with a mix of hiddenly built-up anger and sorrow as his eyes grew wild. His hands balled into fists before being washed away into pity as soon as it came. Eventually, after about ten seconds of this, he marched back to Hayden and asked, in a demeaning tone: “Why did you not send me that letter?”

“Must we do this every time we meet?” Hayden asked behind a bitter chasm in his stomach. Despite the tone in his voice and the contents of his question, he knew that it was inevitable that the familiar wounds would create an intense atmosphere every time the two of them met. He wished Alex had forgotten it one morning so the two could speak amicably together as they did before. However, the topic of the letter would arise without fail, whether in morbid curiosity or outright rage. Every time it was brought up in discussion, Hayden would give the same excuses for its absence. He reasoned that Alex had studied this reality in-depth when gazing upstream, as he refused Hayden the opportunity to use it.

“Yes, we’re talking about this. You’re aware how much I’ve cared for this letter.”

“I know, Alex,” replied Hayden in annoyance, lifting himself off the ground as he did so. “I’m fully aware of how much you care for this letter. I remember the last time, the time before that, and the other twenty-seven times you’ve asked me the same question. What is there left to say?”

“You know well that you’re full of it, Hayden. I’ve asked the same question time and time again, and every time the answer is different. ‘Oh, it must have gotten lost in the mail,’ or ‘The military must have taken it away.’ We both know that’s not true. Why don’t you just tell me? Are we not brothers after all?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I have no idea why that letter never got to you. I sent it. Upon my word, I sent it to you. Yet, you keep acting as though I’m some form of a traitor to the family. I would never withhold any information from you.” His voice wavered, betraying his irritation as he belted this out across the silent plain morning, growing more animated as the confrontation continued. Despite his protests against Alex’s claims, it was evident that deep within his orderly structure a bereaved truth was hidden among the stacks of paper and books that occupied his daily life. It scratched the inner tomb of a body like a rat climbing a wall for food, twisting, and contorting his insides whilst Alex was by his side.

His peer remained silent for a few seconds, allowing Hayden’s explanation to run around through his head with a growing disgruntled stare.

“You know I don’t buy that, right?”

“Of course, you don’t. You never accept the reasoning. Why are you so steadfast in this belief of yours that I, or anyone else, did something?”

“Because I know something happened,” Alex exclaimed, throwing his hands out in annoyance. “There were letters my crew got that were a week old, and I sat there every week, reading your letters, unaware that something was being deliberately hidden from me by my family. Do you think I didn’t notice it?” He reached down for the gin again but knocked it over with a clank against the concrete tombstone, allowing its contents to stream onto the ground below. Alex rushed to salvage what could be left of the gin but grew disappointed when not much remained. Releasing a string of curses under his breath, he quickly drank what he managed to recover in the bottle. He allowed the bottle to slip from his fingers and back onto the grave when he had rapaciously finished, wiping his sleeve as he did so.

“Can I ask you something about the letter, at least?” Alex walked over to the other side of the grave to meet Hayden’s gaze. “There would be no point in lying since Uncle George told me already and gave what we agreed would have been in that letter. I just want to know.”

“You truly want to know,” Hayden asked after a few moments of reflection, pulling his arm in anticipation of this moment. He knew it would come eventually, but he dreaded the outcome. His lips flickered a smile, either out of surprise or gloomy shock that Uncle George had revealed his unsavory knowledge to his brother.

Alex nodded, leaning over a small bit in anticipation of his brother’s capitulation to his siege, unwilling to allow anything to compromise what his brother had to say.

