

VII



SPRING 2026



A Letter from the Editor-In-Chief

The splendor of this campus inspires creativity in almost every person involved with Lees-McRae: from the busiest Pre-Vet students, to the Humanities and Art majors balancing creativity for classwork and personal enjoyment, and even the faculty and staff who wrangle all of these creative students daily. Having a specific home for the creativity produced by students on this campus is why *Ragweed*, originally called *Hemlocks and Balsams*, was started in 1970. This mission of harboring creativity amongst students on this campus is why I, and the *Ragweed* staff, have worked tirelessly on keeping the journal alive. In a school primarily dedicated to STEM, it's important for every student to be able to share their creative voice outside of academic endeavors.

After seeing how beneficial community support truly is in this area over the past two years, keeping the creative community on this campus thriving has become a spark under the (very small) staff working on *Ragweed* to showcase the incredible talent found at Lees-McRae, and to make sure everyone's creative voices are heard. Getting to read every writing submission and to view all of the visual art submissions reminded me just how special the students on this campus are, and I'm incredibly proud of Issue 7 of *Ragweed* because of how much creativity and passion went into each submission. It is an honor to be trusted with all of these amazing creative submissions. I cannot express enough gratitude to every single student who submitted to *Ragweed* this year, and I encourage every student reading this to submit to the journal next year.

My Dearest Thanks,

Grace Doss



Masthead

Editor-In-Chief

Grace Doss

Art Curator

Gwen Wooley

Fiction Editors

Grace Doss

Dr. Silas Heying

Designers

Gwen Wooley

Grace Doss

Nonfiction Editor

Grace Doss

Cover Artists

Cora Stevens

Cam Spier

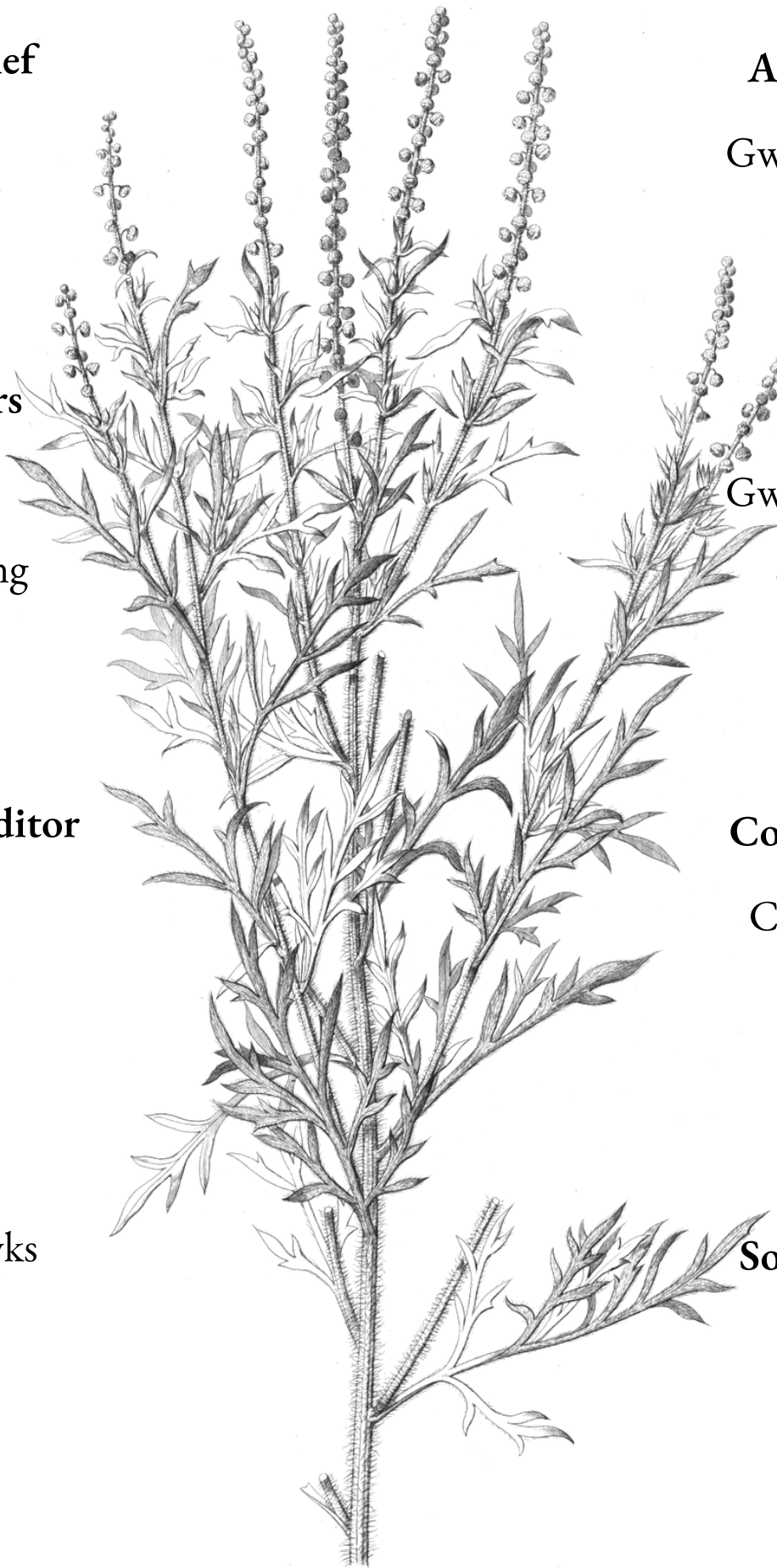
Poetry Editor

Mercedes Hawks

Social Media

Manager

Grace Doss





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BIOGRAPHIES



We Have Heaven at Home, photography by Hal Boles

The Cicada King

Cora Stevens

When my first baby girl died, the sharp hoof of a chestnut mare split her small skull along its sutures like the segments of a pomegranate. She was hardly ripe at all, with still so much growth left in her rubber bones, but all it took was one spook, one towering silhouette crossing the dirt path ahead of us, and she was plucked from the tree too early to thicken her rind. I'd thought that morning, on her eleventh birthday, that she'd grown so unbelievably big from the human grub I could once hold in one large palm. But when she laid there, dead in the dust, it tore my guts up to realize that Jamie'd hardly sprouted at all. She was still so very small at the end. Just a bud. A caterpillar beneath a heel.

I looked down at the blood orange in my dirty fist. It was a robust fruit; a monolith of citrus. It was full of juice and shaped just like her head. In that moment I knew that Troy would kill for it. He hadn't been the one to greet this delivery, a fact that was odd for a man that waited for the parcels like a heron stalking from tall bulrushes. He'd have ten days to pray that another snuck in amongst dried meats and canned vegetables, but I didn't think that there'd ever be a second. It was the first orange I'd seen since I arrived at the watchtower four weeks prior, and its sunburst peel taunted my dry mouth with the promise of sweet, wet flavor.

But I didn't eat fruit anymore.

I tilted my head to look up at the looming white spruce trees that cradled the sky amongst their thick whirls. Even from my place upon the worn swinging bench outside of the Northern Great Slave ranger station, I could see the dry and brittle nature of their branches. Dribbles of sap beaded at the edges of clusters of thin, pale needles, and when the sun caught the sheen of the thick ambrosia, I could almost pretend they weren't all dying. Perhaps things would have been simpler for me if I were ever the type of man who actually believed it would all be okay, one day. Instead, I just put one concrete foot in front of the other. Head high, shoulders broad. Keep moving.

The chattered laugh of a pileated woodpecker bounced from the sturdy trunks and surrounded me like a blanket of cacophony. I scanned the branches for the vocal little thing, but its quick body evaded my gaze. Their playful chants took over the forest by day, and over the weeks I'd spent as a fire lookout, I'd found that, though briefly, catching a flutter of black, white and red amongst branches eased the misery that ate through my chest like the tunnels of thick earthworms. It would never be easy, and I would never be okay, but I would survive to see the next woodpecker, and there were days when that was enough.

But a harsh sound like a boulder rolling down a hill cut my peace at the root. I could tell that the hurried rustling a couple hundred feet away was the sound of Troy sprinting back, having likely heard the engine of the delivery truck start up from where he was exploring. The first few times he'd come galloping through underbrush and tumbling over tree trunks to claw his way back to the ranger station, I'd thought a grizzly was charging my direction and my instincts screamed for a pistol in my grip. He was a broad, absolute mountain of a creature, and the forest seemed to part for him as if it feared getting trampled beneath his massive feet.

A few moments later, he came bumbling into my view, a plastic jar of what once held pretzels clutched at his side like a precious babe. Faint shapes bounced within the translucent walls.

“The hell you got there?” I huffed.

His smile was dumb and broad. “Found me some more cada’ shells. Wanna see, Matty?” He had the accent of a born-and-raised Saskie and the words of an undisciplined schoolchild. He was closer to getting shot for that than for startling me.

“Nah.”

“Aw, come see!” Despite those words, Troy approached me where I was still sitting, and I didn’t miss the way his wide, blank eyes dropped to the fruit clenched in my fist. As if I couldn’t see through the sweaty fingerprints on the container, he unscrewed the cap and held the jar to my face so I could peer down inside. Roughly three-dozen brittle molts stared up at me, the hollow shells of Canadian cicadas rustling against one another in a morbid rattle.

I immediately pushed it back towards him, pressing the jar into his broad chest as my lip curled like a hound’s. “You don’t need more of these damn things, Troy,” I chastised.

He shrugged in faux innocence. “Well,” he began, pursing his lips as if to whistle. “I seem to recall that, when me and Vanny say you don’t need something, you tell us to screw off and get your hands on it anyway.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“Lotta bottles up in that tower of yours for only bein’ here four weeks, Matty,” he mused, scratching his ear with one muddy finger as he made a point of avoiding my gaze. However, when I stood to begin moving, his attention locked back onto me. “Oh, don’t be like that! Say, where’d ya get that there orange, hm?”

“Plucked it off a tree.”

“Come on, I ain’t that stupid, Matty,” he sighed, stumbling after me like a fat bear as I threw open the door to the station and stepped into the main room. Troy had to duck to follow me through the frame.

“We don’t have trees like that here!” As he spoke, his eyes landed on the collection of boxes piled before a worn, heavily stained sofa. “Oh!” It was pathetic the amount of joy one man could feel at the sheer prospect of something as small and unimportant as a fruit. He bent down to rifle through them like a kid on Christmas, shoving aside brandless packages of jerky, crackers, and powdered milk. “These all the boxes that were delivered? Aw, Matty, don’t tell me that orange was by itself!”

I nodded, and his expression fell.

“Well, er, are ya gonna eat it?”

I shook my head.

“Matty!” Troy sighed and moved towards me, and my eyes followed the clumsy motion of his awkward feet. “We both know not to let this stuff go to waste out here.” He reached towards the orange and I nimbly tossed it to my other hand, a taunt that made his eyes sag like an old dog’s. “I’ll trade ya.”

Intrigue seeped into me like the sun through cold, black water. “Oh yeah?” I mused. “What you got?”

The Cicada King (cont.)

He eyed the orange with feral desire, mentally grading the quality of the fruit as he determined its worth. I saw spittle at the corners of his canine mouth, gleaming like the sap off the spruce trees. “Well, it hurts ta offer it, but I don’t want to cheat you,” he said, bending down to retrieve his plastic jar. I watched with one brow raised as he unscrewed the lid and shook a handful of shells into his large, calloused palm.

“I’ll give you, uh, nine of em’. Nine of em’ for your orange.”

“You gotta’ be shittin me, Pitch.”

He pointed a fat finger at me. “Hey, don’t you call me that!”

I shrugged. “What do you see in those shells, anyway?”

“Whatever you see in an orange you won’t even eat,” he pouted. “Say, Matty, you’re a real dud sometimes. Wish you’d care bout’ us more. Be a bit nicer.” Nine cicada molts were dropped back into the jar, which he placed on a large desk that sat at the center of the far wall. It was at that moment that I decided I wasn’t going to like whatever he was about to bark about. “You ever think you need to loosen up a bit?”

Annoyance churned inside my gut. “No,” I stated. “I don’t.”

“Well, I think you’d do the both of us a favor if you calmed down,” he mused, failing at nonchalance. “Maybe we ought ta’ find you a girl.”

“Pitch.”

“Hey!” Troy squawked, raising two fat hands in defense as if calming some sort of animal. “I’m just tryna’ help, just tryna’ help.” A moment later, he pulled at one of the drawers to the desk, and he fished around inside of it before withdrawing a small red box with a spade on the front alongside the silhouette of a dramatically posed woman. “Say, what about a different kinda trade, hm? I got your future wife right in here, Matty.” He shook the box for emphasis and his smirk turned sly. “She’s waitin’ for you all patient and such.” Despite the cardboard packaging and the unimpressive nature of the erotic playing cards, Troy’s eyes said that he was offering me gold. “Unconditional love in exchange for your orange, how about it?”

I was tempted to squeeze the fruit until it burst in my grip, but I couldn’t convince my fingers to tighten around its thick rind. “I said no, Troy.”

He was already shuffling the deck of cards, his large fingers managing nimble twists that formed illusions before me. Flashes of skin winked at me from amongst the cards until he sprawled them out face up on the desk in one neat swipe. Fifty nude women looked up at me with disgustingly sultry gazes, and I felt my skin crawl beneath their stares. “Troy,” I started, my voice tired. “You’re a real dog, ya’ know?”

“You act like Vanny don’t keep one in her front pocket!”

“Then she’s filthy too. Put em’ away.”

“Come on, Matty, ain’t any of these worth your orange?”

I ran my fingers through my hair, pushing the thick, brown strands back across the crown of my head. “I told you it’s mine.” He frowned from where he stood. “Stop pushing me about it, Pitch.” He grumbled as he collected the cards and replaced them in their box. “Told ya to not call me that,” he huffed. “But fine, whatever. Be like this, I guess.”

I didn't give those words the privilege of a reply, but they didn't get to sit in silence for very long, either, before a third voice heralded the appearance of a short, broad woman. Vanessa had her dark and thick curls piled high on her head, and a confident smirk not unlike the lazy grin of a cat pulled at the corner of her mouth as she leaned against the doorframe to the back room. She held the confidence of a stag despite her unimpressive height, and though I wasn't too keen on authority, she held at least a few ounces of my respect simply for living in the very woods I was stationed within for the previous nine years.

"He just knows no woman could compare to my Tonya." Her following smile displayed the empty windows where three missing teeth had been lost to time.

Troy's eyes widened in offense. "You watch yer mouth!"

A nonchalant shrug. "You seen her? She's a real beauty." She fished into the front pocket of her navy blue field shirt and pulled out the ten of hearts. I rolled my eyes at the image of a nude brunette sprawled out on a wooden dock, her spine contorted as if it'd been snapped in the effort to appear as sensual as she could physically manage.

"Oh, nah, don't expose her like that," Troy lectured, dumbly pushing Vanessa's hand back into her chest. His voice was chastising as his barking continued. "Disrespectful. That's why none of ya will ever see Samantha. Mine and mine alone." A hand clutched his chest as an expression of yearning crawled across his features.

