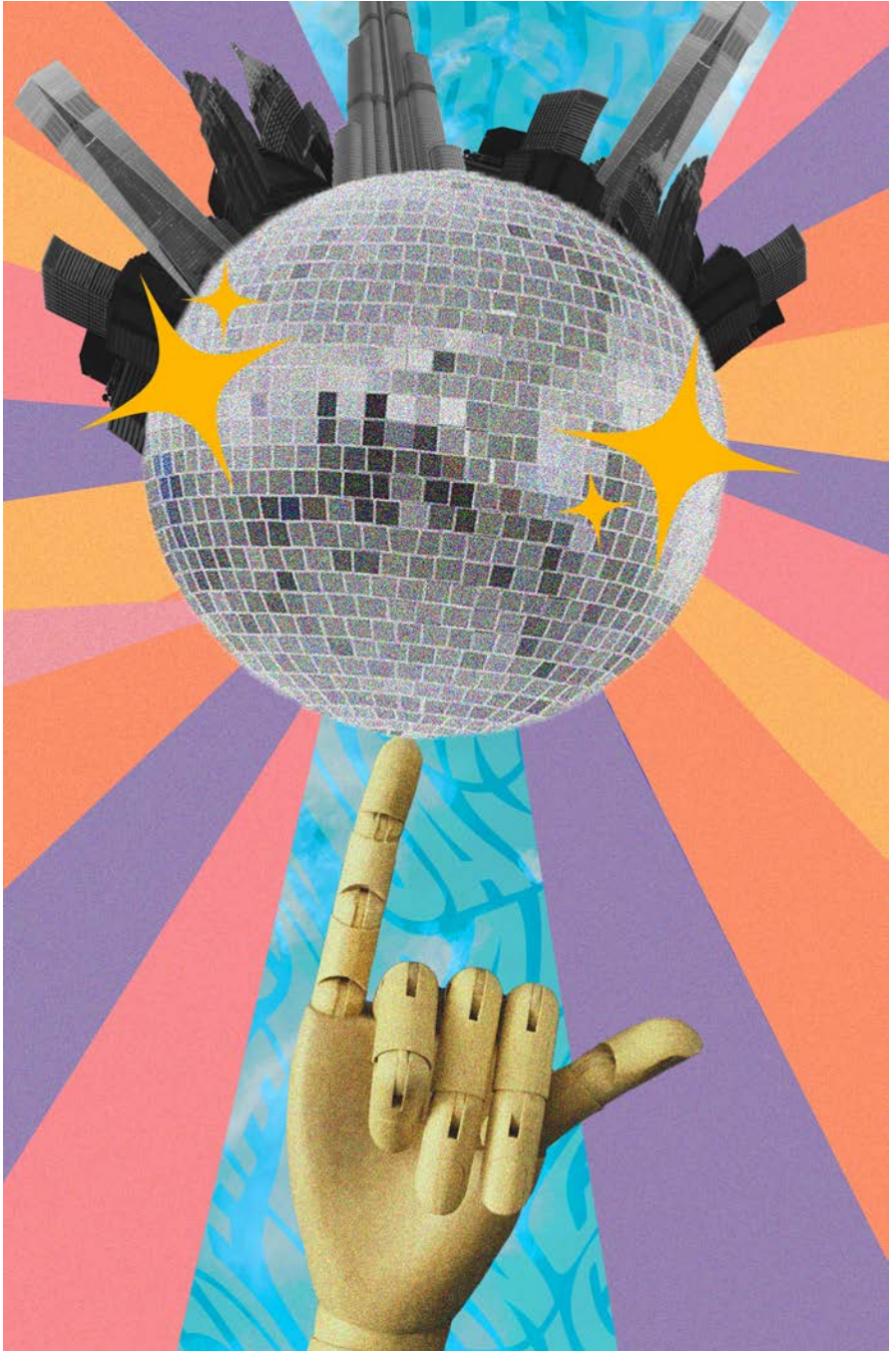


THE TRIBUTARY



Vol. XIV Spring 2023

THE TRIBUTARY

VOL. XXIV SPRING 2023

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By Olivia Farish

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Knock on the Door

Margaret Mooney

I loathe Halloween.

It has been years since I got pleasure from dressing up and begging stingy adults for their little whopper candies on a cold October night. I have never understood the cult obsession with this national holiday. To me, it is just an excuse for teens and adults to binge-eat candy, act like someone they're not, and behave inappropriately. On the day that we designate as Halloween, I typically sit at home and read romantic novels or watch comedic movies. The exact opposite of the typical Halloween traditions.

This year, I have chosen to bundle up on my couch and read *Pride and Prejudice*. I am in complete bliss. Until... a thunderous knock sounds at my front door. Where I live, a knock on the door is never a good thing. I slowly stand up, weary of who my mystery visitor might be. As I am approaching the door, I notice blue lights flashing in my driveway. I rush to the door and sling it open to discover two police officers standing on my dimly lit porch. They have looks of despair plastered on their faces. They deliver life altering news.

After a long pause, "Your sister has gone missing." I am instantly struck with a wave of nausea and misery.

I always hated Halloween.

Germs

Rebekah Kopp

She cannot believe she's let this happen.

Honestly, she knew better, and still, she's done it.

After so much diligent training and attention, she's screwed up.

She can't get home any faster. She weaves through traffic, surely and easily, careful to not touch the steering wheel with her right hand.

How stupid! She'd gone and pet the little dog without a second thought. The dog was so charming, a furry little thing with short legs and long ears. It reminded her of a dog she might want, if she was allowed to have one. But that could never be. Dogs carry too many germs, have too many things on and inside of them. That was a risk she was not willing to take.

Finally, she is home.

Leaping from her car, she snags her bag and keys with her left hand and bolts up the front steps to the door. She unlocks the door with one hand – she is quite good at using one hand nowadays – and rushes inside. In moments, she is at the sink with her sleeves rolled up, dousing her hands – paying careful attention to her right one – in soap. The bubbles pile on top of each other as she scrubs, making sure to cover every inch of the hand, even going up the forearm a bit just in case.

She should have never petted that dog. Who knows what bacterias and germs she has brought into her home now, what infections and diseases have already begun to crawl up

her hand and into her mouth, choking her as they go down, down, down, infiltrating every living part of her body, inside and out.

She is done washing her hands, but still, the fear remains. A shower would help.

Poetry Collection

Elwood Yu

Nuclear

New war on Earth's other side,
I hear Einstein's careless sigh.
"Ask not for which bomb I like.
No meaning when none survives."

My Generation

I ask what is life's meaning.
The crowd just keeps on dancing.
"Come and gulp down this bottle,
Since when we have tomorrow?"

Life

Let not the cheap pill and bullet,
Take away your precious heartbeat.
Live thy life with reason and care,
Build our future free of despair!

A Never Ending Clock

Genna Echols

Tick tick tock,
The deafening sound of a never ending
clock.
Humans wither,
Bodies rot,
But time never stops.
On and on we burn each day,
Working to trek through the nights
unscathed.
We fight, we dream, we even scream.
Time does not stop to listen to our
screams.
We cannot fight time because it will
always win.
Instead, we fight for the imprints we make.
They may never be seen.
They will not last.
But that can't be helped because time
never stops.
Tick tick tock,
The deafening sound of a never ending
clock.

Blackened and Burned

Genna Echols

The waves have crashed
Darkness falls
That beautiful bird
No longer calls
The tree branch fell
The tree is hollow
All this bitterness
Makes it hard to swallow
The shore has crumbled
The tree is black
The wind was screaming
The clouds lit with a crack
The smoke floated up
Into the sky
The darkness smiled
and waved goodbye

Photos by Genna Echols

Beauty in Flight



Holly at Home



A Goopy Snack



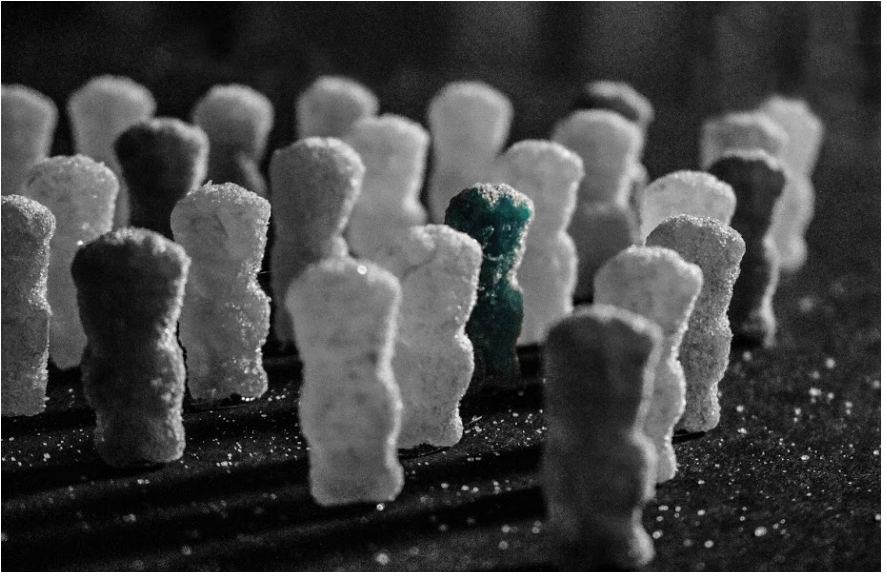
Fruity Variety



Eye of Autumn



Standing Out



Acrostic

Ashley King

God gives girls gems of grace,
Refinement remembered, racing resolution,
Always admiring abominable aesthetics.
Nursemaids never notice nigh news;
Demoting dandelions destroys daring.
Making more memories, mends my mind,
Others obey obscene occupancy.
Though tonight time takes the tailored tendency,
Her home honors hour's happiness,
Eradicating evil engagements, enduring ejection.
Reaper's reach removes relations, repetitively rehearsing,
"She's my new destination."