After a reluctant sigh, Hayden started explaining, all while running his hand through his hair. “The letter was about the money you would receive when you returned home … or if you did at all. Dad said he wanted to give you two hundred and fifty dollars when you got home so you could get yourself back on your feet. His idea was that you would get a job and apartment somewhere in the twin cities or Milwaukee, somewhere close here. When he said this, he pulled out an envelope and told me to give it to you when I felt necessary, seeing as he might not have been here to give you the money himself. I wasn’t sure what to make of it all; I was still relatively young, so I took it, feeling a bit shaken at the heavy thought. I intended to keep that promise. I really did. But …” Hayden grew hesitant in his words, clearing his throat to cobble together more time to think. “I fell on tough times. The cost of my dorm went up suddenly. I had nowhere to turn in town. All the hotels and such were too expensive to live in without constant worry, and the ones that I could were too far, about across the town. I didn’t want to use the money meant for you as long as I could. I sold my car for a cheaper one just to make it by the next month somewhere in ‘71. I was 19 and didn’t know what to do. I had about two months left before the semester ended. Deadlines for the next term were coming, and I didn’t have the money. I was too afraid to ask Dad, God knows why. So, I…” Hayden coughed, pulling his hand away from his hair to squeeze the wrapper in his pocket. “…well, you could probably put the pieces together. I kept what was left with me when I went to Dad’s for the summer down in Colorado. There were about thirty to thirty-five dollars. If you want it, I’ll be more than happier to give it to you, plus whatever I can spare.”

He looked back up to meet his brother's gaze with somber repentance. Throughout his testimony, Alex had never changed his air, never interrupting with a question or argument. He merely stood there carrying what he had been striving to get for years. Yet, hidden within his stoic character, Hayden could tell his brother was unsatisfied with this answer in his dead eyes and conflicted eyebrows rising up and down. Something was demanding an answer for a conclusion that neither he nor Hayden knew of. Shaken from the mental attrition that deteriorated his impassive nature while looking at his brother, Hayden averted his gaze back to the headstone. The wind blew across the plain with a bit more force after this small conversation, forcing the man first at the cemetery to pull on his jacket harder for warmth. He looked back with a quick glance over his shoulder towards his brother. He remained unfazed by the change in weather, still adorning himself with the same expression that had scared his brother's gaze away.

This brief silence of broken tranquility was interrupted when, through the gusts and the rustle of leaves on branches, Alex silently muttered, "So, that was the secret you kept from me for years? Robbing me of money like a Raskolnikov?"

While Hayden ran the question through his head, he quietly pulled his hand out of his pocket and folded it into a ball with his free one, looking deeper and deeper into the cracks of the gravestone, wishing not to picture the bitter face that his brother gave him even with him behind. He had done this before his deployment over a whole host of petty matters that seemed trivial then and now. Hayden had always attempted to repel any genuine negative emotions that he could experience from these scoldings, since he knew Alex would forget about it within a few hours, sometimes even minutes afterward. Yet, the sinking feeling that flung his heart into the depths of a raging Great Lake grew stronger with every passing second.

"Look, it doesn't even matter at this point. I have someplace to stay and a job since I got back. I have some money, though I will happily take those thirty-or-so dollars when we go back next. I won't tell the old man. There's no point."

"Ok, that can be arranged."Hayden turned just a little to see his brother again, only peering into his right eye. "Maybe sometime in the late summer or fall?"

The stoicism that filled Alex's gaze before remained evident with his arrow-straight posture and idle expression. Yet he could tell that hidden beneath the exterior of firm acceptance laid a man who was trying to repel something that Hayden couldn't see. Alex tried to say something, but a force within his spirit held him motionless, resulting in his mouth agape in mental friction. He took a step back, not acknowledging his brother, who now looked thoroughly at him with a mixture of confusion and concern and turned to see the train tracks of the valley, only broken up by the trees and church in front of him. Hayden noticed his hands balled into fists again in stress as Alex took another step with haggard breath towards the valley. It was only when Hayden broke his complacent stature and rose to meet his brother, gripping him by the shoulder for support, did he finally snap out of his trance-like state, looking back at Hayden with pleading eyes.

"That's not what I was talking about," Alex suddenly blurted out. His voice betrayed his expression, allowing a sliver of hurt to seep through his rough voice. "That wasn't the letter I was talking about."

His younger brother released his hand from its grip in sheer bafflement, not being able to think or say anything other than a single question: "What?"

"I don't care about some money Dad had set aside for me when I was gone back then. It's of no real use to me now. Hayden," Alex looked directly at him, shifting his body to meet his eyes to maintain contact with his brother's soul. "Why did no one tell me Mother died when I was gone? What was the point of that?"

It was as though a clap of thunder roared through the valley, forcing the two to separate their gaze in equal parts shock and grief.