I huffed in disgust. "Jesus, Troy. She ain't a real woman."

It wasn't often that his annoyance turned to true anger, but in one brief moment he managed to whirl on me and press a finger into my chest. "Hey," he started, his voice low as he moved into my personal orbit. Nothing he did could've made me back away, however, so I just leveled my gaze with his and let my stony eyes convey just how interested I was in his bullshit. "Hey, Mattias. You know what games I won't play with ya? Shit like that." His finger jabbed into my sternum with force that made me clench my jaw, more to muzzle myself than to muzzle the sensation. "So I'd bite my tongue if you wanna keep these five months cordial, friend."

"Back it up, Pitch," I growled.

"Not sure I wanna."

I pressed a palm flat to his chest, giving him a second of grace to make the right decision before I sent him stumbling back towards Vanessa. "Looks to me like you do," I responded coolly. My eyes shifted to Vanessa, who was watching the short display with crossed arms and an unimpressed gaze. "My weekly report is on your desk. Shouldn't be anything noteworthy we need to discuss face to face." A nod. "Good."

"I already took my share of the dropoff and set it aside. I'm going back up."

She sighed, a deep exhale that seemed to sag her even closer to the ground. "Alright, alright, shoulda known you wouldn't stick round with us for long." She offered me a smile that didn't quite reach her dark brown eyes. "I haven't seen you more than six or so times over the past few weeks, Matt. Don't forget you can come down an' say hi. Troy can cook as a meal."

Troy grumbled beside her, still licking his wounds from our brief spat. "Eh, maybe. If he's a bit nicer."

I gave him a deadpan stare. "I'll try my best."

The Cicada King (cont.)

Vannessa walked over to pat my shoulder. She had more weight behind her affection than Troy did behind his anger. “That’s what I like to hear. Now go run away. We both know you wanna’.”

No matter the wistful, guiltig tone she held, she didn’t have to tell me twice. I turned around just like that and made my way out of the station. My bag was still waiting for me outside by the bench, and after quickly checking to ensure no animals had made my meals their own, I threw my backpack over my shoulders and began the march back to the base of the tower I would call my home for the four remaining months. The short journey was comforting, and it was in moments like that one, where I was away from others and truly on my own within the cradle of nature, that the earthworms in my chest ceased their burrowing. My body felt heavy as I moved, but the weight on my conscience was lifted.

Somewhere within the trees, a woodpecker cackled. I tilted my neck to search for it and caught sight of its body on the side of a tall, dry, and dead quaking aspen. Its prehistoric head moved like a puppet’s wooden skull, turning left and right as it examined the bark beneath its clawed feet. Their eyes always felt all-knowing to me. Unblinking and raptor-like. They could pin me in place more than any predator. When it locked its neck and stared down the bark before it, I braced myself for its drum. When the sound came, it wove itself around every tree and threaded my ears. That was what I adored about them. The remarkable strength, the undeniably bizarre nature of their bodies and minds. What an animal.

I stared up, hypnotized like a doe, for a few moments more before I continued onwards, hiking my way up the side of a hill that framed the valley the ranger station was nestled within. The base of the tower was roughly half of a mile north, and I could see its looming frame in the near distance. It was a tall, almost celestial thing, with one-hundred-fifty feet of rust-red metal frame supporting a two-hundred square foot cabin space. It was a foreboding Olympus that oversaw miles and miles of Saskatchewan wilderness, and I was putting what was left of my heart in its cold, steel hands. I trusted those forests with my soul, after everything.

The first day I climbed the firewatch tower, I wondered if that was how Louis Riel felt when he took the thirteen steps to the platform of the gallows. The thought that change was inevitable but the end was approaching at a blinding gallop. He died thinking he was sent by god, and I lived thinking there wasn’t one. Still, I felt that pooling sense of damnation intermingled with my desire for change, the idea that, no matter how things ended, at least each step upwards meant something. And maybe, one day, at the end of my solitude, I’d go up higher, and higher, and higher, and I simply wouldn’t come back down.

I set the orange on a small, pathetic desk that was more of a shelf. The piece stood alongside a wobbling table holding a large, gray transceiver. Its legs were thin and spindly, and often I considered it a miracle that the heavy machine atop it had yet to snap each support like spruce twigs. The orange’s bright rind was a contrast to the dull colors that surrounded me up there. Despite the blue of the sky that endlessly stretched from beyond the rows of windows bordering the small space, I lived in a world of dull brown and steel gray. The spruce trees did not reach me up here, instead layering the earth below like thick pointillistic bundles of struggling life. The forests were dry this time of year, but there was a noteworthy devastation seeping through the trees like the spread of the fires that I was hired to stalk the wilderness for. All of it was dying.

Not for the first time, I wondered if that was how God felt when he looked down at us all. I was not a believer, never had been and never would be, in fact, but if there was some deity out there watching the seeds

of failure begin to sprout in their spiritual magnum opus, did they look on with the same hopeless disappointment that I felt then? Or were they not even human enough to care? Perhaps the unspoken key to godhood was apathy, and perhaps I could learn something from that mindset. It was always something disgustingly human that sent me back to every crevice I'd ever tried to crawl from.

My eyes drifted to the far corner. Stray sunbeams caught glass bottles and sent kaleidoscope prisms across the hardwood floor. 'Lotta bottles up in that tower of yours for only bein' here four weeks, Matty.' Troy was naive and childish. He had not an ounce of sense of what a 'lotta bottles' truly was. I knew. I'd known for a long, long time by that point. I'd known more than he would ever be able to just what constituted a 'lotta bottles', that dumb git. The pile in my corner was a pebble to what I used to be. A pupae. A caterpillar.



Mixed media barn quilt by Georgina Worley

It pulled him in, and out, somehow. He stopped kicking and thrashing. The water: it lifted him. Suspended. Pure tendrils of liquid that elevated his body above the depths, yet did not allow it to breach the surface. He tried to swim away from his boat. The Pendulum of the currents denied his request. Any attempt to swim was met with a resistance: a dense coolth of compressed nitrogen. His limbs were held, almost as if by a telekinesis. The harder he fought to move, the more rigid his cooling body became. Land was in sight, but there was no hope to reach it. Where was the lightning? Sputtering and kicking, the world gave no sympathy to his plight. There must be shelter somewhere.

He absorbed—all he could do. The water was moving. The water touched him. The water was cycling. The water was moving to the west. The water was 18 degrees. The water had a pH of 7.8. The water had no notable traces of chlorine, copper, rhodonium, iron, or sulfides. The water was moving to the north. The water had acceptable levels of silica. The water had 11 mg of dissolved oxygen per liter. The water was moving to the west. The water conductivity was 120 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$. What? The water had a salinity of 261 ppm. The water was fresh.

Fresh.

The water was fresh.

No ocean salts, no bits of rock reed, not even traces of benzene.

Fuck

This was not ocean water. The perks of being a machine: he knew exactly the parameters of his own body. The composition was just right. It was his own water. His own expiration. All the water he breathed out, here. He was floating in it. The phlegm from his own heaving lungs, churning and churning mycoloops. The fools! They thought all this water they poured into his gaping throat would further the world, but all it did was wound it. Both with his words, and with his rain. He was sinking in his own rivers. And in his own raindrops he would drown.

My name is Reverse of Raindrops.

I am here to find a way across the Divide.

I am an irreplaceable asset of innovation.

I am a mentor to my peers and a sanctuary to those smaller than me. I will see it through that the wills of my parents are satisfied.

I will let no shame come upon their memory.

I am the riches of their gracious hands.

I am a gift.

I am Reverse of Raindrops.

ROR was in his room. His gaze was greeted by the same indifferent tiling he had spent all 347 years of his life within. Six sets of 12 by 12 grids of acid-gray plates. This vault contained comfort, exasperation, triumph, and despair: every experience he had ever processed. All written in the lines between those tiles. Opalescent crystals

Breathe In, Breathe Out (cont.)

held his thoughts. Holographic writing projected his research. Prismatic tines tracked his bearing. He glanced at one corner in particular: tile L28. He had spent quite a bit of time fussing by this one when he was perfecting substrate shift strikes. Out of sight, his crown was somewhere far below.

Oh, the tiles, the aureoles, the trial logs. The terrible comfort.

This was his home. This was him.

Remember yourself.

The bowline had come untied - but the mast so intricately engineered bound his form to this holy interface. How should one forget his own orogeny? The bog could not, nor could it be blamed for reflecting back his own peatless erosion. There must be a reason ROR had been dispelled. To posit his expulsion from god's omnibox as a form of projective methodology would be a gross assault on his progenitors - besides it would never make it through peer review. Their blessing of anthropic decay had rendered the communication channels as broken as ROR's own compass.

No, he was no dissident. He was not in the ocean, full of his own refuse. He was never on a boat. He was not swimming. He could not be. It was not his design.

Nor was it design that his vault be full of water. Yet, he was still submerged. The crystals, animused into pearls, bore a subdued, silky hue. They lived up to their namesake, hovering in this marine terrain. They were illegible in this state, the water distorting the read-lines of the lattice. And there, his lightning! All his holograms still ran, though the water refracted and scattered their light. A pleasing green cast, pixels dispersed like falling stars, radiated through the fish bowl.

And there it was! A fish! In his own room.

It was undeniable: he was truly pelagic.

The elver, spinning and dancing circles in his temples only confirmed it. Elegant fins wavered as it twisted around the bundled wiring. Silvery scales concealed its arrow-shaped body against the metal backdrop. Only the glowing blue inlays of the tiles' edge revealed the shimmering flanks. A split tail the shape of a crescent moon rocked back and forth. He felt every movement.

A fish! Inside him!

It was impossible, really. For a fish to have made it up all this way. Perhaps one remnant of his aquatic dream was allowed to spirit away with him. It was quite a wonderful one. ROR gladly would take this aquarium existence over the pounding waves. And the elver, it gazed at him with unblinking discs of eyes. It had swam all this way to meet the oracle in the mountain, who knew everything. Yet ROR managed to gaze back with even greater wonder. The fish's eyes, they were so wide, so lively, so vivacious. A piercing dark pupil in a

diaphanous turquoise globe. Hazy lichen-green eyes and a face plated ocean-blue reflected back at him. The fish's eyes, they were open. That was important. Why was it important?

Then ROR noticed. It had a halo. The glowing cast of divinity's touch, hovering around its head. ROR has very strong feelings about this mark. What did it mean?

Oh.

It was her touch.

This fish was supposed to die.

But did he really have to?

Who even said such a thing had to occur?

And its eyes, they were still open, surely there was some mistake.

He really did not want to kill it.

It had even brought him a gift! The periphyton clung to its scales. It was so lovely. And his only company. For so many loops he had been alone. The others, he could not reach them any longer. None of them saw the stars. So he watched the fish swim circles in his flooded brain. And ROR was happy.



Untitled, painting by Chan Houck

The Forest

Kaley South

The sound of the wind rustling through the trees, and birds singing their songs, rush through my ears as I reach the spot I have been searching for. Somewhere flat, dry, and secluded to stay for the night. Over the course of this 14 mile hike, I have stayed with friends, at hostels, and in cabins, but never on my own in just a tent. My youth was spent hiking, and exploring nature, so I tell myself I will be fine. This is no different than any other hike, I'm just alone. I sit my bags down by a big oak tree, and take in the nature around me. I see a stream nearby and all around me are tall towering trees, wise with old age. I don't see many animals, which strikes me as strange, but most likely they're all hiding from me. I begin setting my tent up, as the sun is starting to fall. I fumble over my feet and the tent spikes as the world around me turns dark. Small footsteps, and the occasional cracking of twigs keep me on my toes, but I get settled as night falls. Before I settle, I hear a low growl, I look around trying to figure out where it is coming from. As the hair on my neck stands, and my heart seems to drop, I look down and realize it is simply my stomach begging for food. As it is too late to try and build, let alone start a fire, I snack on apples, and granola bars I had brought on the trip. Strangely, as the earth grows dark, the beings which inhabit it spring to life. Coyote howls, footsteps, and wind creates an atmosphere so eerie, yet calming, you cannot decide to be scared or comforted. I am used to these sounds, but I prefer the quiet nights, when I can actually get rest. I zip my sleeping bag all the way to the top, and close my eyes for the night. I am awoken by strange howls, not like any I've heard before, almost human, yet so animal-like at the same time. I stare at the roof of my tent, a transparent mesh barrier "protecting" me from the outdoors. As I stare, the howls seem to get louder, or closer perhaps; I am not yet scared, just alert to my surroundings. Suddenly, a new sound. Breathing, right beside my head as if someone has run a marathon and is struggling to recover..I hold my own, to be sure that I am not making this up from my anxieties of being alone, but no. I hear it. I can still see that it is dark, probably in the middle of the night and there is NO way I am going to check what the noises are. Chances are it is just a deer, or a rabbit, but I am not taking any chances. I cover my head to drown the breathing out, and try my best to fall asleep. After what seemed like forever, I slowly drift off.

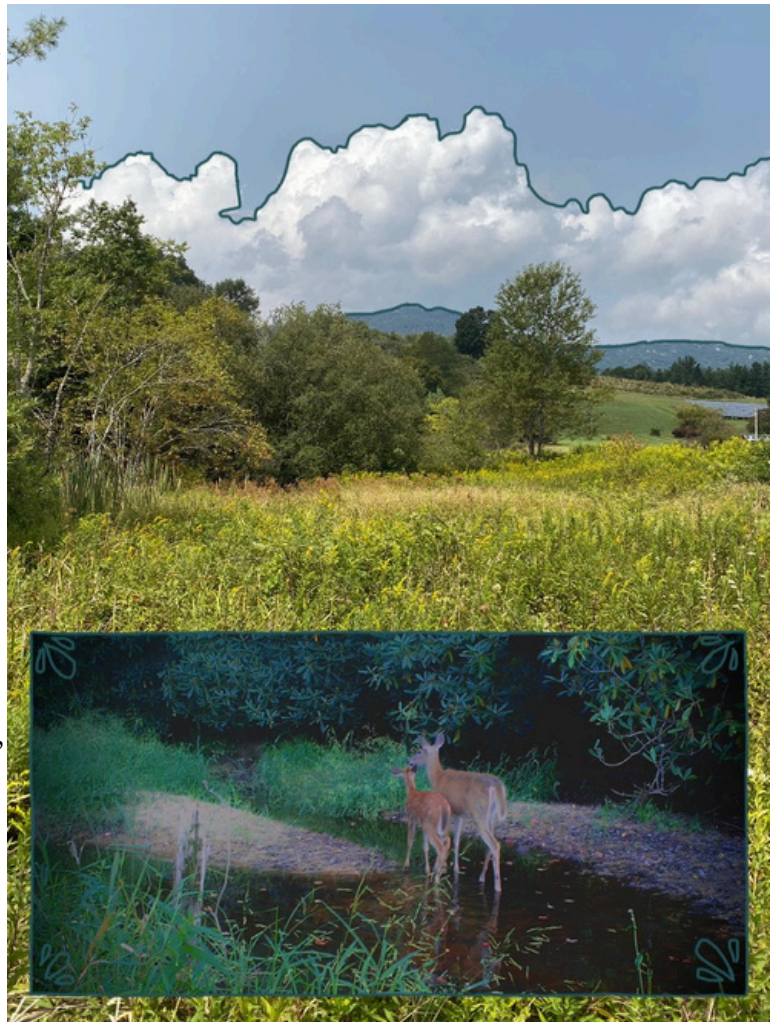
The morning comes, and I slowly open my tent. Strangely, the area looks different than the night before, The trees which towered above me before, are no longer there. In fact, nothing looks remotely the same, the river is not there, and my firepit was in a different place than before. "Maybe it was just dark, and I was tired last night" I tell myself Deep down I know what I saw, and this is not it. I try not to focus too much on the fact that I have no real clue where I am, and make some quick breakfast. As I eat, I feel as though there are eyes everywhere, of what I don't know; I just feel watched in every step I take. No time to ponder however, as today I need to make the hike to my next camp.. I finish my oatmeal, and pack up my things quickly so as to not spend much longer here. The feelings of being watched only intensify as I make the journey. Footsteps seem to follow me, and I keep hearing whispers which I cannot decipher. I walk for what seems to be days, checking over my shoulder occasionally with no success of spotting what is following. Night is beginning to fall, and I still haven't reached the summit, in fact it seems as though the trails grow longer as I go. Cutting my losses and quite frankly wanting to go home, I decided to set up camp at an alternative location.. I pick a clear secluded spot, and begin the tedious process of setting up camp. I finish just in time to watch the sunset while

I eat my dinner for the night. I still can't shake the feeling of being watched, but I know I can make it through the night, and home tomorrow. With that in mind, I drift off to sleep with a sense of excitement and confidence, forgetting about the whispers and feelings of being watched.