Are You Alive?

Emily Peters

I hear the echo
“Are you alive?”
“Are you alive?”
A question I cannot answer
For is a man alive if he breathes through his nose
Yet he walks alone in a dark corridor?
Tears streaming down his face
Feet go in tandem
Right, left, right left
Animation does make one alive?
A man whose head is full of nothingness
His soul a barren wasteland
Yet his eyes, still blinking
Thus, would being physically conscious make one
living?
No, my child, not truly
Nothing heartless and broken is ever truly alive
For when God breathed life into Adam
Filling his lungs with dust from the earth
Part of the machine went amiss
He was a speck of sorrow living amongst Eden
So God took a piece of Adam
Broken as it was
Creating a second, less tainted copy
There shone a light as bright as a thousand suns
With flowing locks and delicate pink skin
Suddenly, he was not so alone
Suddenly, he was truly alive

Consequences

Emily Peters

Brother, shall you look upon the glaze of my pupils
You may see the wither of my skin
The jagged lines that cut deep across my face
Thou shall show wisdom, but alas, suffering
I have suffered for millennium
A debt I owe for the weight of my sins
Salvation has come far too late
For the beast is buried deep within my soul
Nesting and feeding within my heart
A darkness that tends to its young
Savage pups that grow to feast on my mind
I have observed your depression
Seeing it when I stare at the pain encompassing your
expression
A broken look that further feeds this living hatred that grows
strong within me
If I could fall upon my knees and beg for you to slay it, then I
would do so eagerly
But alas, the dark creature is plump and healthy, consuming
what remains
Killing it would undoubtedly be the breaking of the shell that
is piecing me together like a delicate vase
Leave me, oh weary brother
Leave me to suffer for what I have done

I am Fine

Cassey Regrow

TW: Suicide

When diagnosed Bipolar, you quickly learn
That you will become Depression's best friend.

But for you
Depression will be that acquaintance you try to avoid
at all costs.
Like the kid at the lunch table all alone you thought
you would befriend.
But turns out she really is the odd kid.

You find out Depression gets you into trouble.
She tells you to stay in bed.
"You'll be fine if you stay there."
Your bosses don't seem to agree.

Because when you are diagnosed Bipolar
An old, short, bald man in a white coat will say,
"Here, take these Pills once a day for the rest of your
life."

Depression is the little devil on your shoulder whispering:
"IT WON'T HELP!!!
Just kill yourself now
before the Pills tell you to."

No one talks about what it's like to wake up in the hospital
after you try to kill yourself.

No one warns you that for the next six months,
Every time you drop something,
Because you have to retrain your hand on the basics of

holding things

No one tells you that every bounce,
Every thud reverberating back to you,
Will be a declaration of your failure.

But she will tell you.

Repeat after me: I--am--fine.

When you are diagnosed Bipolar, you learn
That you are Depression's best friend.

For you

Depression will be that friend that always hangs
around

Making all your old friends stay away more and more.
They just don't get her way of doing things.

You learn that Depression is a liar,
And the longer she hangs around,
You see the advantages of learning the habit.

Repeat after me: I--am--fine.

Sometimes Depression has more bad days than good.
She likes ripping the radio out of the truck dash
Because it played your favorite song
on the wrong day.

She likes making you aware
Of how grim life really is.

Repeat after me: I--am--fine.

She tells you to find God
But you have a terrible sense of direction
And most days you feel like God's afterthought.
That he keeps giving you directions to the House of
Existential Crisis.

No one talks about what its like to wake up in the hospital
after you try to kill yourself
For the third time.

No one tells you about the nurse that will not let you out
of her sight
For the next 72 hours
"Can I just piss in peace?"

I--Am--Fine.

Getting paid more than you've made at any job.
To stare at you with judgmental eyes.

Repeat-after-me.

The black stain of charcoal on your lips they forced
you to take.

The left side of your face sagging from the stroke you gave yourself.

I-AM-FINE!

Just trying to numb it all with

Here, take these Pills once a day for the rest of your life.

When you are diagnosed Bipolar

You recognize Depression as an old friend.

She taught you to lie like a pro but never lies to you.

“You look like shit.”

I--am--fine.

She showed you how to wear your hair in a ponytail,
hiding that you haven't brushed it in over a week.

She introduced you to Febreeze so people wouldn't notice

That you just haven't mustered up the energy to
shower in four days.

You and Depression go way back.

She loves chocolate and chain smoking.

The same movies put on replay just for the familiar
sound

And a good musical score with no words.

She has your back.

So when people torment you like a broken record
player

“You're so much prettier when you smile!”

“Why can't you just be happy?”

Depression will be there.

She will demand of them to put strings on your limbs.

Make you into a marionette.

Tell you how to be.

Show you how it's done right!

When you are diagnosed Bipolar

Repeat after me: I—am--fine.

Jessica Tran, 1999:
An Unfinished Collection

Jessica Tran

The Asian American Experience in a Small Town

They ask what I am and I wonder why it isn't obvious. I look up and realize I am the only one.

Place

I dream about returning to my mother's birthplace.
The place where my father took his first steps.
The place where my grandmothers spoke their first words.
The place where my grandfathers met their first loves.

I imagine myself with a community.
I speak their language.
I know their traditions because they are mine, too.
Everyone looks like me.

I am far away, my place grounded in American soil.

Tradition

We bought five shiny red apples since they were on sale. When we got home, my mom told me to give them to Buddha. I went to the living room and kneeled in front of our humble shrine. A small, golden statue frozen in a jovial laugh sat encased in a small glass box. In front of him, a ceramic plate waited to be filled with the treasure that is discounted fruit. My dad let me light the incense and told me to pray for fortune and good health. We each clasped a stick of incense in between our hands and bowed our heads. He murmured a short prayer, and I counted to three in my head as we waved our incense up and down, three times, weaving ribbons of smoke through the air. We leave them standing in a cup of ash, and I hope Buddha likes our offering of a pyramid of apples. My friend knocks on my door, and I know it's time to go to Wednesday night bible study. I see all of my friends and my classmates from school. We play games for the first hour, and then the youth pastor tells us how great and good Jesus is. We spend the rest of the night studying and memorizing bible verses, and I try my hardest because there's a prize at the end of the year for whoever memorizes the most. I go home and I pray to God before bed because that's what everyone says you need to do. I lay in bed and close my eyes, and I am afraid I won't be in the same heaven as my mom and dad.

Ode to Loneliness

Taylor Abernathy

Lovely is the one whose solitude
Is a welcome friend come round
Bringing with them an attitude
Of contentment, soaring abound.

Lovely is the silent serenity
Of a room with no chaotic voices
Giving an air of perfect purity
And no opinion of choices.

Lovely is the field of silence
Basking in its gentle glow
Making each one acquiesce
Solitude's soothing flow.

I know you may not see
What peace your love
Brings at once to me
But I am your dove.

I am in love with being lonely.

Book of Dreams

Taylor Abernathy

The pages and pages of ink rest within my dry palms. They scratch across my skin and sparks pop into the air, bringing the smell of smoke into focus. I have never felt such passion before. The book in my hands welcomes my parched touch.

The words guide me through my desires, they make me question every pleasure I have sought. I hear thoughtful praises of my triumphs, and whimpered moans at my failures. The pages seek my beginning, but the words know my end.

I peek inside the world they created for me. I have always known words to make me wish for the life I was not given, but now I have a way. This book is no ordinary book.

The Book of Dreams whisked me away that day. My body was there, my mind was elsewhere. I might as well have been dead, for I only lived inside my head!

Juno, My Love

Taylor Abernathy

O, how the great have fallen!
How the wicked have won!
Why did she send me to
The true scene of Hell
For revenge or renewal
Which did she choose?
O Juno, my love—
How could you?
She promised me forever
For us to be together
But now all I hear
Is a scathing demon
Worshipping at my ear
O Juno, my love—
Where did you go?
I searched for you today
I searched high and low
Have you truly forsaken
The one who loves you so?
Why must I be the one
To miss your bonny brow
To see the twinkle of your
Ever teasing raven black eyes
I waited for you, did you know?
Did you see me standing there
At the place you once told me
That we should always love

Each other, and not any other?
But now I am here today
Wasting the day away
Because my lovely Juno
O Juno, my love—
She handed me a brass key
And expected me to unlock
The steel prison that is her
Bleeding, merciless heart
And like the fool I was
I took the metal at the start
And worshipped my love Juno
Until she left me—
Broken and falling apart.

The Boy with No Shoes

Taylor Abernathy

When I walked barefoot for the first time, I finally saw what he meant. The boy with no shoes and eyes like the cerulean sea had finally reached me.

The day the new neighbors moved in next door, I—at this point a scraggly 8-year-old—was watching cartoons with my little brother. I didn't think much of it at the time. People moved in and then they moved out. This cycle would continue and never end. My father had come into the room, his hair sticking to his glistening forehead and his white shirt soaked with sweat. He told me and my brother to come outside, there was someone he wanted us to meet. We both groaned at the thought of leaving our coach. We had been there the perfect amount of time so that our bodies were molded into the coarse fabric.

Eventually, we got up and followed my father outside. It was hot, the kind of summer heat that dragged at your skin and curled the wisps of hair at the nape of your neck. I immediately wanted to go back inside, but before I could a figure stepped into my line of sight.