"I . . . I had no idea, Alex," Hayden made a quick motion to wrap his brother into a tight hug, forgoing the arguments and accosting's in a sheer rush of sadness.

Alex brushed his advances of saddened affection off with a scowl, breathing heavily as the wind picked up again. He investigated his brother's befuddlement again while the first signs of tears began to form on the base of his bottom eyelids. Alex struggled with himself, trying to retain what little fortitude remained from his battered and torched form before continuing.

“Well, someone had an idea of not telling me. I just know it. It was either a massive coincidence that not a single member of my family, extended or not, sent a letter mourning her. Every other member of my platoon did if they had one. I remember ….” He stopped himself to catch the breath that had worsened in its increase, nearly causing him to keel over in weariness before going on. “I remember comforting Myatt in a ditch outside a village after he learned his dad died of a heart attack, only for him to die from a sniper ten minutes later. We never found who shot him, but we damn well tried. Clyde knew about his mother’s death but held strong; Jerome did when his sister died; Hell, even Joey -that beast of a man- was allowed to know and held firm, even if he didn’t know much in this world. He marched with us until the very end. Why were they allowed to know that, but I wasn’t?” Alex’s pleas were to no one in particular, merely thrown around like the leaves in gusts of wind. His brother could tell that, at least partially, the somber inquiry was directed at him. Yet, in spite of the emotions that had buried themselves in the aged and coarse skin of Alex seeping through the cracks and wounds into a flurry of rage, Hayden remained speechless, only murmuring apologies and prayers as he listened and looked at his older brother.

“Well?”

“I never knew, Alex. I swear to God I never knew,” Hayden stammered out in a rush. “If I had known that no one told you the news, I would have in a heartbeat.”While he tried to maintain sincerity in his claim, as it was truthful, upon reflection on the entire ordeal, Hayden would admit only to himself in quiet gloom that it was not entirely true. Doubt was always on his mind when Alex was away. It lingered while he was going from town to town on Greyhound buses in search of work until he settled back home with his father, growing more in weight as time went on. The years dragged on, and though letters still made their way back from the jungles and deserts to home, that small flicker of doubt pertaining to his own abilities always sparked when they did. Even at this moment, his fears were evident -he assumed it was in the look in his eyes and his posture- as Alex carried on.

“Well, why didn’t you do it anyway? I know you’re lying.”

“I told you the truth. Had I known, I would have told you, I promise.”

“Would you have told me when I was in Vietnam?” Alex’s tone fell to a dark mutter, refusing to look at his brother with a looming head. Hayden went to speak, but his will refused these attempts, wishing to articulate what he said next the best he could as not to let the last structure of their relationship crumble with the force of a howitzer shell. His vocal cords ached with every defense he gave, only allowing the pit the bottomless chasm which expanded upon its every growing maw to sink him further. Hayden realized that attempting to hold what he honestly believed within the confines of himself would thrash him more than any tirade that Alex unleashed would do, slowly tearing him down until the burden of thought wore him into a husk of a man.

With a defeated sigh, he spoke, standing as straight as he could.“I didn’t want you to tell you that mom died because I was afraid you would …” He found that the tail-end of his thoughts refused to leave his body on its own, forcing him to attempt squeezing it out with every bit of his body. His fingertips were growing cold, causing him to shiver. It was the first time the late spring chill ran through his body with the harsh stabbings of a thousand knives.

“You didn’t want me to do what?” Alex persisted, stepping forward with conflict in every aspect. It was as though, at least to Hayden, that the true nature of this mystery ran over his present anxious anger and bitterness, forcing him to look pitiable in his rage.

It was when looking at his brother’s face, in its years of questioning and anguish, did Hayden suddenly exclaimed with saddened exhaustion:

“Because I didn’t want you to die because of it. All right, that’s what. I didn’t want you to hear the news and just walk out into some jungle out there and never come back.”

The moment ended as quickly as it began, with both brothers staring intently at one another in collective shock. Neither moved nor uttered a word as there was not much to be said. Hayden rationalized that no amount of apologies or self-loathing could mend the wounds this singular comment created. In truth, he had been hiding this foreboding of his for years, going back to the moment the life left his mother’s eyes in whatever room she died in -he could not bear to be with her when it happened. It was something he believed he would only reveal to a greater being than him upon the plains of some inhuman land, where his imperfections would wash away in a flurry.