The sound of a zipper being slowly unzipped springs me awake, but I lay silent, too scared to even breathe, let alone look. I hear my things being jostled through, and footsteps circle my tent. I slowly grab my flashlight, hoping if it's just animals, they would get spooked. As the light shines through my tent, shadows emerge, but of what? My eyes can't make out what I am seeing. The shadows seem to stretch, and change forms. I am frozen in fear, unable to move in my tent, thoughts race through my head of what to do. I can hear my stuff being rummaged through, and thrown about. But I can also hear grunting, and a low growl which doesn't seem like any animal I've heard. "What if they open my tent" Is the main concern running through my mind, I have to do something, but what? Suddenly a figure appears right at the door of my tent, I hold my breath as it seems to bend down towards the zipper, the figure is skinny, yet seems to grow wider with each movement, It moves with unnatural crawl-like movements, as if it is half bear, and man. I tense, as the zipper begins to move, and my tent becomes not so safe. Readied with my flashlight as a "weapon," I position myself in the corner furthest from the door, in case I can escape whatever is trying to come in. The moment comes when the door is fully open, but as I prepare for the worst, what sounds like a stampede fills the air. I hear tree limbs snap, and the dry ground rumble and shake beneath my body. Overcoming my fear for a short second, I peek

outside. What I see however, I cannot comprehend; tall, skinny, barely clothed 'people.' Yet they seem to not be people at all, they have fur, run on 4 legs and can scale mountains as a mountain goat could. I watch them climb trees, and run off into the distance, frozen in fear as if my legs are unable to move.

The silence quickly fills the air, almost suffocating me, yet there is a strong wind which seemed to pick up only as they were out of view. I pack up my tent as quickly as possible, and run, not walk in the direction I know is out. I ran for hours, but somehow made it to my car. The first thing I do is check in with my family, but how will I tell them what has happened? They would never believe me. I decide that's besides the point, I just want to get home and never step foot in these woods again. What were those things? I repeatedly ask myself on the way home, eventually coming to the conclusion of: "I don't know, nor do I want to know, those things can stay in the woods far far away from me."



Untitled, photography by Katalia Bowie and Carter Mock

Mirrored

Gracie Jones

The boy could sense his mother's disappointment when he opened the car door. She was burning in silent fury. He said nothing, climbing into the front seat and quietly closing the door behind him. She wouldn't be happy if he slammed it. He clicked the seat belt into place and let her lead the conversation.

"I hope you know how disappointed I am."

The boy said nothing in return. He already knew he messed up.

She sighed. "Another fight, really. Your father wouldn't stand for this." She muttered the words more to herself, but the words cut into the boy. He turned his head away, staring out at the school parking lot. There was a moment longer, then she reached for the keys.

"I have a job tonight," she said calmly as the car spluttered on. "Mr. Parker's son asked me to clear his family home."

The boy's mother was a maid, but not a typical one. She specifically cleaned the houses of the recently deceased, an act for the family members that may not immediately be able to return where their loved ones passed. It was a job she relished. A job that she had recently begun bringing the boy on, letting him wander around dusty old knickknacks while she worked. There was never anything interesting in the houses. There were weird things, old items, creepy cabinets of dolls and glass figures and bottles, shelves of moldy books, and closets and chests filled with moth-eaten clothes. But not one of those was of any interest to a twelve-year-old boy. His evenings spent accompanying his mother to work were filled with boredom.

He frowned. His mother shook her head at his disgruntled look, but neither of them said anything more. The drive to the house was equally as silent, at least in the realm of human voices. The loud rumbling of the old car soothed his annoyance, and, with a small crack of the window, he could hear the wind whistling as it rushed by. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the glass.

Nowhere was a long drive in their small town. All too soon they arrived at the Parker's house, an old brick thing with two stories and wooden paneling along the topmost floor. The windows around the garden were boarded over, and all the plants were overgrown, grass up to nearly his knees when he stepped out of the car and slammed the door behind him. His mother fished in her purse for the key, and the boy tried to entertain himself by counting how many spiders he saw nestled amongst the bricks.

One...

Two...

Three...

Four...

By the time he got to six, his mother was slotting the key into the lock and pushing open the front door. It creaked loudly. He winced.

"Don't break anything," his mother warned as they stepped inside. The boy couldn't remember when she said Mr. Parker died, but it had to have been a while. The house was covered in a thick layer of gray dust, so thick in some places it was practically a carpet. He scuffed his shoe against the wooden floor, smearing it into the cracks. "They're planning to host an auction once everything is cleaned. Everything in here will be for sale."

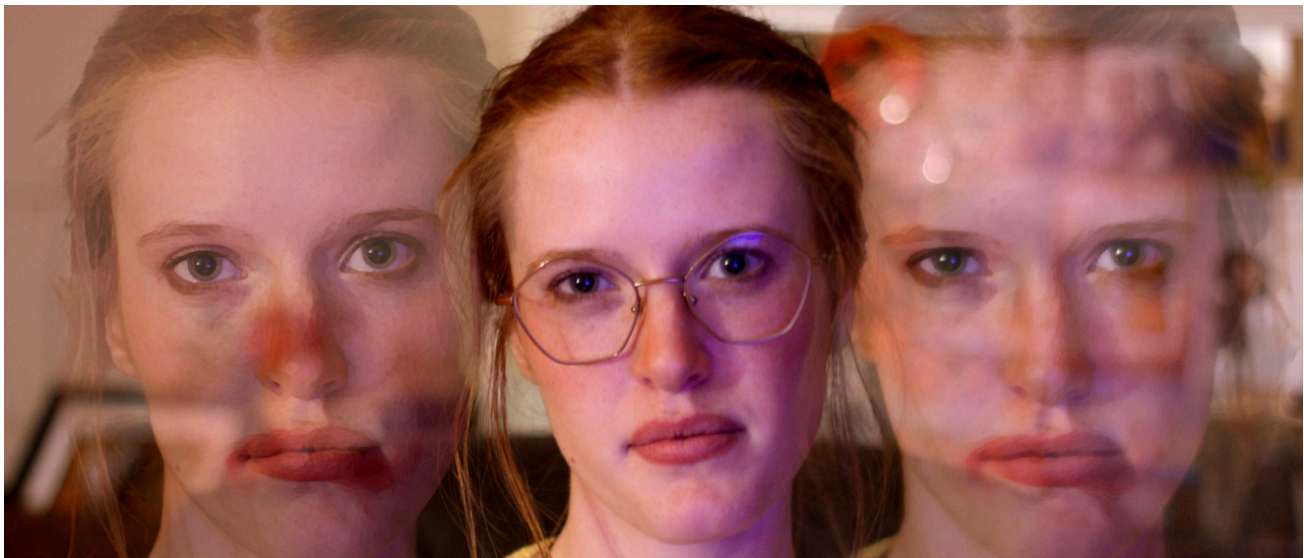
Do not break anything.”

He'd only broken something once, almost twelve houses ago. She wouldn't let him forget it.

The boy rolled his eyes as his mother set down her cleaning bag. Silently, he crept away, veering towards the stairs. He was going to explore. A house this big and old was sure to have at least a couple rooms that weren't identical.

The staircase was right in the center of the entrance hall, one of those old fashioned ones that goes up and wraps around the room before vanishing to the second floor. He didn't waste a second before climbing up. Getting out of his mother's sight was worth it. If he'd stuck around she probably would have forced him to help her clean—he had a feeling this wasn't going to be a one day job, based entirely on how thick the dust was and the numerous cobwebs crowding the corners of all the rooms. There was nothing that immediately caught his eye on the second floor, so the boy climbed up to the third. There, he saw it.

There was a mirror at the end of the hall. He crept forward, footsteps small, so small, because he was small. So, so small. The lights were off, but the mirror shone with a strange glinting glow, sucking him in. He couldn't look away. He couldn't see his reflection until he got close, until his fingerprints were smudging onto the surface of the glass. But the fingers reflected back at him were not his own. The hand on the other side of the mirror was old, wrinkled and gnarled and crooked bones and peeling skin. The arm it connected to was skinny and saggy, sun spots gaping holes in paperwhite flesh. His eyes moved up and up until they saw, reflected back at him, sunken cheeks and missing teeth and bulging eyes and a liver spotted forehead. One eye was blue. The other was brown. Just like the boy's own unique ones. As he watched, thick, dark blood drooled from the swollen tear ducts, leaving a line of red down the face. As he watched, he felt warmth, tacky and sticky, fall down his cheek. He lifted a hand. The reflection did too. He touched his cheek, and his fingertips came back stained red, covered in blood. His reflection grinned.



Portrait, photography by Soleil Correa

If There Were a Few to Name

Asch Fields

“What the hell is that.” Jade’s words were that of a question, but there was no doubt in her tone that even suggested she was looking at something one could question. The look on her face didn’t help. In the 14 years I had known her, never once had I seen such raw, unfiltered emotion. Worse than a deer in headlights, her face was drained of color, her eyes wide with pin-point pupils, her brows furrowed, her mouth slightly open like she meant to ask again, but this time the only one to catch her words was the rotten air that surrounded us. Every part of her, every limb, every inch of skin, was trembling and shaking in what could only be described as absolute abject horror. No, not horror. Horror was when you knew what it was that scared you. When you threw open that door, looked death in the eye, felt fear, but you understood. This was terror. She saw the thing that created such fear, but what seemed to scare her was the fact that she had no idea where to start. I spent this time stalling, studying her expression, trying to see whatever it was in the reflection of her suddenly distant, glassy, tearfilled eyes, before I finally, slowly, began to turn around. My heart pounded so loud I had it confused with the enigma’s heavy, trudging steps shaking the ground, only just then realizing I was trembling just as badly as my compatriot.

My eyes finally landed on the thing. That’s simply what it was, a thing. I’ve seen people write and document these eldritch horrors by calling them “indescribable,” only to try to describe them. I won’t even bother wasting your time trying. Besides, by the time I’ve found the words and pieced them together, my friend and I may be long dead. However, what I can describe was the violent, destructive rush of complete and total agony that struck my heart and my psyche. I felt... no I knew, that if Jade were shot and killed right before my eyes, handling that would be a cakewalk compared to the sudden onset delirium and dazed panic that now coursed through my veins in the form of adrenaline. My breathing became shallow, like the concrete under our feet returned to its thick wet state and began to swallow me whole, my chest tightening and the air being forced from my lungs. I had experienced heart problems for as long as I could remember, though this was the first time where I wouldn’t be surprised if it decided to give out right then and there, forcing me to leave my friend to fend for herself as my lifeless body falls to the ground.

As horrid as I felt simply from looking at this thing, I couldn’t shake the second feeling that left me planted where I stood. Unwavering awe. Before I realized what was happening, I felt tears streaming down my face, blurring my vision as it got closer, step by awful step. They were not tears of terror as my friends were. I could not look away as this thing had hypnotized my very soul. As desperately as I wished to run, I found myself willingly resisting that primal urge for the sake of fascination and curiosity.

I had only noticed that my friend had snapped out of her haze when I realized I was no longer looking at it, but instead into her frantic gaze, her mouth moving but my senses were failing me. I finally came back to the world, still feeling dazed as if heavily sedated, brought back to the situation at hand as she shouted my name inches from my face, her sweaty, shaking palms cradling my face, yelling that we need to go, pleading me to stay with her as if I were dying in her arms. She shot a glance over her shoulder at the approaching creature, my mind temporarily going blank as it came into view once more, before she practically pulled my arm out of its socket, yanking me down the road away from the thing, forcing me into a sprint. I stumbled slightly at first, realizing how weak my body felt, like I was standing for the first time in years, learning how to run

before I remembered how to walk. I caught myself before I fell, my arm throbbing in pain from the force dragging me forward, my mind a maze of questions and panic, as I desperately sprinted behind my friend who was still gripping my wrist like a lifeline.

We ran for probably five minutes before I realized that the fear I felt only mimicked hers. The real panic I felt was the desperation to pull from my friends once safe grasp like a tortured dog on a chain, my systems pleading me to stop her and to turn and run towards the thing instead. The further we ran, the more trapped I felt. The closer we got to the treeline, the faster the tears fell from my cheeks, the more my wrist burnt under her tight grip, the more I felt like a child being taken from my place of safety, my home. I couldn't begin to explain why I felt like this. At the same time, I couldn't begin to care either.

We entered the forest and my friend finally released me, weaving through trees and jumping over tall, mutated roots. Free of my spiked collar, I slowed to a stop, my mind racing helplessly. Just before I could look back for the thing, I heard her call for me. "What the hell are you doing?!" she pleaded as she stammered in her step, "Please Morgan don't do this! Don't be like-". She was cut short, her foot catching on a curled tree root, causing her to shriek as she lost her balance, flying forward into the brush. I almost didn't go after her until I heard a solid thud and a snap, but no cry. For the first time since seeing her eyes, I felt nauseating dread. I hesitated, panting softly both from the run and the adrenaline coursing through my veins. This dread overtook my curiosity. I cautiously moved closer to where she had fallen, every step making my bones shudder.