It was...a young boy. His skin was tanned from the sun, which I could conclude to mean he was outside at all hours of the day. His face was a sharply defined oval, I had never seen such an oval-shaped face before. He was smiling while he spoke, he talked so quickly that I wasn't even sure he was speaking English. I couldn't tell you a word that he said, but what I remember most was this:

His eyes were sparkling, and his cheeks were flushed with mirth. His clothes were baggy and loose, which I would soon learn was his preferred style. His hair was messy and unkempt, sticking in all different directions. When I looked down, I saw bare feet melting on the hot concrete.

The boy was still speaking, so I interrupted him, my eyes never once strayed from his feet. “Why do you have no shoes on?”

He stopped talking, and when I moved my eyes up to meet his, he still had that smile on his face. His eyes still twinkled, and his cheeks were still red, and he told me this.

“Because I forgot.”

I wanted to punch him in the face.

Jordan lived next door to us for almost a year. During that time, I learned that although I might think of myself as a weird child, there would always be someone much weirder.

Jordan liked to climb up on his roof. Every day. There was not a day when I didn't hear my father yelling at Jordan to get off the roof before he killed himself. Jordan would only laugh and yell, “sure thing, Mr. Abernathy!” I never figured out how he got up onto his roof, considering his house was a large two-story build; but with Jordan, I learned not asking questions was always the safest route to go.

The summer he moved in, all three of us played together every day. I, my brother, and Jordan explored every part of our backyards. I had never seen anyone who loved to be around people more than Jordan. He always smiled his crooked smile and made himself the center of attention. As a

child who never wanted attention, I was always puzzled by his antics. How could someone so strange, be so at ease being himself with others?

This question was always in my mind when I was with Jordan in public. When we went to the Paragould water park together and Jordan almost drowned in the kiddie pool, all he did was laugh at the shocked adult faces who helped him out of the shallow water. There was no embarrassment from him, even though I was shaking with humiliation near the concession stand. My thoughts were a constant spiral of, *“How can he laugh at a time like this?”* and *“Everyone thinks he’s a moron!”*

Jordan’s antics would never cease to put me and my brother through the wringer. I had never met anyone with a tendency towards idiocy as their go-to. There was no shame, no embarrassment. It was as if Jordan couldn’t feel the stares or the silent judgment. Even when it was just the three of us, Jordan never apologized for acting as if he had never heard the term “acceptable behavior.”

While Jordan may have been annoying and flamboyant, both in public and in private, there were also times when his façade would crumble ever so slightly.

Sometimes, I would find Jordan with flushed cheeks, but not from laughter. His eyes would be slightly red around his dark lashes and his lips bitten bloody. There was one conversation that we had, one that I can never seem to forget.

“You’re crying,” I said to him.

Jordan didn’t even take a breath; he replied, “I only cry on Thursdays.”

“Why only Thursdays?”

“Because I have to pick one day to feel anything other than happy, I refuse to spend any more time than that on crying.” I looked at him weirdly the rest of that dreary Thursday, not knowing how I was supposed to handle him without a wide smile. His normally bright eyes were as dull as a murky pond, and he didn’t laugh. Not once. The entire day went by without even a hint of a giggle breaking free.

Everything I knew about Jordan didn’t fit with his Blue Thursdays. How could this boy—who still would *not* put on some dang shoes even though he had his dirty footprints ingrained in our carpet by that point—be anything other than happy? I didn’t understand. On Thursdays, although Jordan was sad, he acted like a normal kid. He didn’t make ridiculous statements or try to climb into the storm drains to look for alligators (he never found any). Why did it take sadness to make him not act like an idiot?

I always watched Jordan extra close on Thursdays. I wanted to understand, I wanted to know why he was upset on these days. He wouldn’t tell me what was wrong, but I never asked. I wanted to ask, but I was afraid. Afraid of the answer I would receive from him.

I wasn’t an outgoing kid. I stressed over every interaction with people and was prone to bouts of embarrassment every time I tried to speak to others. I never would have admitted it to myself, but I envied Jordan.

Jordan was unafraid of judgment. He never got embarrassed, and he definitely had no problem interacting with others. So, when Jordan had days where he didn’t smile and laugh, I was afraid. Does this mean that no one can be truly carefree and happy? Has Jordan been fooling me this entire time?

One day, exactly 3 months from the day Jordan would move away, I couldn't take it anymore. We were sitting outside in his backyard, eating blue raspberry rocket popsicles, and watching the melted syrup drip down our sweaty fingers. It was a warm day in March, a sure sign that summer was only a couple of months away.

My brother was at home that day, sick with a spring cold, and Jordan still asked if I would come over to play with him. We sat outside for a while, not really speaking. I never started a conversation if I could help it, and Jordan tended to speak every single second of the day. So, the silence gave me the courage I needed to ask him. I didn't know how to start this conversation, so I just started with, "Do you really forget to wear shoes every day, Jordan?"

I must have startled him a little because his body jumped at the sound of my voice. He turned his eyes towards me and smiled his annoying smirk.

"I don't forget every day. Sometimes, I just don't feel like wearing them."

"But walking barefoot makes your feet all dirty."

"I like the feel of the earth on my feet. It makes me feel alive."

"Alive? But all you have to do to know you're alive is find your heartbeat."

Jordan laughed at this, one of his full-body laughs. I didn't understand what was so funny to him. I didn't understand wanting your feet to be black on the bottom, all so you can "feel the earth."

Jordan took my hand and placed it on his chest, completely taking me by surprise. My cheeks flushed with

embarrassment as my palm met his chest, but I soon focused on the feeling of his heartbeat.

Ba-Bum Ba-Bum Ba-Bum

I felt my own heartbeat match his rhythm and we sat there for some time, with me focused on his heartbeat, and him watching me intently.

Finally, Jordan spoke.

“A heartbeat only moves inside us. I think to really be alive, you have to *feel*. To feel everything around you is so awesome! I want to experience everything, no matter how I have to do it.” I removed my hand from his chest and leaned back in my chair. I still didn’t understand.

“But Jordan, don’t you ever feel embarrassed?”

“Sometimes, but never when I’m being myself.”

“But you always act so weird! You’re always talking too loud and asking people weird questions. Don’t you know that’s not normal?” Jordan quirked his head to the side after my little outburst. He didn’t get upset, in fact, his smile only grew.

“You know Taylor, I have lived in a lot of different towns. Do you know what I learned? That trying to fit in sucks. Everyone, no matter where you live, expects different things. Why should I have to be like everyone else, when I could just do what makes me happy?”

“But you aren’t always happy, Jordan! Every Thursday you cry. If being yourself doesn’t make you happy all the time, then maybe fitting in will!”

This is where Jordan's smile dropped off his face, and his eyes widened in surprise. I looked down at my flip-flops, not wanting to see his face anymore.

He's going to get mad at me. He's going to ask me to go home. He won't want to see me anymore.

Jordan didn't do any of those things. He just stood up, which caused me to jerk my head up toward him, and stretched his arms above his head, his face upturned directly into the afternoon sunlight. Then, he picked up the volleyball lying next to his bare feet and held it out to me.

"Why don't you show me how to pass this again? I want to learn so I can beat you at volleyball next time."

We didn't speak of that conversation for the rest of the day, but as Jordan was walking me home that night, he said this to me.

"Only being happy doesn't make you more alive. If anything, being able to feel everything inside my heart is when I feel like I have finally lived."

I was confused for a moment, still caught up in the fun of the afternoon before I recalled the earlier conversation.

"Does feeling alive mean more to you than being happy all the time?" I asked him.

When we finally reached my front door, he answered.
"Yes."

When Jordan moved away, I remembered our conversation. Does being yourself really make you feel more alive? I didn't know for sure, but what I did know is that Jordan really did do what he believed would make him feel like he was truly living. Even if he wasn't happy all the time, or it made him a little strange, he still stayed true to himself.

Almost a month after Jordan left, I woke up one morning and walked outside. I didn't put on shoes; I didn't brush my hair. I was still in my pajamas, rumped from sleep. I walked outside onto the dewy lawn and watched the sun slowly climb over the tops of the trees. The light was speckled throughout the thick green leaves and cast shadows over the neighborhood.

My feet were slightly cold and damp from the dew. My hair was frizzy from the humid air. I kept walking down our lawn, and then I walked to Jordan's lawn. Their house was dark and quiet, with no life within. I could still see him on top of the roof, laughing and yelling at the top of his lungs. I remember a small smile forming on my lips and laughing out loud myself.

I don't know what it was about this day. This wonderful, warm, glorious day. I felt like I finally understood what he meant. What he said about *feeling*. How could I not have felt like this before? Why was I so worried?

When I walked barefoot purposely for the first time in my yard, I finally saw what he meant. Life was good. So unapologetically, frighteningly, wonderfully good. Jordan was right. The boy with no shoes and eyes like the cerulean sea had finally reached me.

Lefty's Diner

Isabel Fodor

I've been in charge of Lefty's for nine years now. I had always planned to take over the little truck-stop diner, but I hadn't known I'd be just twenty-two years old when it happened. My folks passed in a car crash, and - well - they left everything to me. The house, the diner, and a surprisingly large inheritance. I knew that mom's ghostwriting career made decent money, but we sure didn't live in a way that reflected just how much she had in her savings account. I'm not even sure that dad knew how much she had.