The wind began to grow worse, blowing harder from where the train tracks were, causing the jackets of the two to flap around. The two brothers remained motionless, unaware that this natural force was assaulting their senses, as they were too focused on each other. Hayden was not sure what to make of his emotions at that point; they conflicted with themselves so much that only a feeling of stagnant grayness permeated from his head to his toes, which had begun to curl up for warmth. In that same vein, he could not decipher what to make of Alex's reaction, as it was mute. It had been a mixture of the emotions that both held during the entire ordeal. However, a new one lingered on the edges of Alex's eyes -which with the dried-up, small tears from earlier- that Hayden refused to admit was there until denial proved no longer viable: A sense of betrayal.

As Hayden was thinking all this, Alex suddenly shifted, moving his body away from his brother towards the gate, where a hitherto unmentioned car sat. He began to walk to it, covering his eyes with his hand to block the harsh wind away from his vision, acknowledging its existence. He made for his car, a small coupe he got after a year's work, but stopped, turning back to Hayden with a glum look. He said nothing; he made no signal for him to come over; he did not even seem interested in his company at all. The most he could muster was shaking his head at everything.

As time went on and Hayden grew, he came to understand why Alex did what he did. He thought that he would have done the same if he were in his brother's boots on that cold, gray, and wet Mother's Day. But watching from her grave as Alex slowly walked away, he was unwilling to admit any fault, feeling as though he acted rationally and that his thoughts were the best with what he knew. Alex made no intention of opening his car door, instead trotting towards the railroad tracks. He appeared to have no real destination in mind, though Hayden did not give chase, not even uttering a word of worry to his brother, feeling as though all caution or reason for such an action was lost between the two.

When looking back at the headstone, which was almost forgotten about during the course of their argument, the young man found the wrapper from his pocket had fallen out at some point, ending up on the grave. Hayden did not try to remove it; too much was plaguing his mind to focus on a small piece of trash. Instead, he watched in stillness as it fought the breeze, pinned on the gravestone itself before it was harvested up by the wind and carried off into the plains.

Fluttering in the air, it slowly made its way into the lush green grass, clashing with the gray sky until it was out of Hayden's sight, swallowed into the ground with the remains of those who came before and those who will lay when the time comes.

Out from Underfoot
by Yusuf J. Benya

Page 1:

Panel 1:
Fallen leaves and the darkness is almost tangible. The stars shone brightly, casting a soft light over the trees as they are changing their shade. The moon was hidden behind a thick layer of clouds, casting an eerie glow over the trees.

Panel 2:
Panel 2 is at the center of panel 1 Youngish rich dark man with a gaunt frame, in dark clothes covered in blood, holding a very beat-up, black-headed hatchet, sitting on top of a hacked-up deer corpse, wiping blood from his mouth, satisfied.

Page 2:

Panel 1:
One man Hank and one-woman Sharon, dressed in thick jackets with fur hoods, flashlights, and backpacks, were moving slowly due to thick grass and branches, walking side by side, probing with their lights in the dark fall forest. The cold makes their breath kind of visible.
Hank: Look, whatever you want to show me is probably great, but we need to get back soon. I don't like being this far from the road.
Sharon: Didn't say it wouldn't take much time, but it's worth it.
Thought bubble, Hank: This girl can never just be simple. I wish she would hurry up.

Panel 2:
Small isolated panel of Hank's foot getting stuck in undergrowth and vines

Panel 3:
Hank turns his flashlight down into the vines and roots, making a face as he tries to pull his leg out. Sharon walking next to him tries to step over the vines he stepped into.
Hank: Can we, at the very least, go back to my truck so we can drive there?
Sharon: We're not far.
Thought bubble, Sharon: It got dark way faster than I thought. I hope we can still see the small waterfall.

Panel 4:
A look of panic seizes Hank's face as Sharon gets farther ahead of him as he's trying to wrench his foot from the vines.