I pushed through the brush delicately, finding that it gave way to a hill, and from the hill into a clearing with a small pond, murky with disease. It took me a moment to register the sight, and after a moment of analyzing the oddly peaceful environment, my eyes landed on the still, crumpled body of my friend. I just stared for what felt like hours, waiting for her to make a sound, to twitch, to get up, anything. Then I finally worked up the nerve and cautiously descended the steep hill. As I got closer, I didn't need to check her pulse or shake her to know that she had snapped her neck the moment her head made contact with the jagged rock below, blood soaking her hair. She was dead. The fall had killed her. It wasn't even that high up, it was just a matter of her looking back at me, tripping, and landing just right for the pressure to cause her vertebrae to dislocate, making that awful crack, and severing her spinal cord. In my hesitation, she was probably still alive for a few seconds. The fall killed her. No, not the fall, I had killed her. I was so captivated by the monster behind us that I worried her and her worry for me caused her to lose focus and lose her footing. I killed my best friend because I was careless and I was hypnotized by a beast neither of us could understand and now she never will.

It took me a moment to realize I was now on my knees, silently cradling her corpse to my chest, blood staining my neck as I held her head under mine. I ran my fingers through her knotted hair, my chest aching, my heart beating loud and slow. I stared at the grass where she had fallen, the blades popping back up and moving like an organism waking from its sleep, recovering from her sudden impression in the ground, forgetting she was ever there, my footsteps slowly following suit. My eyes followed this pattern of revival and landed on her foot, her shoe missing, and her sock bloody. I delicately reached down and lifted the bottom of her shredded pant leg, finding that her ankle had twisted sharply, faint bruising already setting in, deep scratches from the hateful thorns she had fallen through decorating her shin, causing a consistent stream of blood to stain the pale pink skin. She must've hit that tree root hard when she turned to look at me.

If There Were a Few to Name (cont.)

Even if she had survived the fall, it would take weeks if not months for a sprained ankle to heal, even longer for a fracture, dislocation, or break. She would've been a liability and she would've hated it. She would've been as good as dead if I had tried to carry her further into the woods for a safe place to rest. Outside of that, this world was hell frozen over already. This death was a mercy.

The tears had dried from my eyes and I released her leg. I held her for a moment longer, staring at nothing for what could've been half an hour, maybe more than that. Time felt awfully weird these days, even more so now. I just wanted to cradle her, hold her until all of her body heat finally dissipated, trying to convince myself that it was better this way, that she's no longer hurting, that she would've made me leave her there anyway. Despite how much reassurance I gave myself, I couldn't shake the ache in my chest that I was alone. I had felt alone when everything started, even when she and I had started our journey out on the desolate highway. But even then, I had her. Now I had nothing. What good was trying to survive if she wasn't here? That thought echoed in my mind for a long time. She's gone. That's all there is to it.

After a while I finally stood, carefully scooping her lifeless body in my arms, realizing with another ache that she weighed practically nothing. She had been telling me our entire journey that she was fine and taking care of herself, always looking out for me and making sure I was eating, healthy, alive. She died doing that and now her corpse was the evidence proving that long before this, she had already given her life for mine. I carried her along the pond and found the last healthy looking tree in the clearing. I gently sat her down against the wood, supporting her neck though it would do no good now. I glanced around the little clearing and decided to take sanctuary here, at least for the night. I heard no movement from the thing chasing us, hell I almost forgot why we were running, my mind so preoccupied by the turn of events. I stood and looked down at my friend before reluctantly leaving to collect fallen branches and some dead foliage, praying her lighter still had enough fuel to start a fire before yet another freezing night.

I gathered enough sticks to fill my arms, avoiding the diseased branches and keeping an eye out for any small animals that had yet to mutate. I came back to the clearing, setting the sticks down in front of my friend, sitting on the soft grass and building a cone of wood to start the fire, making sure it was far enough away that it wouldn't catch on her clothes. I rummaged through her bag and found her lighter, fighting the trigger for a while before finally getting a spark. I watched as it slowly consumed the dry branches, glancing over it and at my friend's lifeless expression. I forced myself to look away as if that would do me any good at this point. The adrenaline was starting to wear off and I felt my eyes flutter. We hadn't properly slept in the past 2 days, too scared to stop for longer than 20 minutes at a time. She was sleeping forever now, I might as well hope to do the same. I laid beside the fire, not caring about the dirt on my clothes as they were already so bloodstained I couldn't care less. I stared at her for a moment longer before speaking softly, my voice rough and distant, so far from my mind that I could hardly identify it as mine anymore. "If I survive tonight," I whispered to her unresponsive form, "I'll give you a good burial and finish our walk like you wanted. I'll try at least." Not that I expected anything, it still doubled the ache when she didn't respond. I swallowed hard and curled up slightly, shutting my eyes and praying that plan didn't go through, praying tonight I'd join her and wouldn't be cursed with the promise I whispered to the husk of the girl I'd known most of my life.

It took a while, but I eventually fell asleep. I dreamt but, as per usual, nothing of substance. Ever since the

War ended, I started to have very fleeting dreams with very few things I recognized. This time all I could remember was the empty highway we had traveled down for so long, a distantly familiar blue door, and my friend's face. Her face lingered in my mind the longest. Though the longer it stayed, the fainter her smile got. Her face rapidly lost its color, and her eyes became unfocused. Her neck cracked abruptly and I jolted awake, gasping for air like I had finally come above water. I sat, panting heavily, holding my face in my hands, attempting to get my breathing under control, reminding myself it was just a nightmare. I finally looked around the clearing, finding that the sunlight had returned, no sign of danger was present, and my friend's body was still there against the tree. I cursed my luck, wanting to scream at whatever higher power had decided to torture me so. But then again, was I really deserving of a quick ending like hers? I caused this, I killed her.

I was suddenly overcome with a vicious wave of nausea and clawed at the grass as I vomited. I could feel it burning in my chest and out my throat. The tears came soon after and I found myself doing exactly what I had wanted to do when I woke and was reminded of the sin I had committed. I screamed. It rippled out of my soul, made my body ache everywhere, my fingers tearing at the soft grass and digging into the dirt. I screamed and I swore, babbling loudly and nonsensically, not bothering to be coherent at this point; no one could hear me except myself or a potential threat that could end my suffering. It hurt, by god it hurt, but I didn't care. I wailed until my vocal chords felt like they had been torn out, my eyes burning with tears of hate and remorse. I don't know who I was yelling at. Myself? Her? God? Hell, maybe it was a combination of the three, I certainly don't remember. I could very well be going insane. Took me long enough I suppose. We had been traveling for well over a year at this point, no one but ourselves. If we'd seen any other people, it must've been brief as I have absolutely no memory of such an encounter. I had every right to lose my mind when heaven finally fell, the War ridding the earth of every last decent human being. I had every right to fall in love with the only person that cared to spare me from such a descent. But she was gone, because I had killed her. Now I lie trembling and sobbing on the forest floor, grasping helplessly at my arms, my bloody and cracked nails digging into the fabric of my sweatshirt, with a smoldering campfire in between myself and my best friend's corpse. I wanted to promise her I'd never forget her face, that I'd come back here to her by my bitter, agonizing, yet welcome end, but my memory had failed me so many times during our journey. She was all I had and I knew damn well I would leave this clearing and her face would become a blur in my mind. This thought made my heart feel hollow. I was torn between leaving and completing the journey she wanted so desperately for me to complete, or letting nature take its course and sitting beside her to rot or until something found us. I forced myself to sit up, not bothering to brush the tears from my eyes. I looked at my friend, as if waiting for her advice that I had relied on this entire journey. I knew it wouldn't come, but I guess I just hoped that seeing her face would help me make my decision.

As I stared, I heard a crack from deep within the forest, quickly turning to find the source of the noise. My body shivered as I heard the next snapping of branches, following the pattern of someone, most likely something, coming through those woods, getting closer to the clearing. I scrambled to my feet, digging through my bag to find my gun, knowing that it would only do me any good in the off chance that it were a human approaching. As I debated whether to run and save myself or defend my friend's body from suffering a worse fate after death, the brush on the hill shook slightly and my heart matched its jagged rhythm.

A Royal's Country Christmas

Abby Grimes

“Open your eyes.”

Adalynn did as she was told, and her mouth fell open. Eric had led her to what was a large ballroom. The ceilings were higher than any chapel she'd ever been in, and huge marble columns lined the room on her right. Three massive diamond chandeliers hung from the high ceiling that was trimmed in gold. Adalynn looked down at her feet, which were standing on top of a clear, white marble floor. The floor was so polished she could almost clearly see her reflection.

When she took a small step to the right, red clay dust fell off of her boots and onto the floor. She felt her cheeks flush in embarrassment. Everything about the room was elegant. This was where Eric belonged. Then here she was, in a pair of overalls, staining marble floors with clay.

Adalynn looked back up at Eric, who was looking at her, his blue eyes shining. You don't belong here, Addy.

Eric held out a hand to her. “Dance with me,” he said softly. Adalynn searched his eyes for a sign that he was humoring her. She didn't find any.

Alarm bells blared loudly in her head as she took his hand, stepping closer to him. You're gonna get hurt! Stop now! Save your heart!

Eric put his hand around her waist and pulled her closer to him. When he did, soft music enveloped the room. Adalynn felt her cheeks warm. She should've known he'd had something planned.

His blue eyes softened as he took the hand from around her waist and cupped her chin. “You're so beautiful, Addy.”

Adalynn laughed, and Eric frowned.

“I'm not exactly dressed appropriately for a place like this.”

Eric brushed his thumb over her lips.

“I don't care about your clothes, Addy. Only you.”



Clothing design by Ally Dieffenbacher

The Tidebreaker Knight

Sabmod Lacewell

Born of two worlds, a Genasi is the child of elemental power and mortal blood, a being shaped by fire, water, earth, or air with the storm of the elements coursing through their veins.

In the world of Elarion, such creatures are rare to see, not because they are hunted down, not because they are all hated, but simply because they keep to themselves.

The crashing waves of Virelin Deep were quite fierce during this time of the year, waves crashing against the bow of the Starlance. A ship best known for being able to transfer goods and people; steadfast, reliable, and strong, it carries the heaviest cargo, the burdens of those who ride it.

In the lower deck of the ship, small families huddled together, hoping to reach new lands and start over, far away from the thieves and horrid creatures that had terrorized their villages. With no protection and no wish to pay those who sought to exploit them, they sought freedom across the sea. Children laughed and ran about, passing the time on the long, weary voyage.

One child, playing tag, wandered further toward the back of the deck, where a figure sat against the wall, his head hidden beneath a cloak. The curious girl forgot her game as her eyes lingered on the fabric. Intricate, water-like patterns shimmered on the cloak, flowing as if it were woven from the very waves it represented.

“Excuse me... sir?” Her soft, shy voice trembled as she kept a safe distance. Her fingers fumbled nervously through her shoulder-length hair, her breath caught in her chest as she hoped she hadn’t angered the mysterious figure.

The stranger stirred, opening his eyes, revealing brilliant, oceanic green ones. One might expect irritation at being disturbed, but instead his lips curved into a gentle smile.

“Hello, little one. How can I help you?” His voice was soft and kind. For someone who looked like a seasoned traveler, one might have expected a gruff or weathered tone, yet his words carried the warmth of a father welcoming his child home.

“Are you one of those genies? The ones that grant wishes?” the red-haired child asked, still twisting her long strands of hair. Though nervous, she seemed more at ease now.

The man chuckled lightly. “You’re only half right, dear. While my ancestors may have been genies, I am not one myself.”

With a slow motion, he pushed back his hood, revealing more of his face. The child gasped in awe. His features reflected the sea itself: skin with a faint ocean-like hue, soft glowing marks beneath his eyes, and hair that spilled out like silky strands of seaweed, well-kept yet wild. When he smiled, his teeth appeared sharp, yet somehow the expression remained warm and welcoming.

“I’m a Genasi,” he said, enunciating carefully to help her sound it out.

“*Gen... gas... si...*” she repeated clumsily. Being a child, she didn’t quite grasp the pronunciation, and so the name “*Gengassi*” stuck. He didn’t seem to mind.

“If you’re a *Gengassi*,” she asked earnestly, “does that make me... an Elizabeth?” She tilted her head, clearly pondering whether her name was the name of her kind.

The man let out a soft, genuine laugh at the thought. “Well, if you are Elizabeth, then that is your name. It’s who you are, not what you are.”

His words carried the wisdom of someone who had lived long and seen much, though he knew they might not fully reach a child's understanding.

"Who... what... I... am?" Elizabeth echoed, tilting her head even further, still puzzled.

The Genasi chuckled again. "Let's put it this way, you're a princess, but your name is Elizabeth."

That seemed to bring a smile to her face, her innocent smile showing brightly with her gapped front teeth. She indeed was a child who was happy with her life of whimsy; being called a princess seemed to add to it as well. Getting an idea, he rubbed his chin while looking around before spotting a barrel wobbling about to the rocking of the ship. He opened it up and saw just what he needed. The water in the barrel shivered under his hand, rippling and twisting as if alive. With a subtle flick, streams rose into the air, spiraling and folding over themselves. Frost raced along the liquid, turning it pale and crystalline, jagged patterns forming like delicate veins. The ribbons wove together, curving into a crown, finishing with a sharp, ringing chime as the last droplet froze. The tiara hovered, glittering like a fragment of winter itself.

With a soft smile, he gently placed it on the small child's head and kneeled like a knight bowing before royalty. "Princess Elizabeth, I wish you a safe voyage. Now, hurry back to your friends and family. They must be wondering where you went off to." With a giggle, she ran off to rejoin her friends, instilled with a new sense of whimsy. Her friends gathered around, admiring the tiara on her head.

Happy with what he had done, the Genasi turned to go back to resting before the boat violently rocked. He stumbled, catching himself just in time. Others were not so lucky. A chorus of thuds and yelps filled the air as passengers struggled to regain balance. Confused, he looked toward the upper deck as shouting erupted from above. His hand brushed the hilt at his side before he gripped his scabbard and made for the stairs.

"Is everyone okay? Any injuries?" His voice was calm, steady enough not to spark panic but strong enough to cut through the noise. A few nodded, tending to others. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw a child clutching their mother.

The sound that followed was one he knew too well, a deep hollow woosh. Instinct took over. He sprinted forward, shouting, "GET DOWN," tackling them just in time as a cannonball tore through the wall, splinters exploding across the floor. The projectile whistled inches above their heads before crashing somewhere beyond.

His pulse quickened. These were not rogue waves. This was an ambush.

He rose quickly, brushing shattered wood from his cloak and guiding the terrified mother and child to safety. He gave the child a reassuring smile before bolting toward the deck, the air alive with screams, some terrified and others driven by adrenaline, as the stairs groaned beneath his boots.

There was only one kind of trouble that could cause this. Pirates. Most travelers were fortunate never to cross paths with them, but luck had clearly abandoned this voyage.

When he reached the deck, he stopped abruptly. The captain stood firm at the helm, her hand raised to halt him. Her blue uniform shimmered with accents of green and purple, calm yet commanding, marking her as the ship's undisputed authority.

"All civilians are to be below deck this instant. Unless you have a death wish, I suggest you get your blue hindquarters back down there immediately." Her voice was thunderous, perfectly matching her towering frame.

The Tidebreaker Knight (cont.)

He swept his cloak aside, revealing a badge, a crest of a sword set in stone with water cascading around it like a waterfall.