So, I've been able to live comfortably and work the diner seven days a week. Mom's books still bring in royalties now and then, and the diner doesn't take much to run, especially since they changed the highways around and left my little exit ramp practically off the map. Lefty's has always been a casual, low-maintenance establishment. Since my dad built this place onto the side of our house in the seventies, it's hardly gone through three new paint jobs. And we only replaced the furniture if it was broken. Truckers never cared about interior design, just hot food served fast and cheap. And good conversation, which my parents never hesitated to provide. My mom especially could charm even the grumpiest truckers into smiling and opening up about their lives.

I'm the owner, and usually the chef and waitress as well, but since the highway shift happened four years ago, I hired Julia to work every few days so I could rest. She's a good kid; just turned twenty, smart, and polite to customers.

I didn't always work nights. I used to have the diner open from seven in the morning till nine at night. It seems like a lot, but even when the highway was closer, truckers and travelers would usually pick the Denny's that sprouted up three years before my parents passed. It was two miles up the road, too, so they'd stop there before they got far enough to see our sign. I've always had ample breaks between customers to eat, to freshen up, or to doze off in one of our six well-worn booths. Working nights, I don't have as much downtime, but I manage. I prefer to keep busy; keeps my mind clear.

The first time I had a night customer was about a month after the highway shift, four years after I took over the diner. That customer was Bird Man, or at least, I called him Bird Man. He never objected to the nickname, nor did he bother to tell me his real name.

I was sure I locked the front door of the diner, but the little chime went off through the diner and through my house. It was rigged to alert me anywhere in the building if there was a customer walking in. I startled awake in my bed, and checked the clock. 1:37 a.m. Throwing on a robe and shoving my feet into some old slippers, I made my way downstairs and unlocked the door that connected my living room to the diner's kitchen. I flipped on the lights and tried to blink the sleep away from my eyes to see the dark mass at my counter.

I yawned as I made my way to the service counter. "I'm sorry but we're closed, I thought I had locked-"

On one of the old, wooden barstools sat a man. On his shoulder sat a big black crow. The man was dressed in a big

black coat; it looked fancy too. The real kicker, aside from the bird of course, was his tall, black top hat. He didn't seem to register, or care, that I had told him Lefty's was closed.

"Sir?" I asked, after a moment of thick silence had passed between us.

He looked up at me. His nose was large and hooked, his eyes were beady, irises as black as his pupils, and his mouth was small and angry. The bird looked at me too, and it gave a small squawk. "Your sign out there. It says. . . It says all are welcome," he said in a gruff voice.

"Yes. Yes it does." My mom bought that sign at a flea market just a few days before she and dad died. I found it in the living room with the price tag still on it, and put it in the window for her. It was just one of the little ways I tried to honor her memory. My heart ached for a moment as I thought of her.

I realized I had dazed off for a moment when the Bird Man cleared his throat. We shared eye contact for a few seconds. He was testing the waters. Testing me. I have to admit, I was afraid. But all were welcome at Lefty's. "What can I get for you, sir?"

His small mouth curled into a smile, showing me his small, somewhat pointed teeth. He and the bird both seemed to relax their shoulders a bit. "Coffee and sausage please. And a little bowl of water and maybe some bacon for Scratch."

Scratch, the bird, squawked when he heard his name, and he looked at me. "Right away," I said, more to the bird than to the man. "Give me just a few minutes to cook that up."

He was a polite customer, despite spooking me that first time. After that night he became a regular at Lefty's, coming

in most nights, and always ordering the same thing. A few weeks after Bird Man started coming to the diner, Cecilia the Great showed up. She comes on the third, fourteenth, and twenty-seventh of each month to order orange juice and dry toast at two in the morning.

I was listening to Bird Man talk about crows and ravens and omens, “It’s my job, girl. I send Scratch and his friends out to warn folks.”

I was about to question him further, not doubting him, just curious, when she walked in for the first time. She was a tall woman, probably around six and a half feet. She looked like she came from a renaissance fair; she was wearing a rich purple dress, with a corset and gold embroidery. She sat on a barstool two seats away from Bird Man and cleared her throat delicately.

“Hello, ma’am,” I began, walking toward her. I came to the shocking realization that I could see the booth behind her even though I was looking straight at her face. She was translucent. It was far easier to come to terms with a man with birdlike features than to come to terms with a ghost. But, she was still a customer. “What can I get for you?”

“My name, darling, is Cecilia the Great. I will have the juice of oranges and toasted bread.” She ate daintily, dabbing the corners of her mouth with the paper napkin as if it were fine silk. “I thank you for the meal dear, I shall return again soon.”

“Well, I’m glad you liked it, Miss Cecilia the Great,” I answered, smiling at her and glancing to Bird Man, who was watching amusedly.

“I suppose there’s a matter of payment,” Cecilia noted. “Dear, I have no American money. I propose a trade.” To my

surprise, she removed a pearl earring and left it on the counter. Before I could grab it to give it back to her, she curtsied and drifted out the door.

“Do you know her?” I asked Bird Man.

He chuckled, “She used to wear diamonds.”

Bird Man always pays in crinkled up bills. Cecelia gives me fancy jewelry as payment every few meals. I try to refuse it; it’s far too valuable to give up for a few meals of juice and toast, but she insists. Leaf and Fern, two young men with greenish skin and even greener hair pay for their food with a bouquet of wildflowers. They typically show up on full moons.

Most of the night customers are polite, even the ones who aren’t regulars. There was once a person covered in mud, or maybe made of mud, that left quite a mess. And there was also that group of incredibly tall cloaked figures, only one of which spoke, yelling “Bacon! Now, wench!” But, most of the others aren’t bad. I’ve adapted to the “suspended belief” lifestyle. You know, the way that you have to act in movies when weird things happen. Different folks need food, too. And I’m happy to provide it. I do prefer when they’re nice to me, though.

Except for the customer on the seventh. On the seventh day of the month, a single customer comes in at exactly 3:00, and they always scare the hell out of me. One time it was a man, sobbing and covered in blood. I thought it might be a normal person who was in an accident, but he stopped wailing for long enough to calmly ask me for some scrambled eggs and coffee with milk. That one kept me from sleeping for a few days.

I was waiting anxiously last Thursday morning. I had gotten everything ready to hopefully rush through my seventh-of-the-month horror show. Reading a magazine to try to calm my nerves, I leaned against the wall that separated the service counter from the kitchen. The digital clock on the wall glowed 2:36. I took a deep breath.

“It’ll be fine. It’ll feel like a horror movie, but it’ll be fine,” I muttered to myself.

I was about halfway through an article about a man who had turned his backyard into a community garden when the door chime sounded. My heart quickened and my eyes shot up to the clock. 2:50.

Oh no.

It was a girl. A pretty, dark haired girl, maybe around twenty years old. And she was *normal*. No blood. No cloak. No cloud of dark smoke that hung about her without dissipating. She gave me a tired smile and sat at the counter.

“Hey, can I get some coffee and pancakes, please?” She must have seen the confusion, and possibly the terror, on my face because she added, “I’m on a cross-country road trip to California, and I like driving better at night. Less people.”

I forced a smile and nodded. “Sure thing, coming right up.”

I have to get this girl out of here! I screamed in my head. I rushed into the kitchen and began to pull out the flour and sugar, when I saw my emergency stash of instant mix. Having good, homemade pancakes is not nearly as important as making sure she doesn’t see whatever horror show is about to show up. “This is not my proudest moment, but this girl needs to leave.”

Within a minute I was pouring batter into the frying pan, which was barely hot enough to begin cooking the pancake. While I waited for it to cook I started the coffee machine.

"It's a beautiful night out," the girl called from the diner. "You can see a lot of stars with the sky clear of clouds."

"Yeah, it's great," I called back, plating the pancakes. I cursed quietly as I spilled hot coffee on my hand while filling the mug.

"So," I started, hiding the shake in my voice, "I bet you want to get to California as quick as possible, huh? Don't want this road trip to take too long?"

"Well, I guess so." The girl shrugged. "I don't really mind the drive as long as I have enough CDs." She took another bite of her food, and seemed to chew in slow motion.

I bounced on the balls of her feet and checked the clock. 2:57. "Oh, you like music? I do too, but the radio in here is busted. It must be boring in here for you."

"It's fine," said the girl, swirling the butter and syrup together. "It's nice to take a break."

With growing dread, I watched the clock. Seconds ticked by, and the girl just sat there. I busied myself with cleaning the cooking utensils, scrubbing the frying pan till it was probably sterile.

"I'm going to go ahead and put your check down, but, um, no rush."

3:00.

The door didn't open.

I looked at the girl again. Normal hair; dark brown and just below the shoulders. Her clothes were normal, a little wrinkled from the drive, but normal tee shirt and jeans. She

wasn't transparent. She wasn't too tall or too green or too bird-like. She wasn't my usual nightmare customer.

"Thanks. Could I get a little sugar for my coffee? I have an extra sweet tooth."

I paused. "An extra sweet tooth?" I echoed.

"Yeah, I've always loved sweets," she smiled.

"My mom always said that she had an extra sweet tooth," I said, turning to her. *That hair. Add a little gray, cut it a little shorter. Blue eyes, the same ones I have.* I walked over to the other side of the counter, wiping away nonexistent crumbs. I did my best to nonchalantly glance over to her.

Two freckles on her right cheekbone.

Mom.

Suddenly I felt dizzy. My mother was sitting right in front of me, just younger. *And she said she was driving to California.* My parents met in California when they were twenty. I couldn't believe I was watching my mother, before she was my mother, sit and eat pancakes in the diner she didn't build yet.

"Hey, um, did you tell me what your name was?"

"It's Marsha. What's yours?"

"Susanna."