Panel 5:
Hank pulls free from the rest of the roots as he rushes forward to try and keep up with Sharon as she steps back. She squints, extending her hand out with her flashlight, turning to Hank.
SFX: Clack, clack, clack, clack, clack
Sharon: Do you hear that ?

Panel 6:
Sharon holds onto him as she points her light ahead. Hank next to her puts his hand on her shoulder and flashes the light in the same direction. She seems concerned and a little afraid.
Sharon: May-mmaybe we should go back to the truck.

Panel 7:
Sharon practically jumps onto Hank with a short scream. As she does this, Hank takes steps backward, his eyes almost shooting out of his head. Both of them are shining their lights into the forest around them.
SFX: CCCCracKKKK
Sharon: What was that!!

Page 3:

Panel 1:
POV redirects to the vampire, standin and stretching out, away from the body, gripping a hatchet slick with blood, the corpse at his feet painted red, blood, pooling off a green tarp onto a pile of sticks.

Panel 2:
Vampire leans forward, putting his hand with the hatchet across his stomach, the other on his chain, looking down at the body. Frowning with sharp, bold eyes at the corpse.

Panel 3:
The vampire looks to the right, squinting lightly, his frown turning into a scowl, almost snarling, as he unfolds his hands, letting them fall to their sides.

Page 4:

Panel 1:
He slowly moves away from the body. Squinting heavily, his pupils extend, covering his iris.

Panel 2:
His head snaps away from the corpse to his right. He flexes his fingers on the hatchet.

Panel 3:
POV shifts from tree to tree, zooming past to see two people, one man, and one woman, dressed in thick jackets, flashlights, and backpacks, moving slowly due to thick grass and branches.

Panel 4:
The vampire's eyes flick quickly to the corpse as he hunches over the ground, then back to the direction of the people in the distance. His mouth opens. His lengthy, fleshly tongue scarcely flashes out, licking his lips.

Panel 5:
The vampire, standing straight, rolling his shoulders and head and with his eyes openly scanning, holds the bloody hatchet out across his breast with menacing determination.

Panel 6:
As a single image, the bloody hatchet falls to the ground, blood droplets falling off it.

Page 5:

Panel 1:
Vampire leaps from his stance and strides through the trees. His eyes glow and trail behind him as he races towards the pair. The lights of the pair grow closer as the vampire moves through the dark autumn forest trees, the trees blurring in together.

Panel 2:
He crouches and jumps into a tall, slim tree lacking many branches, lashing out his hands to reach for the tree itself,breaking branches.

Panel 3:
His little, spindly bloody hands grab a slim tree, his fingers digging into it, removing the bark along with branches and leaves sending them furiously to the ground.

Panel 4:
The jacketed pair's faces are flushed and panicked. Their flashlights move in multiple directions sharply, as they move backward slowly. They're holding onto one another, searching for the source of the sounds.

Page 6:

Panel 1:
The vampire clinging to the tree arches his back, raises his head, opens his mouth, expels air from his lungs, and wails, (sounding like a rabid dog). His fangs' scissor-sharp blades, pointing outward, are bared, flashing against his tongue.
SFX: RRRREWWWELLL
Description caption: The vampire's face is a blur of frenzied emotions. Just as his voice is cast into the darkness, it is a wave of terror and primal nonsense that belongs to the realm of beasts.

Panel 2:
The vampire turns to see the pair tripping over themselves alongside the roots, undergrowth, and brush in the opposite direction. Their flashlights are flailing in every direction, as they run in panic.

Panel 3/4:
The vampire releases the tree alongside broken branches and leaves. Panel 4 is seen within panel 3 as the vampire lands in a crouching stance, eyes open as he lands covered in sticks, mud, and leaves, and intensely frowning as he fails.

Panel 5:
The vampire stands up, his brow furrowed in the muck. Still heavily frowning, he shakes off some sticks and leaves from his pants, lightly dusting leaves and bark off himself.

Panel 6/7:
POV changes. Hank and Sharon run with frantic wild eyes, grabbing at little branches as they run through the darkened forest, fumbling and grabbing into each other as they go. Hank is somewhat ahead of the woman, who turns her head to look behind her. Sharon runs and grabs onto Hank with frenzied desperation as she looks back, seeing a faint shadowed body with the clattering of sticks and branches around it.