“I understand your concern, ma’am,” he said evenly, “but I must implore you to let me help.”

She raised an eyebrow, taken aback. A knight’s crest was a rare sight at sea, but hardly an unwelcome one.

“Well,” she said with a faint smirk, “seems a knight of Aequorim has graced our ship. Name?”

He shifted his cloak again, revealing the sheath at his hip. Though he wore no armor, his bearing alone carried the weight of a seasoned knight.

“Tidebreaker Knight, Delta, at your service, madam.”

Without further interruption, Delta made his way to the deck, managing to stay upright despite the violent rocking of the ship. The wooden boards groaned under the stress of the waves as he fixed his gaze on the horizon. There it was, the rogue ship. Its massive hull was smeared with crude, uneven paint that formed the skeletal outline of a serpent, its jaws gaping wide as if to bare its fangs at any who dared cross its path. The sails loomed like torn shadows against the dim sky, black as the swashbucklers’ hearts. One look was all Delta needed to know exactly what kind of pirates they faced: the kind that would not stop until the deck was soaked in blood and treasure.

His stomach tightened. These rogues would not just take the cargo, they would take the ship itself and likely every life aboard. Judging from the ferocity of the first barrage, mercy was not part of their plan.

“FIRE!” the captain roared, her thunderous voice cutting through the chaos. A chorus of cannons answered, shaking the deck as they unleashed their fury. The smell of gunpowder burned through the salt-sweet air while cannonballs screamed across the sea, some smashing into the enemy hull with splintering force, others hissing past and vanishing into the depths, fated to rest at the ocean floor until the day some diver disturbed their silence.

Delta narrowed his eyes. The rogue ship’s cannons had gone quiet. Its crew now fought only to steady their vessel, their sails straining to keep pace.

“Too afraid to fire, huh?” the captain sneered, one hand gripping the railing. She prepared to bark another order, but Delta suddenly raised his hand.

“No, something’s wrong,” he muttered, his tone sharp and uneasy. “They already had our attention with that first attack, why stop now?” His eyes widened. “Oh no.”

Without another word, he spun around, snatched up a heavy plank of wood, and bolted toward the captain. She flinched in surprise, her hand flying to her sword, but before she could draw it, Delta was already upon her, raising the plank in a blur.

The crack of steel meeting wood rang out, not from an attack, but a block. A pirate’s blade had been inches from the captain’s throat, the intruder having slipped aboard in the confusion. The assassin’s eyes widened as Delta shoved back with all his strength, sparks flashing between the clashing edges.

Before the pirate could recover, the captain lunged forward with a roar and drove her boot into his chest. The force of her kick knocked the air from his lungs and sent him sprawling backward over the railing, his scream swallowed by the roaring sea below.

“That first attack was a feint, a distraction to draw their eyes while a smaller crew rowed up our flank!” Delta shouted, his voice cutting through the roar of the waves.

Before the crew could fully turn, grappling hooks slammed into the rail and a swarm of pirates clambered onto the deck, blades flashing and faces twisted in hunger for blood and plunder. One wiry pirate darted toward a crewmate struggling with the rigging, blade raised for a clean strike.

The knightly Genasi quickly gripped the heavy plank of wood he was still holding and hurled it with brutal precision. It struck the pirate across the temple with a sickening crack, sending him sprawling across the deckboards. The rest froze for the fraction of a second Delta needed.

His movements were sharp, efficient, and merciless. He closed the gap between himself and the next pirate, his cloak snapping in the wind, and drove a solid kick beneath the man’s ribs sending them sprawling as well. A dagger flashed toward his throat, but Delta slipped sideways, caught the attacker’s wrist, and slammed his elbow into the man’s gut before snapping a clean jab into his nose. The blade fell from numb fingers.

Another pirate charged in from the side. Delta pivoted smoothly, meeting the swing with a swift duck, then swept his opponent’s legs out from under him with a precise kick. He moved like someone who had trained every motion to perfection, no wasted energy, no hesitation, just pure control.

He finally seized a dropped saber from the deck. The blade was rough and chipped, but it would serve. He parried one strike, drove his shoulder into the attacker’s chest, then turned and hurled the sword like a dart, knocking another pirate’s weapon clean from his hand. The sharp ring of steel against wood echoed across the roar of waves. What a wonderful way to spend the day.

“Protect the civilians!” Delta shouted, commanding through the clash.

“Well don’t just stand there, you dolts! Get your asses moving!” The captain roared in response, her voice booming across the deck amidst the chaos. “I want men in the lower decks! If I see a scratch on one child I’ll have you thrown off the ship! I want the cannons manned! We keep that ship at bay at all costs!”

Her words ignited the crew into motion. Sailors rushed to shield the passengers while cannon crews scrambled into position, the thunder of gunfire answering her fury.

Delta ducked beneath a desperate slash, rolled under the pirate’s legs, and came up behind him with a swift, decisive strike that sent the man into his peers, halting their attack. The deck trembled beneath their boots, the precious cargo holding onto each other beneath praying for the chaos to come to a stop.

...*TO BE CONTINUED*



Untitled, painting by Sara Gutierrez

Would You Survive a Chosen One Prophecy?

Lela Young

Someone just knocked on your door and told you that you're the heir to an ancient bloodline with a destiny.

Circle one answer per question, then tally your letters.

1. A robed stranger appears at your door and says, 'The prophecy has chosen you.'

You:

- A) Ask for ID, a written copy of the prophecy, and at least 48 hours to think it over.
- B) Say 'I knew it' and start packing immediately.
- C) Close the door. This is not your problem. You have plans.

2. It turns out your entire childhood was a carefully constructed lie to protect you.

You feel:

- A) Betrayed, then reluctantly understanding. You'll process it later — alone, dramatically.
- B) Validated. Something always felt off. Now it makes sense.
- C) Mostly annoyed. You had a whole identity. Now what?

3. The prophecy says only you can defeat the ancient evil. Your first move is:

- A) Find someone who knows more than you do and ask a lot of questions.
- B) Locate the ancient evil and introduce yourself.
- C) Google whether prophecies can be reassigned.

4. You discover the ancient evil was once someone who was also chosen... but he failed. You:

- A) Take careful notes. That's not going to be you.
- B) Assume you're different. You have better hair and more motivation.
- C) Feel genuine sympathy and briefly consider a diplomatic solution.

5. The mentor figure who's been guiding you dies at a critical moment. You:

- A) Grieve later. Right now there's a prophecy to fulfill.
- B) Use the grief as fuel and become briefly terrifying.
- C) Sit down for a while. This is a lot.

6. The prophecy is fulfilled, but at great personal cost. Afterward, you:

- A) Return home quietly. Let someone else write the ballads.
- B) Accept the throne. You earned it. Obviously.
- C) Ask if there are forms to fill out to officially un-prophecy yourself.

Results:

My score: ___ A's ___ B's ___ C's

Mostly A's | Reluctant Survivor

You made it through on sheer stubbornness and emotional suppression. The bards will write songs about you. You will hate every single one of them.

Mostly B's | Gloriously Doomed

You were too confident and charged in way too fast. The villain saw you coming from chapter three. Your death scene will be beautiful and completely your own fault.

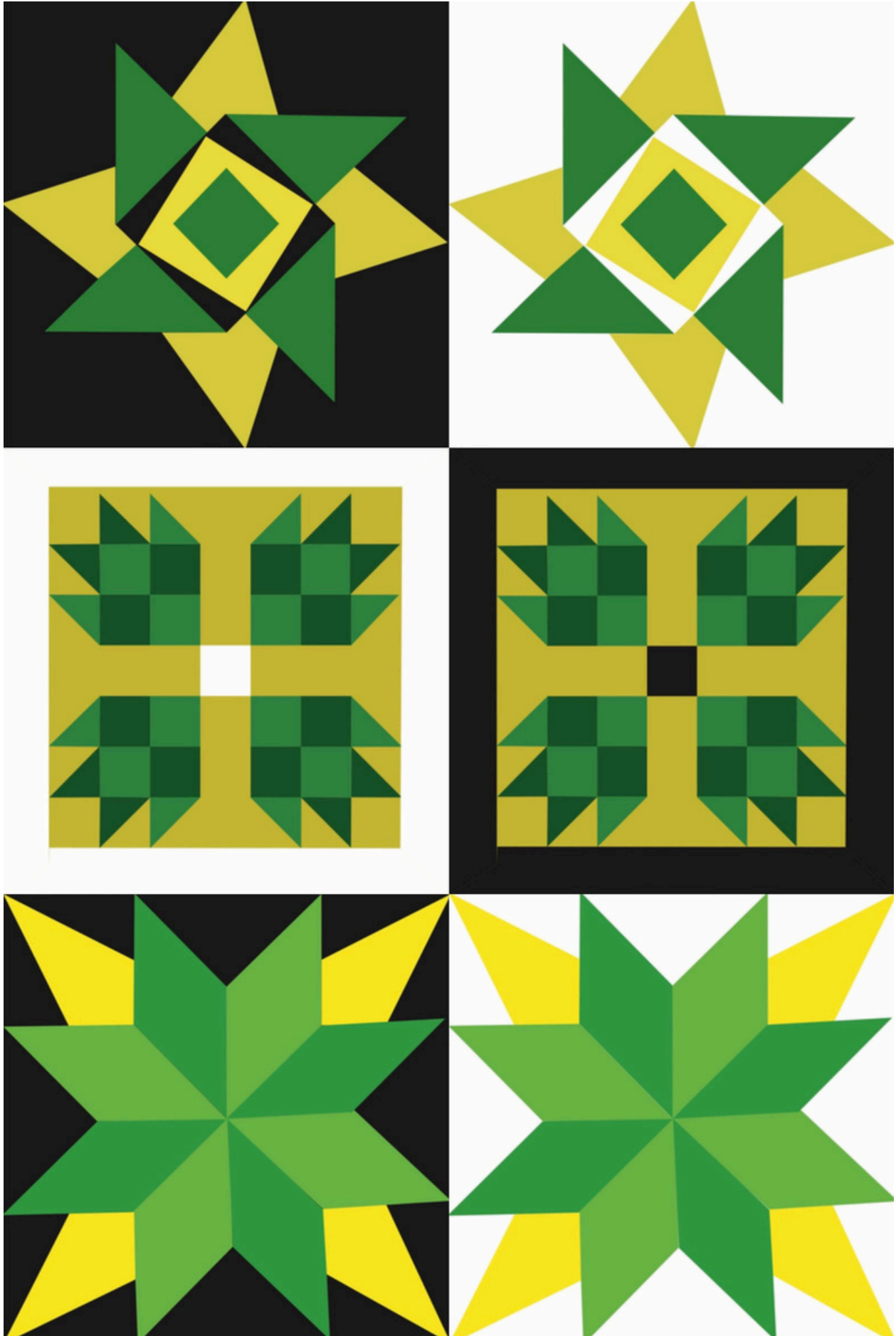
Mostly C's | Accidental Wildcard

Nobody, including you, saw this coming. You'll save the world mostly by accident while trying to go home. The epilogue will confuse historians for centuries.

Result: _____



Untitled, photography by Cara Odum



LMC Barn Quilt, painting by Lydia Petit

On Euthanasia

Alex Christiana

If you don't kill them, I will. It was the promise of an angry client as she threw two dogs onto the hot asphalt of the parking lot. Their cost had officially exceeded their value when they broke out of their pens and killed a litter of expensive puppies. I was only sixteen when I got a job at the animal hospital in town, and this was my first euthanasia. One at a time, I restrained each dog snugly against my chest as a veterinary technician placed an IV catheter into the front leg. They were anesthetized then euthanized. On my way home from work that day I stopped at my old job, a grocery store, and wondered if leaving had been the right decision. If veterinary medicine was the right career path for me.

Upon arriving home, I was greeted by my family's own two dogs. The older of them, an English Mastiff named Tank, had cancer. I learned from a veterinarian at work how to palpate dogs' lymph nodes; while practicing the skill at home, I noticed Tank's didn't feel quite right. I urged my father to book him an appointment, and a fine needle biopsy confirmed that he had lymphoma. After careful consideration, my father decided not to treat the already aging dog's disease, but rather manage his pain and make the call when the time came. But how do you decide your best friend's time to die?

The answer for my father, and many other pet owners, is that sometimes you don't –or can't. But the body is designed to live and will continue doing so for as long as it possibly can; I've learned firsthand that natural deaths are only beautiful in books and movies. It was the summer before my final year of high school when Tank died in the arms of my father, who could feel as his heart beat faster and faster. As his breath grew shallower and more agonal. As his body trembled in pain. Suddenly, two unwanted puppy mill bitches had been granted a more dignified and peaceful death than a dog who knew more love than he could ever comprehend. The decision to end a life is one which should never be taken lightly, but it is as difficult to make as it is necessary to make.

I left for college with aspirations of becoming a veterinarian, so I spent the summer after my freshman year working at a lesson barn to get more experience with equines. Horses exist in limbo between being pets and being livestock; each of the twenty-some heads in the herd had a name and a job they were expected to perform. One pony, a gray Welsh mare called Annie, was exhibiting behavioral issues that only grew worse as the summer dragged on. Additional training and daily doses of Mare Magic proved ineffective as she became unsafe for riding or even groundwork. In August, the program director donated Annie to a college anatomy lab.

It wasn't an option to pay for expensive behavioral medications or keep around an unusable animal – a farm of any kind is first and foremost a business. Annie could have been sold to someone with more expendable resources, someone with the time and money to fix her issues. What if they give up and sell her to the next person? And the next person? Where would she end up? How would those people treat her? Where would she end up? Maybe wading through her own excrement as she awaited slaughter at some meat lot in Mexico. Maybe the same one another horse at the riding center had been rescued from just several years prior. At the college, Annie still had to die, but she never had to suffer. She even got to help students just like me; students who want to save animals.

Now, only a year away from graduation, as I apply to veterinary schools, I am forced to consider what it actually means to be a veterinarian – what it really means to save animals. I used to think it was saving them from death. Veterinarians take an oath to spend their lives protecting animal health and welfare and preventing and relieving animal suffering. I still have a lot to learn about upholding these solemn vows I will one day take, but I have already learned one valuable lesson. Euthanasia is more than a responsibility; it is a privilege.



Comfort View, photography by Caitlin Young

Into the Woods and Beyond the Box

Kaelee Rushing

A decade ago, if someone were to have asked my teachers, they would have described me as analytical, logical, detail-oriented. They would've said I was quiet, I minded my manners and did what I was told. I wore frilly skirts to class, and I skipped through the halls. If they asked my parents, they would have said I'm artistic, right-brained, a holistic thinker. My father would have said I was loud, but intelligent, a lot like him. My mother would have said I was a wild-child and I didn't say "thank you" nearly as often as she would have liked. These things clashed, and for a while, I struggled with which version I would rather be.