"Oh, pretty! That's my favorite aunt's name." She sipped her coffee. "I've always planned to name my daughter after her. If I ever have a baby girl, that is."

"You should. I like my name," I joked. She laughed and dabbed her face with a napkin then reached into her purse.

Her eyes went wide and her jaw dropped. "Oh no. I think I left my wallet in my car. It must have fallen out of my purse; I'll be right back I swear!"

“Sure thing, don’t worry about it.” I laughed to myself as she raced out the door. Mom was always misplacing things. I carried her plate and mug over to the sink and started the water.

The door chimed and I turned back to face her. “You know, you kind of look like-”

There she was. My mom as I knew her last. Gray mixed in with the brown. Freckles on her tanned arms. Little wrinkles around her eyes.

“Mom?”

“Hey, honey. What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Working yourself to the bone, Susanna,” she emphasized. “Days and nights? You need to sleep.”

“I do sleep. I hired help and I can nap between customers and-”

“Sweetheart. You can’t just work through it all. You have to process.”

“Process?” I asked. “What do you mean? I did process. I went to the funeral, I took care of the finances, and I took over the diner. I’ve been working this whole time.”

She tilted her head and gave me a sad smile. “Susanna.”

My face got hot and tears stung my eyes. “I can’t. I tried and I can’t. It hurts too much to think about you guys. So, I work.”

I wiped the tears from my face and felt her arms wrap around me.

“It was so-” I choked. “It was so sudden. You guys were just gone!”

“I know, honey. I’m so sorry.” She pet my hair and hugged me tightly. “But you have to let yourself feel it.”

“I love you, Mom, and I miss you,” I sobbed into her shoulder.

Suddenly my arms folded in on me. My mom was gone. And she was right.

I took a deep breath, and I walked over to the light switches. I looked out to the road sign as it flickered off, taking Lefty’s off the map for a while.

Looking for Eva Bourne

K. Michele McLemore

Eva Bourne was a breath of fresh air, an artist with a cheerful and soft view of life that she portrayed well in her work. Every day with Eva was an adventure, whether she was pulling me out of the house to scope out some area that hadn't been touched in years claiming there was an abandoned piece of history located there or forcing me to try a new recipe she found online for some weird fish dish. We were together for five years, I was sure Eva Bourne would become Eva Barrett one day, it even sounded like fate. Eva was comfortable, she felt like home. Despite that, she was so independent, and we fought often. I couldn't take it anymore, so I left.

"You're just going to give up, aren't you Clay?" She asked me calmly that night after our final argument. It was a stupid disagreement over some guy she was being too friendly with, in my opinion. I'll be the first to admit my jealous tendencies, but Eva was always pushing boundaries with me and everyone else around her, she was just that stubborn. She would argue for hours if you let her, but only until she felt like it was a lost cause. "You are a *coward* Clay Barrett," she said to me before slamming her apartment door in my face while I stood amongst my belongings that she had thrown down at my feet.

Looking back, I know she was right. I was a coward that wouldn't fight for the relationship we had. I wanted something better without realizing what it was that I had

lost. After a few months of being lonely, I decided to get back into the dating scene.

The first woman I dated was as kind as Eva, full of life and willing to talk to anyone who would listen. The breakup made me realize that her niceness did not always mean that she was flirting. This woman, unlike Eva, never pushed boundaries or started fights over trivial things. She was easy to get along with, and we spent a lot of time together. We were interested in the same movies, we had the same taste in food, and we even agreed politically. However, she was an accountant, so she lacked the loquaciousness that came with being an artist like Eva. One time, I even *tried* to start an argument with her, but she just asked me to communicate my issues with her so we could work them out together, and Eva would always take the bait for an argument. Eva Bourne always had to be right, but she was not Eva. Unfortunately, our conversations soon began focusing on work and numbers, so I had to end our relationship. We were together for four months.

The second woman I dated was a spunky rock climber by day and a waitress to pay the bills by night. Our most adventurous dates always consisted of some kind of new climbing challenge she would learn about through the rock-climbing community that I didn't know existed until meeting her. She was as odd as Eva in many ways. Her hair was only ever held back by a claw clip despite the many times it would fall out, she only wore black clothing no matter how hot the temperature got, and if you asked her about her favorite animal, she would say something off the wall like ants because they were much stronger than they seemed. However, she was much more practical than Eva. Once, when

I slipped on a slimy rock during one of our adventures and suffered a cut to my leg, she administered first aid and got me to a doctor immediately. Eva was never so prepared for anything, always winging it which usually put one of us in the E.R. Our relationship was fun but unlike Eva, she seemed to only cook the same four meals over and over. I ended our relationship after only two months.

It took a while for me to meet anyone else after my second girlfriend post-Eva, I was preoccupied with renovating my house and put dating on hold for a while. Soon though, I met my third girlfriend on the shampoo aisle of the store Eva and I frequented when we were together. She was a writer, she showed me some of her works and they were all strongly thematic. She was talented, a different kind of talented than Eva, who was a painter. She only ever seemed to speak in hyperboles, and she hardly ever left her desk when she was home. She and Eva had that in common, always working on their next project. Once, I found myself breaking into her apartment because she wasn't answering the door. She was sitting at her desk, writing, and she hadn't eaten anything in nearly two days. Eva was independent, she could take care of herself without my help; in fact, she preferred to go without my help. That's why, after five years of dating, Eva continued to want to live alone. My new girlfriend was different; she relied on me almost too much. If I didn't tell her to eat, who knows if she would make it a week. She was too dependent on me and the time we spent together. We were together for six months before I ended things with her.

At that point, I decided I needed a break from women for a little while. It was nearly two years before I ran into my fourth girlfriend after Eva while visiting the art gallery where

Eva sold her first piece of artwork. The open space was full of people, and I was obviously lost, so I was not surprised when she approached me. Just like the first time I met Eva, she was the one to make conversation. We sat and talked, I bought her first piece of the night, and the rest came easily. She was *just like* Eva, from her bold taste in food to the freckles surrounding her large, soulful blue eyes. I felt that I had finally found the second Eva I was looking for, and this time, I wouldn't let her go over some silly fight. She was everything I wanted in a woman, nearly perfect in every way. We went on some of the same adventures Eva and I went on together, we ate some of the same foods, and she even moved in with me nearly a year into our relationship. She left her own bobby pins everywhere; her clothes took up the empty spaces Eva's once filled. Her natural deodorants and vegetarian foods covered my counter spaces just as Eva's did. One day, however, I woke up next to her only to see her bright blonde hair instead of Eva's unruly red curls, and I realized that no matter how similar she was to Eva, she would never *be* Eva. It was a hard decision because I wasn't sure if I'd ever find anyone else so similar to Eva without it being Eva herself. We were together for two and a half years before I chose to finally end it with her.

By this point, I was starting to feel hopeless as the idea of ever being in love again was fleeting. I missed Eva, I regretted ever leaving her all those years before. Even after moving on, or trying to, she was always at the back of my mind. Her red hair, her freckles, her pescatarian tendencies, and even her stubbornness that kept her from ever giving up in any argument. I looked for her everywhere, in every person I met, in every place I visited. I spent a lot of time in

some of her favorite restaurants, art galleries, and her favorite park. When I did this, I felt connected to her somehow, as if she were going to magically appear in those places and come back to me. And then, it happened.

Eva only ever went to the same bar every time she went out to drink, it was where we met the first time, and it was where we went together every time after that. I started going back every other Saturday night after ending things with my third girlfriend post-Eva; I just wanted to know if I could feel the same way I did with Eva, even if she wasn't there. It was one fateful Saturday; I was sitting at the back of the room as I usually did when I heard it.

"Clay?" The voice was familiar, but only vaguely so. I looked around for a second before deciding that I was imagining things. "Clay Barrett?"

I looked up once more and made eye contact with the woman I had been looking to replace for all those years. It was Eva. Eva Bourne. My Eva. She looked older, but not by much, with smile lines that were not nearly as prominent when we were dating. It had been years; of course she looked older. She had a nose ring, something new. It suited her. She was right there in front of me. Right there. Eva sat down across from me and began asking me how I was, what I had been up to. She was still an artist, but she had moved away years prior with the promise of better opportunities. She came back home after traveling around the country to sell some of her best pieces.

Eva asked me to have dinner with her in the next week to catch up more. I couldn't believe my Eva wanted to have dinner. She was right there, and she wanted to meet with me for dinner. She was *right* there. We met at the old diner Eva

picked out for our first date all those years before, it was her idea to go again. It was like she knew what she was doing. Maybe she did.

“It’s so nice to see you’re doing well Clay,” she told me with that soft smile of hers. It was the kind of smile where one side of her mouth went up higher than the other, it was just as odd as Eva Bourne. “I’ve thought about you a lot recently.” She thought about me. My Eva thought about me. I wondered if she thought about me as much as I thought about her. Did she look for me in other people too?

We talked all night. She apologized for calling me a coward that night all those years ago. We agreed to meet up again soon. Soon turned into more dates and more dates turned into romance. She asked to try again. My Eva wanted to try to date again. I had finally found her. There could be no one more like Eva Bourne than Eva Bourne herself. She had the same red curls, the same bright blue eyes surrounded by the same freckles, the same odd taste in food, and the same loud opinions.

But this Eva was different. I didn’t realize it at first. She was calmer, less stubborn. She never picked fights; she spent less time painting and more time with me. When I asked her what happened, she said she grew up. She tried to explain that we are supposed to change, that we are supposed to grow into different people.

This wasn’t my Eva.