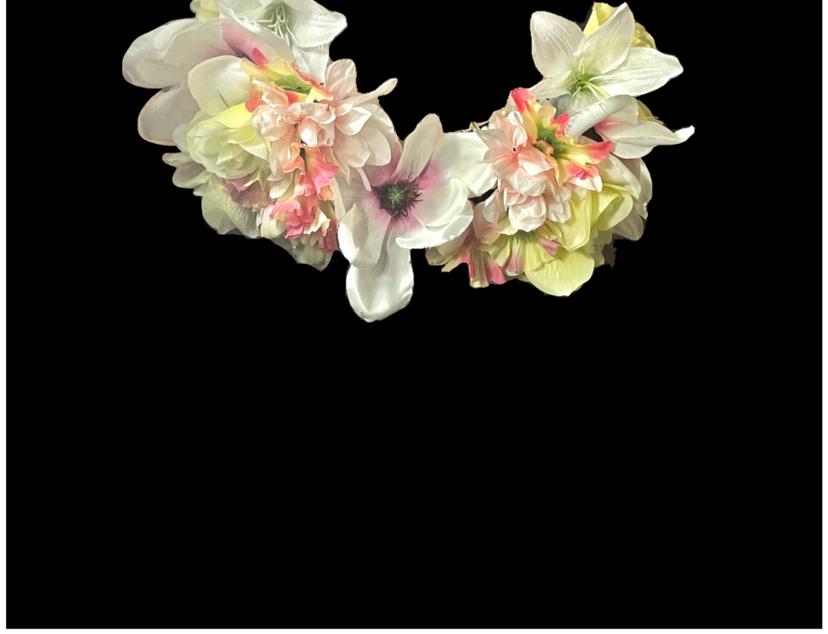
Page 7:

Panel 1:
The vampire turns behind him to see if the pair have completely gone, using his hand to cup his ear in that direction. Exhaustion is plain on his face, his eyes half open.

Panel 2/3:
Panel 2 bleeds into panel 3, with the vampire crouching to the ground in a dynamic running stance, dirty muddy hands slipping out of his eyes. (Blurry lines denote transition.) He's standing next to his hatchet and boots the corpse once again with his hands on his hips, appearing grim while seeming annoyed beyond belief.

Panel 4:
The vampire crouches to grab the hatchet, placing it in his teeth as he grabs the tarp, disregarding the still-wet blood, and kicking sticks and rocks out of the way.

To be continued in Spring 2024 Issue...



MC’s Fashion Club

The days of fast fashion are over! Sustainability is the new hot fashion trend according to the inspiring designers, models, and stylists at Montgomery College. Montgomery College’s own Fashion Club has worked hard on a fashion line created by upcycling clothes into runway couture.

GRAPE CLUB®
GRAPE CLUB®

MC's Fashion Club is a place where young designers, stylists, photographers, and creators all come together with a common passion for fashion.The club is a hub for creativity, pulling inspiration from music, movies, and one another. Students from all types of backgrounds embrace diversity and their shared love for fashion.

Fashion Club has room for all types of talents such as photography, journalism, management, makeup artistry, and much more. Inspiration can come in many different forms like how designer Michelle Ibino, a first-year student, draws inspiration from classical music like "Carnival of the Animal" for her designs. Or how designer and first-year student Alyssa Bottenfield is inspired by the 80s fashion of hit TV show Stranger Things.

All the designs from this year's fashion line come from upcycling clothing by thrifting and recycling fabrics from their own closets to create new innovative designs. This year's spring line draws inspiration from early 2000s spring Versace collections that used silks, high slits, and florals. There is an important emphasis on sustainable fashion because in an economy run by fast fashion it's important to raise awareness of the harmful impacts of fast fashion. To add, sustainable fashion is just more fun!

Acknowledgements

Bringing the MC-Germantown student literary magazine, The Gryphon, back to life this year has been a joyful experience. With this in mind, we extend thanks and appreciation to everyone who helped make the literary magazine a success: The Gryphon team, including Anuradha Malarachi, Lara Gomez, Abigail Ott, Nana Ewusie, and Killian Sibug. Most importantly, thanks to the students who submitted their writing and art!