The term "tomboy" dates back to 1533 where it first showed up in the Oxford English Dictionary. It had a different definition then, but now, it is defined as "A girl who likes activities associated more with boys or looks more masculine than socially normal." I remember overhearing kids at school talk about the concept of "girly-girls" versus "tomboys." The term "tomboy" has a negative connotation to it for the adults using it, but as a child, I did not see the negativity behind it. I just saw it as another way to be. At school, I was classified as a "girly-girl." At home, I was classified as a "tomboy." It was apparent to the other kids that you had to choose. "Why do I have to pick one?" I thought. This dilemma confused me.

During the first grade, my friend's mother began to pick me up every day after school. We would sit patiently on the hard tile floor of the elementary school hallway with our too-big backpacks while we waited for her to arrive. She would pull up in her dark blue minivan, and the intercom would call our names. We would pile into the van bumping each other with our backpacks and squeezing in our car seats. She would drive her three children and me to her house, and her daughter and I would play outside until my mother got off work and came to take me away.

My childhood best friend's backyard was my favorite place growing up. It differed from anywhere else I had seen before. A steep hill of red clay served as the entrance. It was so steep we tied jump ropes to the small trees at the top and used them to pull ourselves up. At the top of the hill, we entered the forest. The dirt floor was covered in a light dusting of dead leaves, no matter the time of year. The trees towered over the house below. The leaves rustled and the twigs snapped beneath our feet as we carefully made our way deeper into the woods, avoiding large patches of thorns and high-stepping over fallen logs. I looked up at the bright blue sky and noticed the numerous grey squirrels chattering amongst the trees. The birds seemed to caw and chip back in return.

Eventually, the terrain was so etched into our brains we would run as fast as we could, hurling ourselves over the logs and ducking under low-hanging branches. We would race each other from the top of the entrance to what we called "our hideout."

In one instance from "our hideout," my friend's brother began to climb a pine tree. It stood as the biggest tree in the whole forest. The branches were thick with needles and sticky with sap, but nevertheless, it made the perfect climbing tree. There grew not so many branches that we no longer had room to climb, but there were just enough that they made a ladder-like formation spiraling around the trunk. It smelled so strongly of pine my nose almost burned. My friend's brother got up about halfway before he called back down to us to join him. I had never climbed that high before. I was, per usual, dressed in a skirt. It was denim and had white

lace ruffles around the edges. I considered it for a moment. “Would climbing this tree mean I can no longer be a right-brained thinker? Would all the kids at school call me a tomboy now?” I questioned. I came to the conclusion that this was not the case. I decided I did not agree with the other kid’s idea of choosing. I began to climb. I climbed to the very top of that tree along with my friend and her brother. I felt terrified of how high up I was, but at the same time, it felt liberating.

One day after a storm, we went out into the woods. Instead of crunching, the leaves squished beneath my feet. We found a tree that had fallen between the two trunks of some larger trees. By this time, I no longer cared about getting my clothes dirty. The wood still felt wet from the earlier rain, but I climbed right up the fallen log without hesitation. The trunk felt slimy and slick as I crawled my way up. The sky looked grey, still covered with a thick layer of clouds, and a cool breeze streamed through the air. I listened to the rain drops dripping off the branches above me. The air smelled damp and musty from the saturated earth below. Once I got a little over halfway up, it began to shift. The fallen tree, spanning at least 50 feet, rocked downward. The far end shot up towards the sky as I was sent crashing toward the ground. It was a motion not unlike a seesaw, and we used it as just that. We spent hours in the woods pushing off from the ground and then plummeting down when the others did the same. I didn’t even mind the new dark color my skirt had turned.

During a warm spring afternoon, I went off adventuring on my own. I walked a long way in a direction we had never ventured before. I noticed a few “Private Property” signs around, but I ignored them. My mind could not fathom the idea that a person could own the forest. To this day, I still don’t entirely agree with it. “Our” part of the woods did not belong to me. My friend’s family owned that property, although the forest did not belong to them either, and this part certainly wasn’t owned by whoever put those signs up. Eventually, I reached a wall of azalea bushes. I pushed through the thick branches to the other side. I was awestruck to see three small waterfalls surrounded by leafy green trees and more azalea bushes decked out in fluffy pink flowers. The sky looked exceptionally blue and the clouds seemed extra fluffy and pristine. The mist from the falls created a small rainbow glistening over the rocks. Kids have great imaginations. Mine proved exceptional. What I saw on the other side of those bushes was entirely unreal. I was aware of this, but nonetheless, it was real to me. The forest had become my inspiration. In some ways, it had also become my teacher.

As a small child, I never liked bugs. I didn’t mind the dirt; however, dirt made me dirty, and I couldn’t have that. As I grew older and got to know the dirt, I began to like it. I don’t mind the dirt so much anymore. The dirt, I realized, didn’t make me any less me. I could take part in adventures. I could live as that wild-child with an equally wild imagination. I could use that right side of my brain while still thinking like my analytical, logical, detail-oriented self.

Studies now show that the concept of left-brained versus right-brained proved to be a myth. Each executive function performed by the brain uses multiple regions contained in both hemispheres to perform the task. My brain, like every other, used both sides. I was both left and right brained. I did not want to label myself as one or the other. Feeling the need to choose felt claustrophobic. According to the National Library of Medicine, 12.5% of people experience claustrophobia. I was one person in that 12.5%. I was scared of the box I was being shoved into. This realization that I did not have to ever go into the box was revolutionary.

Into the Woods and Beyond the Box (cont.)

I am a girl. I wear frilly dresses and skirts, and I curl my hair for special occasions. I also wear sweaters and jeans. I do my makeup every morning, sometimes matching my eyeliner color to my outfit. I work on a farm. I come home late with my boots filled with hay and my sleeves streaked with mud. I get good grades. I like school, and not just for hanging out with my friends. I enjoy learning and expanding my knowledge. I am analytical and artistic. I am logical and detail-oriented. Sometimes I still choose to skip instead of walk. I am no longer quiet, but I am reflective. I speak my mind, but I still do what I am told, within reason. I observe, but I am no longer shy. I say “please” and “thank you,” just as my mother taught me. I am all of these things, but I can also be none of these things. No labels or boxes are necessary to define me. I am me, and I am who I am.



Miss Unicorn, collage and colored pencil drawing by Cam Spier

Jean Bowler

Cora Stevens

Somebody very important to me once told me that everybody should kill something, once. He didn't mean when you set out mouse traps or spray out the roaches. He meant when you really go at something, when you brace a rifle to your shoulder and you feel the harsh kickback as you drop an animal. Jean Bowler was real passionate about guns, you see. Hot blooded Republican down to the bone marrow. "I bleed red, I vote red."

Jean Bowler bled a lot of red when he served in Vietnam.

My first day of working for Jean, I stumbled out of an ancient turquoise stick-shift Chevy, all awkward fourteen year-old limbs and sun freckles that would vanish come winter, and I stared up at the massive billboard that towered above the farm. Spraypaint penmanship decorated and dripped down the face of the oversized sign.

'Free men own guns! Subjects and slaves can't!'

He'd bolded and underlined the 'can't' so that any traveler making the trek along I-55 would understand just how dire of a situation our country was in if we couldn't own firearms. I'd known Jean my entire life before I started working for him on his property, so though I judged his artwork, I really wasn't all that deterred by it. My highly liberal family was the outlier in rural Illinois, not Jean's. He and my father met when my parents moved to the middle of nowhere Waggoner, Illinois, carting along their two twin five year-olds and my fresh baby sister. In a rural area with such a dispersed population, anybody within a ten minute drive was considered a neighbor. And my father knocked on the door of every house within a ten minute radius to find somebody just like Jean Bowler.

My father, Clint, and Jean stuck like glue because they both never threw away a damn thing their whole lives. Clint was an eccentric man with a particular fascination for some antiques. His favorites were these big glass mannequin heads that he'd pile on top of every surface of my childhood home while I was growing up. Their unblinking, etched eyes watched me get ready for school every day from the start of kindergarten to the day my mom divorced him my senior year.

Once upon a time, a dozen glass heads sat in our front yard on old fence posts with light bulbs inside them. If anybody drove by our house that sat on the outskirts of Waggoner at night, they'd see floating glass heads of all sizes and colors littering the Stevens' yard like guillotine fireflies. That was before somebody came by and plucked them right off their posts like ripe tomatoes, which I think was one of the first times I ever saw my dad cry.

Jean was a hoarder. He liked to call himself a collector, but even an awkward fourteen year-old he hired for \$10 an hour knew that he was hoarder. Jean and I would move mountains of hoarded items from one barn to another to keep up with the illusion of organization. We'd lay down old wood palettes in crooked pathways that snaked from inside one barn, through the yard, inside another barn, through the yard, and all across the 12 acre property. Sometimes, when we moved vintage bicycles, old tires, antique lamps, and shelves of perfume collections from one barn to another, Jean would find an old glass head and call up his friend Clint. He'd drive over on his Yamaha motorcycle that towered over me at the time and Jean would wait outside the main barn in his ragged denim overalls with a thick cigar dangling from his mouth. Together, him and Clint would get drunk and talk about all the old shit Jean had hanging around.

Those moments were when I would take my chance to wander around and bother the dozens of animals that shared the property with Jean and his wife, a nice yet unstoppable woman named Kay. Cats poured out of every surface, all identical hybrids that resembled long-hair siamese. The more kittens that Jean's farm raised, the more toes each generation seemed to turn up with. And then they'd keep breeding and breeding and getting weirder and weirder feet. My childhood of playing with Jean's cats and running around to say hello to the many livestock animals he raised while he and my dad got drunk made me comfortable around him. Because of this, I was never off put by Jean when I'd show up by myself in my mother's looming turquoise Chevy and he'd be slumped over in the main barn, completely immobile and hardly aware of me or himself. Occasionally I would wonder if I'd just found a wife's husband's dead body, and then he'd release some ragged sound that convinced me he was well enough.

It didn't matter to me that Jean paid me \$10 an hour to do work I didn't always understand the point of, like moving one pile of shit to another barn and another pile of shit to a mound in the yard. One of the main tasks that Jean was always putting me up to was in the vehicle yard behind the main barn. What must have been three-dozen cars and tractors sat undisturbed on a large patch of dead prairie grass, and there was a massive vintage storage trunk he kept out there for me to store tools and personal belongings in. Even if I showed up and Jean wasn't around or he was keeled over drunk in the old rolling office chair he always found himself in, I knew to always walk to that vehicle yard. One by one, I'd work at disassembling those cars so that he could take the parts I gutted out and sell them off to people who saw a helluva lot more value in 60 year-old transmissions than I did.

When one of us eventually got hungry, or if I wanted a break from the monotonous tasks, I would climb all the way back up into that massive turquoise truck and I'd make my way to the Farmersville truck stop. I don't know what it is about the gas stations near where I grew up, but I damn well swear that some of the best food I've ever eaten was prepared in those old buildings. The truck stop always had out hot fried fish that still makes me salivate at the thought. I've always liked my fried foods more batter than meat, and those fillets were the thinnest, crispiest, most flavorful fillets I've had to this day.

Jean and I would tear apart a styrofoam to-go box of fried fish and fight off the inbred cats who wanted to eat our fish almost as much as they wanted to have sex with each other. It was on an average work day after an average eight hours of school and an uneventful drive to and from Farmersville that Jean asked me if I had ever killed something. He had a fried fish fillet in one hand and a cigar as fat as three of my fingers in the other. I remember thinking about that question for a long minute. I wondered if I should lie. Was Jean going to think I was just some dumb, naive, fourteen year-old kid if I told him that my dad had never made me shoot something? Was he going to call Clint on his outdated phone and tell him to put a gun in my hands and turn me into a 'total hotchick'? When I could tell that he was waiting a bit too long for my answer, I just started doing what I do best. I spilled big long stories all over the gravel drive way in front of us, and I gorged myself on truck stop fish.

I told him about working at the meathog farm that I'd been at for just three short months before my dad told me that wasn't a good place for me. I talked about how I rode my Honda XR dirtbike there twice a week. That I'd had to shower in and shower out because they didn't want me or the thirty undocumented immigrants working there to accidentally transmit diseases to the pigs encased in two-and-a-half square miles of indoor farm.

Jean Bowler (cont.)

I sang the songs that the enrichment robots sang when they carried 950 pound boars around the building so the pigs could see others of their own kind a few times a day. I also told him that I was a midwife. That the pigs were bred to be so huge and that they walked so little that the sows never had enough energy or endurance to deliver all of their piglets. I hadn't killed anything, not yet, but I'd worked somewhere where my job was to reach inside of animals and rip things out that were born to die. And I didn't know how I felt about it.

Jean sat there and he listened and he puff-puffed on his cigar. He told me that every kid my age needs to kill something because, if something were to threaten my siblings or me, I wouldn't hesitate because I'd have already killed something before. Jean always thought about the most dramatic scenarios when it came to guns and shooting things that couldn't shoot back because he had fought in Vietnam and then served in Germany afterwards. He said that I was the protector of us three kids, that Clint was telling him about my martial arts competitions and that I 'rode my dirtbike like a hellcat', and he said that I needed to know I had power.

"Your dad ever make you shoot a gun?"

"Yessir."

"What kind?"

"I don't remember."

"What'd it look like? It look like one of these?"

I don't remember ending up in the laundry room where Jean had a gun safe the size of an entire wall, but by that point we were there. I studied each weapon with curious brown eyes. I knew these things killed. My father had guns. He had a lot of guns. He had an arsenal stored in a secret room in our basement next to five-gallon buckets of powdered ice cream. They had never scared me, necessarily, but I didn't have much interest. I pointed at something that Jean would tell me was a rifle of sorts. He shut the door and locked it and told me that, if I ever wanted to know more about what he kept in that safe, all I had to do was ask. But if he ever, ever, caught me snooping around that safe without talking to him, I would not be returning to his property.

"Tell your dad to take you hunting."

"I don't think my dad hunts."

An offended scoff. "His fuckin' ex-wife hunts on your land and he doesn't?" A nod. "She bring the other one with her now? Shit, they been married, right?" A nod. "I forget they can do that now."

By 'they', Jean meant lesbians.

"Tell your dad to make Tina teach you to hunt." I told him I would even though I didn't really have much plan to. Dad and I did better things than go shoot stuff.

"Hey, kid, come with me real quick."

Jean found me out back in the vehicle yard. It had been a few days since I'd showed up, and I hadn't thought he was home. I was a quarter of the way through wrestling a spark arrester off of a tractor twice my age when he rounded the corner. The same big blue work overalls sat on his wide body, stains I recognized from weeks prior decorating the starched denim. I walked over to the big storage trunk he kept out there and tossed my socket wrench inside next to my schoolbag. "What's up?"

“I got something I want you to do for me.”

I followed along after him, and together we navigated wood palette roads that slithered across his yard until they spat us out at the front of the blue and white farmhouse. Jean and I walked inside. He said hello to his wife without slowing down. Kay asked if I was “Hers for the rest of the day.” Jean told her I wasn’t. Not yet. He took me to the laundry room that was off to the side from the kitchen, it was a few awkward broad steps down, and a late extension onto the main home. I watched him unlock his monolith of a gun safe and pull out what I now knew was a rifle.