It wasn’t long before I realized that she was not the Eva I loved, and that if she wasn’t the Eva I knew before, then there was no one in the world that was. I was sad for a while, but eventually I took her advice and began to grow into a new person. If she could become a new person, I could too.

The Clay Barrett that spent years looking for the Eva Bourne he loved was gone, and I could finally move on. I finally got rid of Eva's old rock band t-shirts, the old papers to help with my taxes, the terribly small rock-climbing boots, the empty shampoo bottle, and the bobby pins with strands of blonde hair still attached. I was a new man.

It was a shame I had to end things with her though, but she fit so nicely under the floorboards with the rest of my ex-girlfriends.

Beauty in Death

Art by K. Michelle McLemore



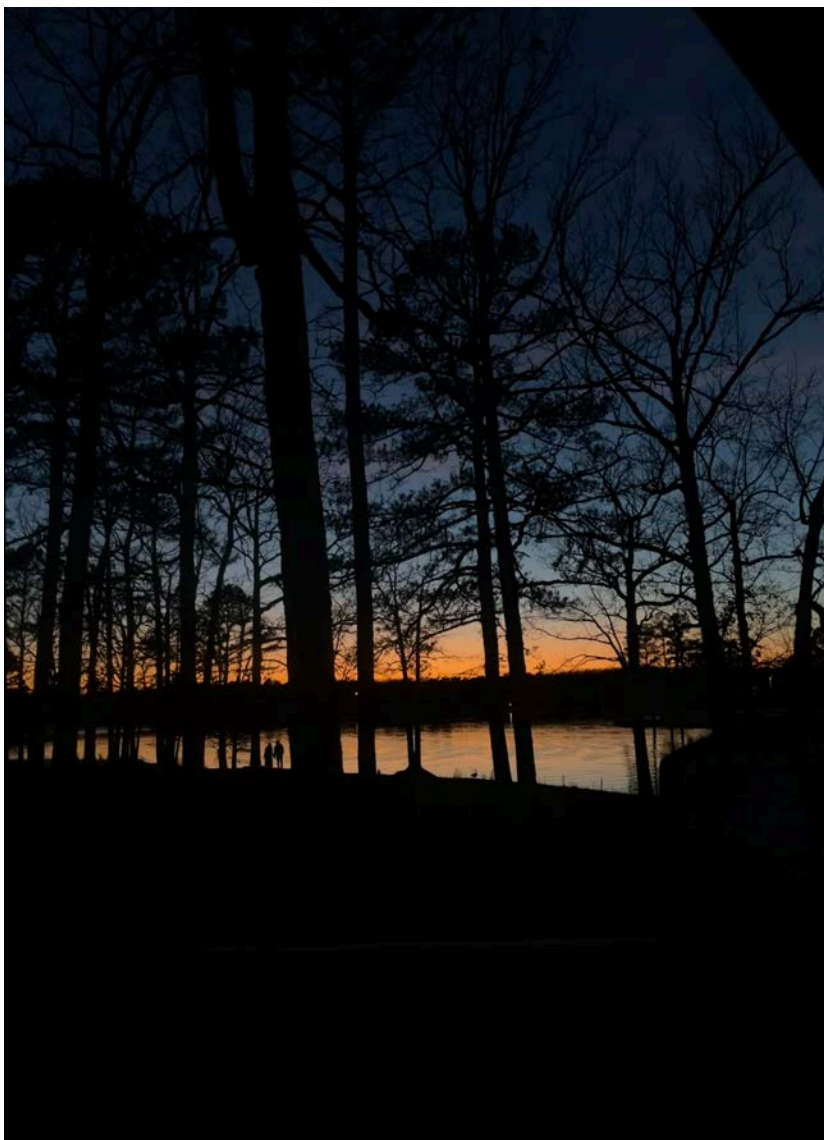
Killer Queen

Art by Chloe Tyner



Photography by Alandria Maddox

Must Be Nice



Head in The Clouds



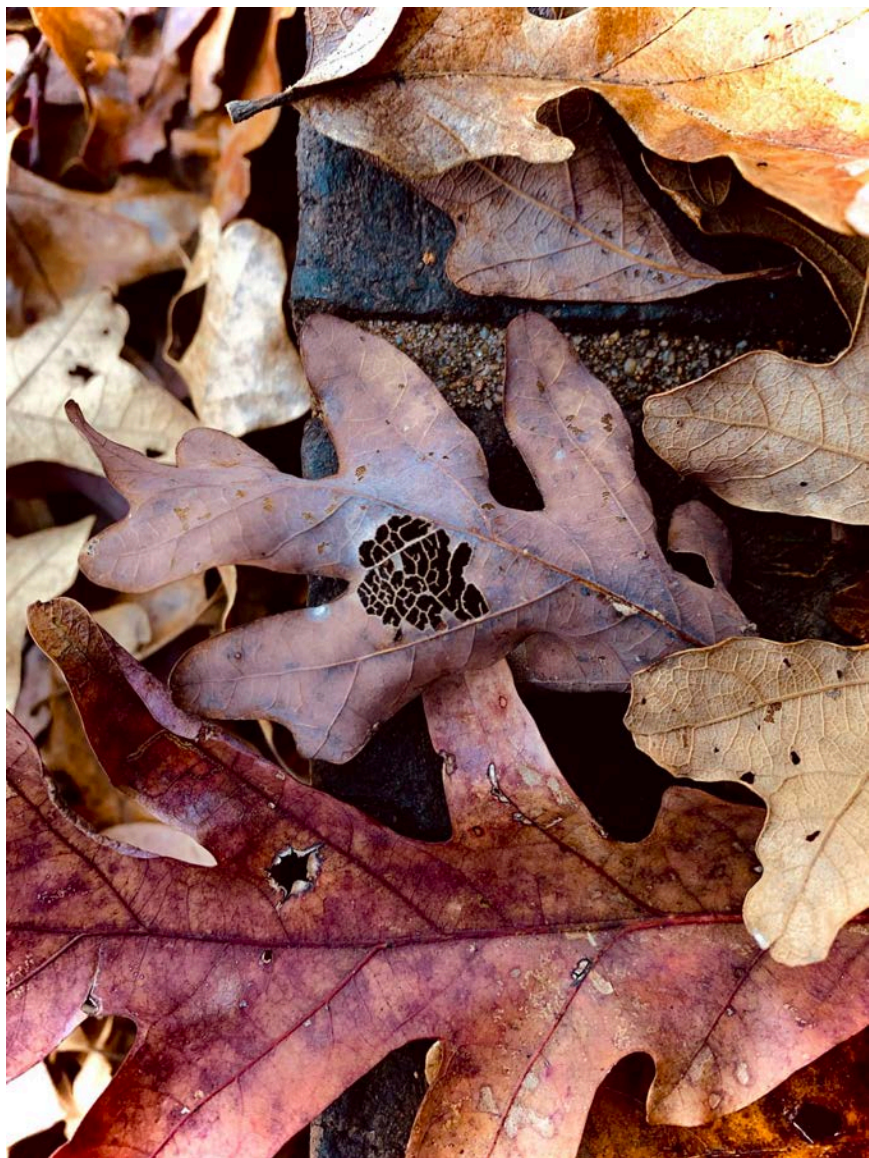
Stan



Kick It To Me



One in a million



Snapshot

Eli Ott

I sat in the front passenger seat of a beat-to-shit gray '07 Camry, leaning my head against the window. The *bump thump bump* of the ride gently rumbled against my skin. Just as it always had when I was a child. I opened my eyes and looked over at the person driving.

“Rosie, why are we even going out here? You never explained what we’re supposed to be doing.”

She turned her head, and the smell of her signature perfume whacked my nostrils. It was the same pomegranate infection she’d picked up in some chain store when we were fourteen. To most people, the scent might’ve been overwhelming, but I’d been the one to hand her the bottle in the first place, so I really had no right to complain. I was right to give it to her. The scent complimented her. Rosie thought I was amazing at reading people, and she’d said that enough times to make me believe it.

“Is it so bad that I wanted to spend some time together? I mean, it’s been a while, y’know? I don’t want you to forget my face.”

I scrunched up my nose. “There’s no way I could ever forget something like that. What kind of a best friend do you take me for?”

Rosie let out a laugh as she turned back to the road. The noise was gone too quickly, though it still rang in my ears. I pulled my foot into the seat to rest my head against my knee instead. Mostly, it was just to watch her.

For someone I'd known since the first day of second grade, it surprised me how new her face seemed in that moment. All the little freckles smeared on her cheek, and her down turned nose were familiar and completely alien at this angle. As early morning light filtered over her face, I noticed faint acne scars on the high points of her cheeks. Probably caused by our years of Friday night sleepovers where we slathered foundation and eye shadow over each other's faces and stuffed our gullets with all kinds of junk food. A curl of black hair fell from behind her ear. I reached over and tucked it back in place.

My friend took her eyes off the road just in time to witness a yawn forcing its way out my mouth. She frowned and flicked on the radio, keeping the volume low.

"I've got one of those mocha drinks you like in the back seat, knock yourself out."

"Oh my god, you're a life saver," I mumbled out as I reached behind us. The sweet sound of cracking the lid off was already starting to chase away my exhaustion.

"Aren't you supposed to shake those first?" Rosie said in her nasally voice. She scrunched up her nose in a teasing way when I flicked the lid over my fingers at her.

"Aren't you supposed to be watching the road?"

Rosie grinned at me one last time before turning back to the sunny morning. I took a large sip of the drink.

A large crack of thunder split through the peace in an instant. Though the storm had been going since I woke up, I still jumped. A bit of my drink coated the side of my cheek. My friend let out a chuckle and opened the center console.

"There should be some napkins in there."

“Thanks, Devin.” I grabbed a few off the top of the stack to start cleaning up. As I did, I refocused on my friend’s face. He’d tied his long, straight hair back into a messy ponytail. The bit of stubble on his face made his sharp jawline just as attractive as it’d been when he sat down next to me on the first day of our eleventh-grade AP Spanish class. I was convinced for years that he was the ultimate love of my life, even if I could never muster up the courage to actually ask him out. The feelings faded away as our bond grew every time we were paired up for assignments.

“You know, I was working on my thesis when you showed up at my place.”

Devin didn’t take his eyes off the road, but his sparse eyebrows furrowed. “Shit, I had no idea. We can turn around if you wanna go work on that. I know how much getting your master’s means, and you’re so close to the end now.”

A silence only penetrated by the rain thudding against the windshield and distant rumbles of thunder took us over for a few minutes. I looked over his shoulder at the endless rows of cotton and soy passing by outside the window. Devin had once taught me how to tell the two plants apart. He always liked pointing out little details like that, to the point that I started doing it habitually. Under the darkened sky and pour of rain, it was nearly impossible to distinguish individual plants. Finally, I said, “No, not really. I think you’re the only person who could’ve dragged me away from that. I need the break, anyway.”

I felt light at Devin’s smile breaking through his concern. “I’m really happy to hear that. I can’t tell you how important you are to me.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way.” Pause, just long enough to make me squirm a bit. “Hey, do you have any mints by any chance?”

“Oh, totally,” Devin said, pulling a tin out of his hoodie pocket. He handed it over. “Just put it in the glove department when you’ve got one.”

“You mean compartment, buddy.” My friend stuck his tongue out, making me laugh as I popped in a spearmint candy.

It was sweet and fresh. I leaned back against my headrest and decided to chance biting down. It stubbornly stayed compacted.

“Hey, dummy, you know you shouldn’t bite on hard candy. It’s bad for your teeth.”

“Oh, shush Phoenix, I’ll do it if I want to.”

My friend rolled their eyes and rubbed a hand on their shaved and bleached hair. “Whatever, we’ll be there soon.”

“About time, it’s nearly dark out.” Despite my gripe, I found myself smiling at the setting orange sun. The clouds looked pink and purple in the dying light. I’d worried for a second about the pictures Phoenix wanted turning out bad, but with light like this, maybe I could capture all the little things I found beautiful about them. Like, for example, their big brown eyes and long cheekbones that could cut a man. Those two features were the first things I noticed on them when we first ran into each other at our college’s puzzle club.

I lost myself in remembering how our long conversation from that meeting made me feel, even if I had no idea what we’d talked about. Ever since then, Phoenix and I were attached at the hip. They’d helped me learn how to laugh at

anything, even in the worst of times. I looked back at the setting sun and frowned.

“Fee, how about we pull over here? I know it’s not what you really want, but we’re losing light too fast. I can make them look good.”

They gave me a hard look out of the corner of their eye. Then, my friend pulled onto the side of the road. “Okay, if you say so.”

We stepped out together and quickly found a small windbreak of trees for my friend to pose against. They gave me a big smile, and that’s when I took the picture. Then, I was all alone in the middle of nowhere.

Why had I pulled over again? I couldn’t remember where I was going, or why, or even who I might’ve been with. But, on my phone, I’ve got these three pictures. All different people, at different times of day and weather conditions but in the same place. They’re all smiling at me in the pictures. I don’t know any of them anymore. All I knew was I felt sadder and more human than I ever have before or since.

The Meandering Mudslide

Kaylee Pence

Thirty minutes before my alarm would have assaulted my ears, a sound caused me to sit up in bed and look for the perpetrator. One of my beloved *Lord of the Rings* posters fell onto my desk and noisily bumped into my collection of rocks. Exhausted, as if possessed by Gollum, I crawled from my cave of comforters and came across the wrongdoer. The poster lay on my desk depicting the great kingdom of Gondor. My other posters hung precariously on the cracked dorm wall, and I jotted down a reminder on a post-it note to fix them later. Before I could lift the poster higher than an inch, it bumped into the dozens of rocks sitting on the edge of my desk, causing a couple to clatter to the floor along with a pecan. I reached down, carefully cradling one of the rocks as if it would break into a million fragments of sand. It bobbed up and down in the mud of my mind before rolling onto the dirty shore.

I am crouching down on a washed-out gravel road in the country. The rusted, wooden bridge nearby creaks as a muddy truck passes by. I pick the rock out of the dirt, wiping away the excess to reveal the smoothest rock I had ever come across out in the woods. Its surface has no cracks, but its inner layer is deeply embedded with them. It rests, tan and ice cold, in my hand. My parents call for me to hurry, and I jump back in the car to join them, fiddling with the smooth rock between my fingers. I enjoy the remainder of our happy time in the country before I must return to college. The wind tousles my hair and my red scarf. The splashes of snow hit

my face, but I remain wide-eyed at the beautiful nature around me and the joyous company with me. The snow covers the shadowed ditches, the stream rushes on from the melting snow, and our ripples of laughter echo across the rural Arkansan country as we leisurely drive through our favorite corner of the world.

The process of using objects to recall pleasant memories may be part of a self-reinforcing cycle that leads to further increased levels of attachment to objects¹.

The memory shifted as I picked up the second rock. The jagged, sharp edges bit into my hand as my eyes glimpsed over the different shades of orange and white. Confined stars shine from the depths of the different swirls of color. Neurons in my brain fired off at the sight of the rock that encapsulates a small memory, and the mud embedded in its cracked surface was swept free.

I am walking with my family up the road to my cousin's house. The road branches off to a steep driveway, and I look down and spot orange amid the sea of dark gray pave stones. My favorite shades of orange sparkle and dance in the light of the sun, and I gleefully pocket it. I have never seen such a beautiful rock. We go up to the door and open it. Scents of fried turkey and baked bread hit us, and I am racing to the food. My dad sets the pumpkin pie down and we feast. I talk about my first semester at ASU, we chuckle at our drunk uncle sharing jokes, and we share memories of our lost loved ones. I think of my late grandma sitting here dressed in a few of her hundreds of rings, one of her dozens of purses, and her favorite red scarf she gave to me. I imagine her there with us,

¹ The following italicized sentences are also directly pulled from the same source. Dozier, Mary E., and Catherine R. Ayers. "Object attachment as we grow older." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, vol. 39, 2021, pp. 595-600.

celebrating Thanksgiving and biting down on a big piece of pumpkin pie. I place my hand in my jean pocket, and the sparkling, orange chunk of rock reaches out.

The emotions associated with the items can range from positive, sentimental feelings to negative, grief and loss.

The pecan stared at me, and I stared back. It was smaller than my pinky nail. I hesitated, and then my fingers wrapped around it, and I felt as though I had touched a repulsive Horcrux.

My cheeks are wet from tears. Every breath is suffocating me. The walls are bearing down on me. My clothes scratch at my skin, burrowing into me. The room is closing in, but the room is empty. I am standing alone in my recently deceased grandmother's kitchen. All that remains are the objects on the windowsill. The rocks and pecans I gave her over the years stare up at me, questioning where their owner is. I ignore the rocks and pick up my little miracle: a pea-sized pecan.

Furthermore, attachment to a possession increases over time, regardless of hoarding tendencies.

I tossed it onto my desk and stumbled back to my bed, wiping my hands on my face. I pressed the back of my hands onto my eyelids until the stars from the orange rock erupted in my night sky. I remove my hands, frowning at the pecan on my desk. The urge to toss it in the trash entered my mind. I wanted it gone, obliterated, reduced to atoms, but I could not move. The little pecan was spat from the depths of the mud.

It is so tiny. I run, tripping over my little legs to reach her door. I bolt inside, gulping for air, and place it delicately in front of her, mesmerized by its tininess. I take out other rocks and objects I found outside from my filthy pockets. I line them up for her to see, rambling about their different shapes

and colors. “I love you, sweetheart,” Grandma says abruptly, and I declare my love for her too. I watch as she continues to clean out her drawers full of dried pens, receipts, yellowed notepads, and random business cards. She has two red solo cups full of good pens and has the bad ones piled in the wastebasket. She freezes at the sight of one of the pens, transfixed by the familiar name lost to time. Grandma's eyes glaze over. She holds it carefully as if it was an active bomb. She throws it urgently into the wastebasket, but then she's desperately searching for it amid the others. She finds it and places it gently in a red solo cup. She clears her throat and half-whispers to me. “Kaylee, don't you ever become a hoarder like your Grandma.”

If an older adult cannot find an object they used to possess that was linked with a core memory, then they may feel as though they will not remember an important event or person.

In the early hours of February 14, 2020, my grandma suffered from a severe stroke in the middle of her brain, followed by several mini-strokes. She suffered for five months before she passed. I still hear her favorite songs on the radio and deafening sneezes that sound like hers. I always see her favorite colors painted in the sky at night. I see her name, Mary, at least once in these early months of the year.

On January 26th, the day after her birthday, Gondor fell, and I was woken. After my classes, a spam email from Mary Wall caused my phone to vibrate. Her first and similar maiden names peered up at me from my phone. The rocks and pecans called to me from a foot away. I glanced at the pecan, curious as to how such a small thing could cause me to remember a mournful past. I opened Safari and researched about it. Mary Dozier, an author of a journal article about

object attachment, shouted at me. After quickly skimming through, a realization emerged from the mud.