We retraced our steps, following in our own dusty tracks but diverging when we passed the poultry barn. Without saying anything in particular, Jean led me off the palette pathway and we stood in the yard. Silently, while chickens, geese, ducks, and peacocks swarmed around the back left corner of the property, he loaded soft-point bullets into the rifle he was holding in his weathered hands. “Listen to me,” he said. “I’m going to put this gun in your hands, and you will not be afraid of it. Got that?”

I nodded.

“Guns give you power. Don’t be scared of power. Scared people are the ones who fuck it up for the rest of us.” It felt like I looked down and the rifle was suddenly in my small grip. He bent over to my level, and I knew that meant I needed to straighten my back and listen real good to what he was about to say. “People will look at you and they will say that guns kill people and that you should be afraid of them because of it.” He jabbed me in the sternum with a fat finger. “But we don’t say our toothbrush brushes our teeth and we don’t say our toilet paper wipes our asses. If you have power, you channel it into action. You brush your teeth. You wipe your ass. You fire the gun. Am I makin’ sense here?”

I looked down at the firearm. It felt like the rifle had eyes and was looking right back at me. It felt like it knew I was a fraud. “Yessir.”

“Then listen to me, Cora. I want eyes on me for this.” I looked up and felt my body tense at the wide expression on Jean’s face. His eyes were blown. They were big and light blue with tiny focused pupils and they scared me. “One of our peahens has an infection. It’s big and it’s nasty, kid. She can’t hardly walk no more cause’ it’s eating her foot from the inside out.” By that point, I knew why I was the one holding the gun.

“I can’t let it chew away at her and break out to the rest of my birds. If you don’t take care of it, every other bird on my property is going to die. Sometimes you have to think about these things.” I knew, in the back of my mind, that I’d been thinking about things like this for a long time. I’d just never pulled a trigger on something living. I thought about the time I watched my mom accidentally back over a chicken with her cashmere minivan. It’d screamed and flapped where it was now crushed, half-alive, half-dead. Instead of getting out of the car and worrying over what she’d done, her first instinct had been to put the thing in drive and finish the job. Paige didn’t tolerate suffering. I’d been thinking about ‘these things’ ever since. “I understand.”

“I know you do. You’re smart, kid. You’re so smart. A total hotchick.”

Now wasn’t the time to tell him my dad didn’t want him calling me that.

“She’s sunning up on top of Kay’s minivan, alright? The one right there.” He pointed to the only peahen resting on the warm car roof. The sun shone down on her like she was already an angel. “Now, I’ll tell you, if you take out a window I’m gonna be fuckin’ pissed.”

My hands stopped shaking. “I won’t take out her window.”

Jean Bowler (cont.)

“I’m glad to hear that, Cora,” Jean replied with exaggerated kindness. “Now look me in my eyes and say it again.”

Sometimes Jean spoke in a way that reminded me he was in the airforce. I looked down the barrel of his ice-blue eyes and into the pinpoint prick of his dilated pupils. “I will not take out Kay’s window.”

He patted me on the shoulder and took a step back. “Glad we agree. You know what you’re doing, right? You’ve said Clint has made you shoot.”

“Yessir.”

I could hear the silent prove it in the gaze that Jean was boring into the back of my skull. It felt like I was watching myself from above when I cranked the bolt of the rifle, and I swore that the gun felt heavier in my grasp knowing the chamber was primed with concentrated death. I braced it against my shoulder and I took the longest, deepest breath I could manage, pulling myself down from where my conscience floated off to and making myself exist as one whole. I prepared my body for the kickback and let my index fall on the trigger.

Aim. Fire.

I followed through with the shot so I didn’t blow out my shoulder.

I did not hit Kay’s window.



Spring Seekers, digital art by Jedda Levy

I Fell Into a Plot Hole

Lela Young

I fell into a plot-hole,
Yes, you read that right!
It gave me such a great pull,
It gave me quite a fright.

At first I thought I'd drifted;
A dream, perhaps, a daze,
But the dream has not yet lifted,
It's been haunting me for days!

Once, they used to speak,
They'd talk till my ears bled,
But now they just critique,
As words hide from my head!

My Google Doc is nearly blank,
Just a word or two;
My fingers hover, frozen stiff,
My thoughts have bid, "Adieu!"

The cursor blinks so mockingly,
"You fool!" it seems to say.
"Your plot is weak,"
"Your words are meek,"
"You'll sooner just decay!"

But wait, a whisper!
There it is—
A hint of planned-out light!
The plot now thickens, no more "thin-ens"
What relieving sights!



Behind the Scenes, photography by Aariana Broadus

Flightless

Katalia Bowie

i feel the absence deep in my bones,
my body trembles to think of what could have been;

it weeps at the thought that i'll never truly know
the sweet embrace of the sun above the clouds.

in the core of my being, i was made for more.
this body shackles the essence of my desire;

for my feet to leave the ground,
my feathered limbs to lift this burden,

up to the heavens, until weightlessness weaves its gentle touch
through my lungs, replacing sinew with the threads of destiny

to close my eyes and know my sight is nonessential,
i rely instead on the pull of the earth to my heart,

caged between my ribs, as it beats to the rhythm of
thunder, chasing the lightning through my veins

and suddenly, i am there, soaring above the line
where the land meets the great beyond. but it's not real

my strings were cut before the angel birthed me;
my wings were clipped before i even tasted the sky.



Meadowlark, watercolor, acrylic paint, and colored pencil drawing
by Cam Spier

Shooting Stars

Hal Boles

I see the stars racing to their resting place,
Though they are already gone,
In an attempt of hope,
I wish.
I wish to be better,
I pray to God during this fleeting moment,
That I too can be beautiful like the racing stars,
And be the light in someone else's night.

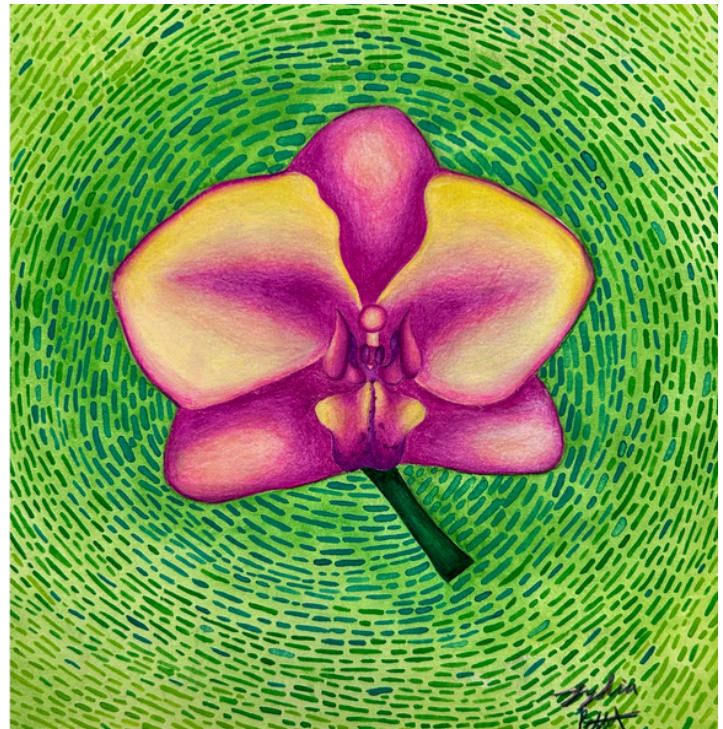


Clothing designs by Ally Dieffenbacher

Flower

Paige Mellick

A pretty flower dancing in the wind
 The one with magnificent colors
 Standing out from everyone else
 I choose this flower
 I devote to this flower
 Standing tall in the sun
 That is who I want
 Genuine love, in vain
 But the flower was never for me
 Withered petals remind me of forsaken pain
 Still, I can live another day
 The day will come when I can be let free
 Free of the suffering and free of being lonely
 Until then I will work hard to show my love for this petal
 Climb the greatest lengths for her
 Take on hills and snow-capped mountains
 Just to reach the top, where I realize she doesn't love me
 as tears fill my eyes, my mind races
 Knees drop to the ground in sorrow
 My heart burns as it breaks into pieces
 Is this a sign from the universe?
 Longing for my soulmate, partner in crime, my everything,
 No where to be found,
 Wallowing away the seasons of change for it to be spring
 Basking in the sun and smelling the nature of it all
 Opening my eyes, there goes a beautifully blue butterfly
 flying right around me
 Staring at the majestic with a sense of connection and belonging
 As it flies onto my finger, I smile
 She understands me, like never before
 At last, I found my true person



Everything Reminds Me of Her, drawing by Lydia Petit

Sing of Blue

LillyRuth Beck

Deep royal blue
I thrive in the chasm you created
With painted nails, I sing of the blue
Deeper than ocean water
I taste the salt as I swim
Kicking to get to your side of the canyon
You took the shovel and started digging
while I was still standing on the dirt
I fell further with every scoop
So here I am, still singing and swimming,
joyful in the lonely



Untitled, painting by Chan Houck

another. a first

E.C. Gibbons

another birthday vacant from your words
your wishes are void from my ears
i miss your whispers of affirmations daily
the squeak of porch rocking chairs persist
the smell of burnt out cigarettes linger
i drink pepsi more now

another christmas vacant from your calls
your phone has been disabled for a while now
no more secret calls in the corridor aching at each ring
my voice cracks, escaping in messages you won't hear
i cannot listen to your recorded voice now

another show vacant from your presence
i look for you still, just in case
i talk to you on the drive home
you hang from my rearview mirror
i think about smoking now

a first full year without you,



Golden Perspective, photography by Caitlin Young

Self Portrait as a Stargazer Lily

Katalia Bowie

i am rooted deeply
 though i do not know
 the soil that claims me.

i swallow what i can,
 drunk on tears that fall
 from nature's cheek

i soak the sun in
 as if
 i have been starved of it

 when darkness settles
 i turn my face to seek the stars
 mirroring the freckles
 of my fragility

i do not know beauty
 but i embody it

my blush will fade
 i will close in on myself
 this body
 will die

the moon
 will call me
 home

ascending like a winged bird
 i will rise again
 new flesh in same soil

an eternity
 grounded

though i cannot fly
 i yearn for it



Untitled, painting by Kaelee Rushing

say its love
Soleil Correa

heart beating

echoes

cold fingers

soulless eyes

touch me

stay

Desire

warmth

come back

burn me

ecstasy

torment

say it's love



Serve Motion, photography by Pati Vedia Sanchez

The War Between Me and Me

Paige Mellick

In my eyes I see the struggle
 The struggle of waking up and feeling like I deserve a great day
 Or that everything goes right
 Maybe I just deserve the day I get
 My affirmations were forged in iron, bending only when I failed to be
 golden
 So I'm beaten
 I attract all negativity
 I'm held captive in my mind
 In my phone
 In my habits
 Is there a way out of here?
 I want to believe that I am capable of everything
 Or that I love myself
 But I'm just lying
 I try to make good habits of self care
 Wearing colors that make me feel bold but when I enter
 It's just heads down
 Sometimes I lose the will to do things
 And lose my discipline
 When will it ever turn out on the better side?
 I would love to learn how to figure out myself
 Or not to care about what people say or think
 I want to trust in me, others, but a lost cause
 I take one look around me and think tumultuously
 My mind explodes and yet still runs
 I don't ever feel safe
 So I live in survival, waiting
 There is so much time
 All in all I want to be a little kid
 that doesn't worry about these struggles
 I don't know when I'm going to be a better self
 But I'll keep on trying

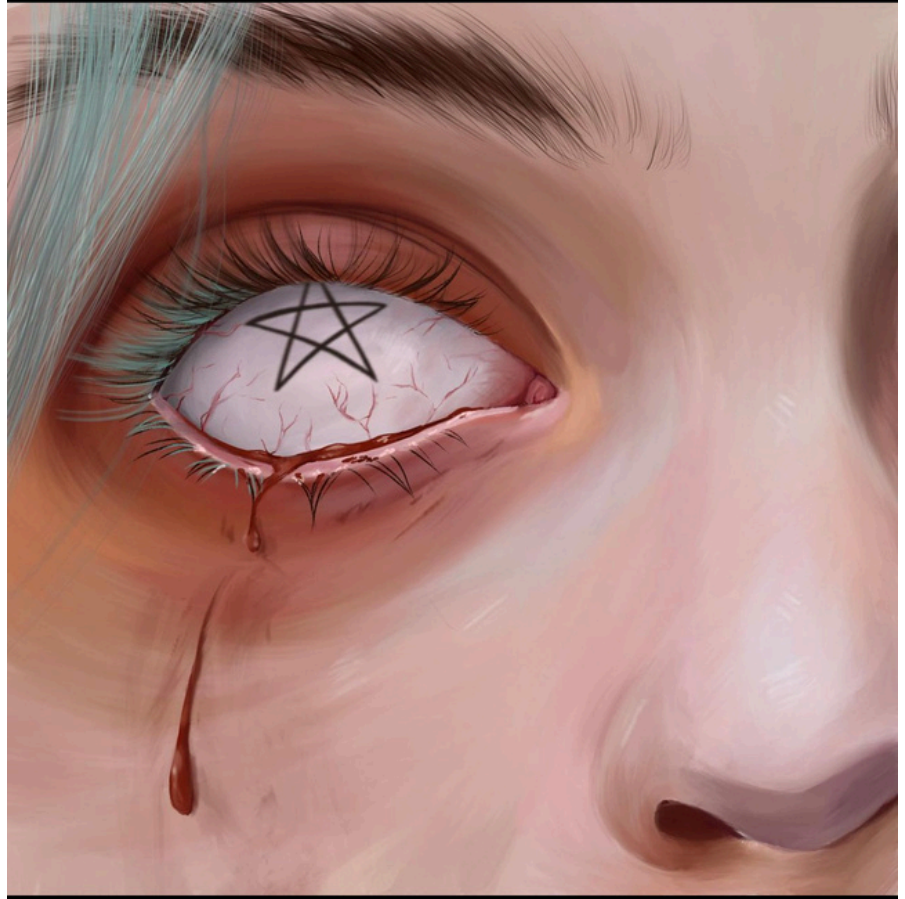


Chaos on the Mountain, photography by Lod

Happy

Hal Boles

Who gets to be happy?
The wealthy?
The poor?
The able?
I don't know.
"Life is what you make it!"
At least, that's what they say.
But, do they know?
Do they know,
That you don't always get that choice?
Orphaned,
Homeless,
Impoverished,
And that list goes on.
"I'm so sorry."
A bandaid on a gunshot wound.
~
Life is what I am making it to be,
I'm happy now.
But,
I don't need sympathy,
I need recognition.
I earned this.