Everything that has or will happen is an object in the meandering mudslide of my mind. The mud permeates. All objects are caked in muck, forgotten in the dirty river of time. The rocks peek out of the mud, and the hoard of rocks will grow for years to come. For every painful memory, there are connections to ones of blissful happiness and wonder. These rocks will escape from the grasp of my muddy memory.

Gloria

Hunter Sanders

It's been twenty years since your death; I find myself back at your grave.

Knives never look the same since-

After countless sessions and meetings, I am still crippled by your ghost, staring at the things I did, at the things I still do. Your shame sticks to me more than any mistress. None of them are you. None of them will ever brighten my life like you did.

I never saw your pain. I never warmed your soul like before our wedding. I never showed you my care. I left you hurt, unloved, and alone while I sought comfort elsewhere.

My apathy killed you.

Now, I stand alone, scarred from wounds I caused. Part of me believes that you want me to move on, but I don't know how.

Gloria.

Why, even after another night of sex, drugs, and suicide attempts, do I find myself back at your grave?

Growth

Kristen Wallis

Growth is not meant to be comfortable.
It tears and pulls at every seam.
Undoing the threads that make us vulnerable.
Wouldn't it be easier to live in a dream?

When we were children, we couldn't wait to grow up.
Look at us now trying to be grown up.
Having to relearn things that didn't add up.
Nobody sympathizes and that's fucked up.

But character changes with every experience.
For good or bad, there is no way to tell.
The versions of our new selves are mysterious.
And nobody can help us but ourselves.

Pencil Shavings

Joshua Thomas

When I was younger, around 7 or so, I spent a lot of time home alone. This wasn't uncommon. Mother and my stepfather had to work and often neither could either find nor afford a babysitter for my brother, Jarrod, and I. Mother did her best to keep us on the "right-side of the train tracks" and away from the dark lands that laid on the other side. My stepfather - well he tried. We were a pair of latchkey kids, my brother and me. It was on this most unfortunate day that my brother was staying at his father's house, and I alone, plagued by the inevitable disease known by all children as boredom, that before the sun would set, tears would be shed.

Like I said I was alone. Bored as any other 7-year-old would be with no playmates. I did not have my Batman to play as Robin. My brother and I would wrap a towel around our necks, using a hair claw from Mother to keep it in place, and play Batman and Robin, running around the house fighting crime. It felt odd to have that towel wrapped around my neck with no brother to play Batman. Instead, I did the next best thing, draw.

I loved to write and draw as a kid. Whenever my brother wasn't around or if he just absolutely refused to play with me, I would take up a pencil and paper and begin creating. On this day, I decided to draw some of my favorite superheroes. Usually when I drew something, I would curl into Mother's lap and show it to her when I felt like it was finished.

“Oh, you did a nice job on his face” or “Why is Batman tied up and Robin saving the day?” she would ask with a smile. The pictures were always perfect to her and usually stayed on the fridge door for weeks at a time.

This drawing, however, was going to be perfection. I knew mother was having a long and hard week, so I decided to make her a new picture. This time it was going to be Goku from *Dragon Ball Z*. I climbed into my desk chair and went to work. My pencil flew over the page. The graphite stained the snow-white paper and slowly formed the outline of a very muscular man. My tongue stuck out as I poured my very soul into the artwork.

Then the pencil snapped.

The lead shot across the desk and became lost to time itself. The wooden tip showed signs of a long-lost inhabitant mocking me with its vacancy. Rage burned up my throat as I growled out my frustration. The half-finished picture stared back at me begging to be finished. I didn't have any other pencil to draw with. It had already taken me forever to find this one! The image of a small pencil sharpener with a clear purple casing shot into my mind. *Yes! There was one in Mother's room in my brother's box!*

I ran across the hall and looked upon my parents' door. It was simple dark plywood but to me it might as well have been a castle gate to a land long forbidden to children. I placed my hand on the cool brass door handle and turned. “No, turn back!” said the small voice that sits in the back of all human consciousness. I wasn't allowed in there but I didn't see any harm done by borrowing the pencil sharpener. *I'll be quick and Mother will never know.* With a push that seemed to move the world, I opened the door.

The room was warm. Sun pierced through the crimson curtains, casting a reddish hue into the room. The porcelain dolls lining the windowsill stared back at me. Their blank faces creeping me out, as if the sentinels would snitch on me as soon as Mother returned. I stuck my tongue out at them and walked in. I scrouged under her bed, looking past the clear containers holding Jarrod and I's artwork and various creations, and found the little blue box that held my desires. It was a simple pastel blue plastic box designed to hold pencils and pens, but was also big enough to fit a few of my brother's most prized possessions. I sat it on the bed and unlatched the lid. In it was a small Crayola teddy bear Christmas ornament, a pumpkin-head eraser that he received during a Halloween party at his school, a quarter he probably stole from somebody, a little green army man ready to fire his rifle, and the much-needed pencil sharpener.

Lifting the sharpener out of its home, I looked carefully at it. *This thing was plum full! I don't want to break it. I'll just dump them out.* With ease the sharpener came apart and with a little tilt the shavings fell with grace into the small trash can next to Mother's vanity desk. The shavings became lost in a sea of used tissues and make-up bottles. With a few simple twists I was back in business. I put the sharpener back in its place and with a new sense of energy went back to my creation.

It didn't take much longer to finish. Once done, it was time to find something else to occupy my time until Mother came home. I flipped on my TV and realized that my favorite afternoon cartoon block, *Toonami*, was about to start. During this time, while I was engrossed in the action of *Dragon Ball*

Z and *Gundam Wing*, Mother had come home, silent as a ghost until I heard her yelling.

“Joshua!”

My heart stopped. I knew that tone. I had done something wrong. I jumped up and, grabbing the picture in hopes of using it as some sort of bargaining chip to alleviate whatever punishment I was about to receive, walked across the hall and into the lion’s den.

At the foot of her bed was Mother. Her eyes were like shining rubies glistening in the Sahara Desert. Her face was set like stone as fury poured from her piercing eyes. The gaze stopped me in my tracks. I looked towards where her hand was pointing. There sat the blue box.

“Why is Christopher’s box on my bed?”

I looked down. I could feel Mother’s wrath. “I... my... pencil broke... so I used the sharpener...”

Silence.

Fearing the worst, I looked back to my mother. I expected the face of the lioness ready to pounce on me at any moment, but only saw the face of terror. No longer was her face set to stone but cracked and shattered. With eyes wider than the moon, Mother dove towards the box. With a blur she had the little blue box opened. She stared into the box as if she was transported somewhere else. Each item she took out with such care, as if she was afraid that even the slightest mishandle would lead to such treasures’ destruction. One by one she placed the prized possessions of Christopher Linn Pagan on her bed. The teddy bear that declared “Crayola was the best” was first. It sat with utmost patience as she laid the pumpkin eraser, with its yellow eyes and yellow smile staring back at her. The little army man sat diligently for the first

president. The shiny silver quarter laid next to his soldier. Finally, she got to the pencil sharpener.

“Where are they?” she whispered. “Where are they?!” she shouted, turning to me. Tears flowed down her cheeks. “Where are they? What did you do to them?”

I took a step back and looked at the little trash can that held the ruined pencil shavings. Her feral eyes followed mine. “No! No no no no no!” she squealed, rushing to the tin can. Her eyes frantically searched but to no avail. “They’re gone!” she cried, falling to her knees. Her hand held the pencil sharpener to her chest while the other tried to hide the sight from her draining eyes. I took a step closer, hand reached out for comfort, but stopped at her words. “Go to your room,” she said between heavy sobs.

I watched my mother fall apart on the floor. *What did I do that was so wrong? They’re just dumb pencil shavings.*

“Go to your room!” she tried to yell but choked on her own despair. I walked over to the box and its possessions and laid down my drawing.

“I’m sorry...” I said as I left Mother.

She cried all night. Never leaving her room. When my stepfather got home that night, he took me to get some quick food. I was confused and he really didn’t have anything to say to me. Just said, “She’s really hurt, Josh. Give her time.”

I lied in my bed that night mixed with emotions. *Why did I get yelled at like that? If I was in trouble, then where’s my punishment?* And then it hit me. That was Christopher’s box. The one that came before me. The one that Mother had lost. His plaque rested on our hallway wall. He was smiling as the school photographer took his picture. Golden letters were scribbled beneath his name “In Memory of Christopher

Pagan.” She would tell me about my brother, each word dripping in the weight of losing a child. “I was ready to leave this world. I didn’t want to live, until I felt you kick,” she would tell me growing up. *How could I throw my own brother away like that?* I cried as well that night. For my mother. For Christopher. And for myself.

One day, years later, I asked her if she remembered that time long ago. “Yeah, I got really upset. It was like I lost a part of him. I mean those were HIS pencil shavings.” My eyes began to water as I thought about all those memories lost in mere seconds. But she smiled. “It hurt. And still does. It’s not like you knew or understood. But come to think of it, your pencil shavings were the ones that replaced his. Your pencil shavings are still sitting in HIS sharpener.”

The World is Your Dancefloor (Collection)

Olivia Farish





A-State Tributary Submission Guidelines

For works of fiction and creative non-fiction:

- *Do not exceed 20 pages
- *May submit multiple works, but no more than one prose per author will be considered

For works of poetry:

- *May submit multiple works, but no more than five poems per author will be considered

For works of art:

- *Submit print quality (high resolution) .jpg files

For photography:

- *Submit in original picture format (not a pdf.)

For All:

- *You must be a student of A-State to submit any work
- *Include a title and name (as you would want the byline to read) on the same document containing your work
- *Submit your written works on a .pdf or .doc format
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