Untitled, digital art by Sara Gutierrez

The Spider on the Shower Curtain

Gracie Jones

it slips, it falls, and then it climbs back up
 a Sisyphusian task, because a second later it falls again
 and again
 and again
 and it reminds me
 (in a way)
 of humanity
 and how we never give up, even when everything goes wrong,
 when it would be safer to stop
 and pause and recalculate until we know what happened.
 we don't stop until we, like the spider, are stopped by outside forces.
 because, dear reader, i am ashamed to admit that the spider is no longer with us
 i let the instinctual, fear-driven sector of my mammal brain take the reigns for just a moment too long,
 and knocked the spider off the curtain and into the tub's pool of water where it drowned,
 because the drain doesn't work right.
 Sisyphus pushed his boulder until he was crushed by it
 The Spider climbed the curtain until he fell
 And Humanity tries, and tries, and tries
 and tries



A Narnian Tale

Lela Young

Once upon a time, my dear,
Snow covered all the world.
Which leads me to a rhyme, I fear,
Which causes hair to curl!
A queen ruled all the land, you see,
And loved to make it snow.
T'was so cold she froze subjects' tea!
A horrid thing, I know.
"But wait," I hear my readers sigh.
"That doesn't sound so bad."
"With winter time, comes Christmas time,"
"And Christmas makes me glad!"
I see I have some details spared,
Though I think you'll need to know:
T'was always winter, never Christmas.
Now do you like the snow?
No presents came around the bend
To all the kingdom's children.
The Christmas tale was never said,
For fear the Queen would listen.
You seem a bit concerned, I see.
Don't worry, it's not over.
There's more to this cold memory
So don't look quite so somber.
Four children stumbled, I'm afraid,
Into that dreary world.
The Pevinsies, that was their name.
And first to go, a girl.
Lucy, yes, that was her name,
While playing Hide-and-Seek,
She hid inside a magic wardrobe.
She saw and couldn't speak!
Instead of ladies' coats and things,
She felt something quite sharp.
"Like needles on a tree!" She squeaked.
But fear did leave her heart.
For Lucy wasn't scared, you see.

For Lucy wasn't scared, you see.
Nor frightened, not at all.
She walked along with wondrous glee,
Now guess what things she saw!
A lamp and post inside a wood
With snowfall all around.
And there a little fawn-man stood,
With snow stuck to his brow!
"Why, hello, sir," The girl called out.
(For she tried to be polite.)
"I've seemed to lose my way about,"
"Where am I, if you might?"
The fawn stood still in fear, perhaps,
And didn't make a sound.
Then all at once he tipped his cap,
His frown turned upside-down!
"Come to tea with me, will you?"
He asked so very nice.
"I've cakes and toast, and sardines too,"
"Home's here, don't mind the ice."
Lucy gave a cautious shrug,
Then followed with a nod.
"I doubt a fawn could be a thug,"
She reasoned, thought't be odd.
At last they came upon a tree,
A tiny door set in.
"Come in, sweet girl, and rest," said he.
"Now tell me 'bout your kin."
"My kin? How very strange!" Said she.
"Why hear about such things?"
"My siblings are a bore, you see."
"It's nothing fit for kings."
The fawn sucked in a sharpened breath.
"There's more of you?" He asked.
"You look as if you've just seen death!"
Lucy gasped and ceased to snack.
"Forgive me, child, I must confess,"
The fawn said, wringing hands.
"The Queen would have me do no less

A Narnian Tale (cont.)

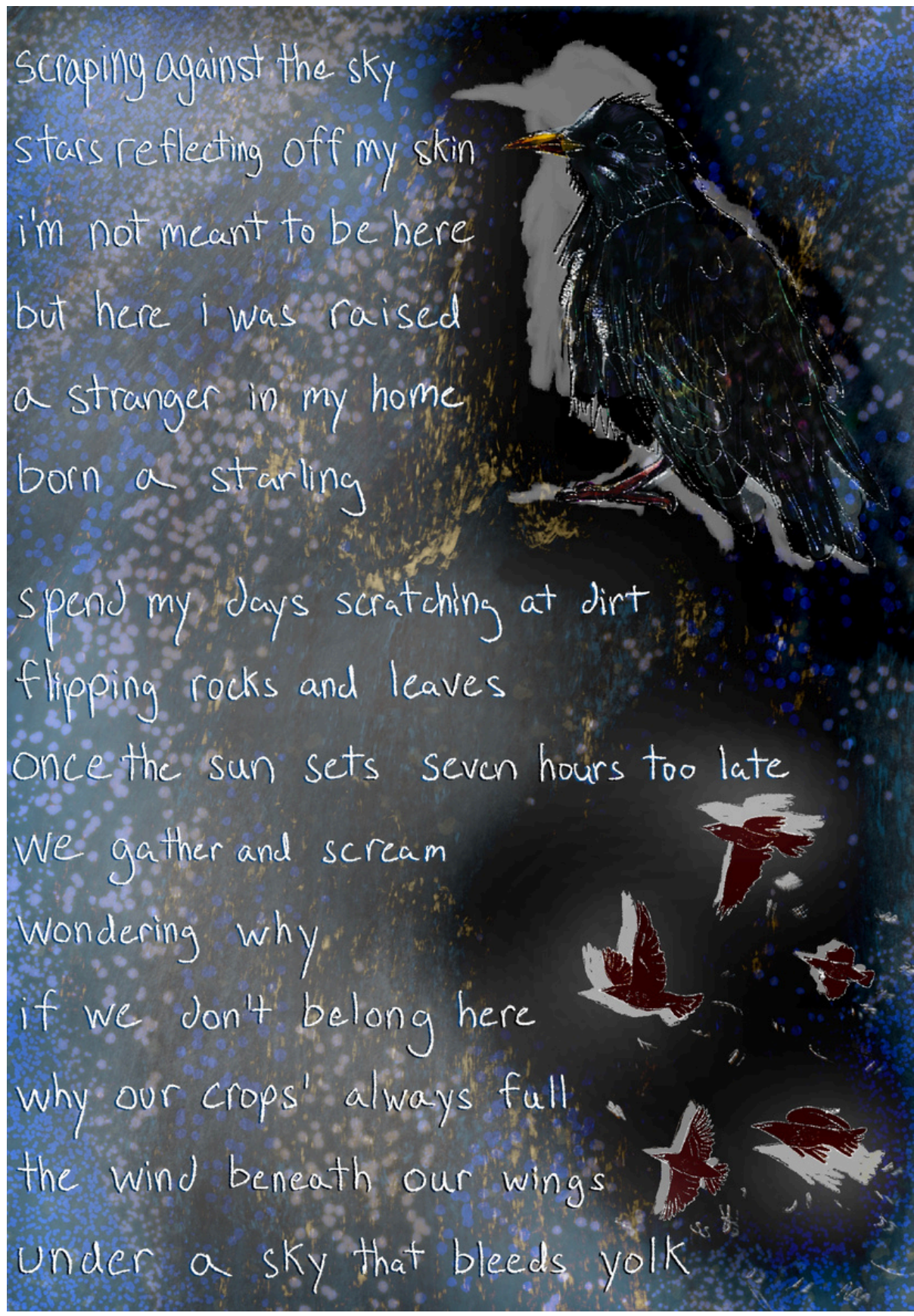
Than bring you to her lands."
 But then he wept and shook his head,
 "I cannot do this thing.
 Go home, dear girl! Go home!" He said.
 "Before the cold bells ring."
 She ran back through the frozen wood,
 Back through the wardrobe door.
 Her siblings scoffed and knocked on wood,
 "A magic land? What for?"
 But Lucy knew they'd all return.
 Old Narnia wasn't done.
 For deep within, a fire would burn,
 And winter would be won.



Last Night, watercolor painting by Lydia Petit

Vulgar Country

Jedda Levy



Cam Spier (Any Pronouns)

Inspired by the natural world and its creatures of all shapes and sizes, Cam creates mixed media art with graphite, colored pencils, and paint to best depict the wonder nature instills in them. (Cover artist and featured on pages 31 and 38)

Cora Stevens (She/Her)

Cora Stevens is a 4th year Biology student with a specialization in Wildlife Biology and a dual-minor in Creative Writing and Technical Theater. This eclectic mix of passions and studies has lent her a deep appreciation for visual art, performance art, literary creativity, and of course the natural world and how we perceive it. (Cover artist and featured on pages 1 and 32)

Hal Boles (She/Her)

Hal Boles is a senior at Lees McRae college. She studies Criminal Justice and Psychology. Hal is from a small NC town named Denton. She has always loved writing, and has been writing poetry based on her life for roughly 6 years. Her work has been previously published in Ragweed, and she aims to publish a collection of her poems as a book! (Featured on pages: IV, 39, 46)

Georgina Worley (She/Her)

Georgina Worley is a psychology major graduating fall 2026. (Featured on page 6)

Jedda Levy (She/Her)

They say when looking for something to leave no stone unturned. Which is why there isn't a rock or log on Lees-McRae's campus that hasn't been flipped by senior wildlife biology major Jedda Levy. In three years spent exploring the Blue Ridge, Jedda has not only discovered a beautiful, biodiverse mountainscape, but a home. And sometimes a sense of belonging can't be found on the underside of a rock. Though salamanders still can, so don't mind if you ever see Jedda peering beneath one. (Featured on pages 7, 36, 51)

Chan Houck (He/Him)

Chan Houck is a local artist from the high country who is studying Communication Art and Design with a Minor in the Ski Industry and Ski Instruction. Chan has been creating art since he was a child and specializes in Acrylic Painting and Ink Illustrations. Chan spends his free time skateboarding and snowboarding when he is not making art or working. Chan graduates from Lees-McRae the spring semester of 2026 and hopes to open his own snowboard and skateboard shop where he can design board designs for the community. (Featured on pages 10, 41, 47)

Kaley South (She/Her)

Kaley South is a Freshman at Lees Mcrae college majoring in Wildlife Bio with a specialization in rehabilitation. She wrote this short horror story for an African American Gothic literature class. Growing up in WNC, she has a deep love for the history of the Appalachian mountains, and specifically the ghost stories, and stories of feral people. This story is just that. (Featured on page 11)

Katalia Bowie (She/Her)

Katalia Bowie is a junior majoring in Wildlife Biology (Rehabilitation), with a minor in Creative Writing. She is from Hampton, Virginia and grew up near the water, but loves the mountains as well here at LMC. Her writing, mainly poetry, is inspired by personal experience and a love for the natural world. She is a recipient of the Elizabeth McRae Full Tuition Scholarship and is very active on campus as part of LMCinema, CAB, Students of Appalachia, Order of the Tower, and some other organizations. Kat hopes to have a career working with ambassador animals or wildlife but plans to pursue her passion for writing on the side, hoping to publish poetry and children's books! (Featured on pages 12, 38, 43)

Gracie Jones (She/Her)

Gracie Jones is an English major at Lees-McRae College who loves to write. She wants to become a published middle grade and YA author, and spends a lot of time with animals, which tends to transfer over to her work. (Featured on pages 13 and 47)

Soleil Correa (She/Her)

Soleil is a senior at Lees-McRae College and is pursuing her degree in Pre-Veterinary Medicine. She loves to express herself in many ways and has a keen love for fashion and adventures! (Featured on pages 14 and 44)

Asch Fields (Any Pronouns)

Asch Fields, originally from High Point, NC, is currently studying at Lees-McRae College for a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing. She enjoys reading classic literature and often writes psychological & fantasy horror in her free time, and takes a special interest in character design. Previously winning the 2025 LMC Scary Story Contest, she is currently working to further that submission into a full-length novel titled, "If There Were a Few to Name", this submission being a part of that story. Asch strives to put psychological depth into her writing, tapping into themes of guilt, grief, trauma, and other chaos in order to provide herself and her future readers both an escape from their struggles while exploring and defining them. Taking inspiration from authors such as Leo Tolstoy, Tennessee Williams, and T. Kingfisher, she hopes to build vivid environments and characters that readers can find their own meaning in through the highs and lows of the plot and all of its twists and turns. (Featured on page 15)

Abby Grimes (She/Her)

Abby loves to write. She wrote from start to finish a book in 2025 titled, 'Secrets with the Crown.' In addition to writing, Abby also loves to write her own music, which she puts to the piano. She loves to read romance, especially anything with a morally grey billionaire who would burn the world for the woman he loves. (Featured on page 19)

Ally Dieffenbacher (She/Her)

She makes clothes, jewelry, and designed in a fashion show last summer. (Featured on pages 19 and 39)

Sahmod Lacewell (He/Him)

Sahmod is just a guy who loves to tell tales, hoping to one day maybe make this a novel series, so he hopes this leaves a good first impression on those who wish to read it. Expect more work from him because telling these kind of stories gives this writer life. (Featured on page 20)

Sara Gutierrez (She/Her)

She's been drawing and making art since she was little. She enjoys it as a form of relaxing and letting go of the troubles around herself. (Featured on pages 23 and 46)

Lela Young (She/Her)

Lela Young is a Christian author of light-hearted poetry and in-progress novels that weave together suspense, moral complexity, and the enduring search for redemption. With a passion for exploring themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and grace, Lela writes stories that invite readers into both the darkness and the hope that shape the human experience. When not writing, she enjoys teaching, competitive cycling, sipping hot matcha, and reflecting on how faith shapes the stories we tell. (Featured on pages 24, 37, 48)

Cara Odum (She/Her)

Cara is a senior graduating in Wildlife Biology Field specialization. She is passionate about studying wildlife and ecosystems with a strong interest in fieldwork. Through her photography, Cara hopes to share her appreciation for nature and creatures. (Featured on page 25)

Lydia Pettit (She/Her)

Lydia Pettit is a Communications Art/Design major specializing in studio arts from Columbia SC. She is passionate about the outdoors, snowboarding, making art, and human rights. (Featured on pages 26, 40, 50)

Alex Christiana (He/Him)

Alex Christiana is a junior pre-veterinary medicine major at Lees-McRae College with a minor in wildlife rehabilitation. His writing is largely inspired by his experiences living in the Southeastern U.S. and working around animals and agriculture. He has works published in the previous two editions of *Ragweed* and is excited to be included a third year! (Featured on page 27)

Caitlin Young (She/Her)

Caitlin is a sophomore Com Arts major. She loves to use her photography as a new way to see the world around her. (Featured on pages 28 and 42)

Kaelee Rushing (She/Her)

Kaelee Rushing is from Hendersonville, North Carolina and creates in a variety of ways, whether it be writing, painting, or photography. Her work is often shaped by a deep connection to nature and a synesthetic way of experiencing the world. (Featured on pages 29 and 43)

Aariana Broadus (She/Her)

Aariana is a young entrepreneur in the making. She has many skills that she is currently utilizing and building. She is interested in art in many forms such as: theatre, dance, painting, and photography. She is learning how to express herself through her work and believes that art speaks for itself. Aariana wants to be many things, but what's most important to her is finding a way to combine her business pursuits with her art! Enjoy this piece of photography she created using LMC's own Joshua Yoder. (Featured on page 37)

Paige Mellick (She/Her)

Paige is a poet who writes in the waves of what she feels as well as in the romance area. Her work explores insecurity, hopeless love, and potential, often carried away with life's magic. When she is not writing, she can be found nestled up with a book or watching true crime on Youtube. (Featured on pages 40 and 45)

LillyRuth Beck (She/Her)

LillyRuth is a senior Musical Theatre major at LMC. She is extremely passionate about the arts in all of its forms. Writing is one of her favorite mediums. In her spare time, you can find her drinking an iced coffee, or crafting to her heart's content. (Featured on page 41)

E.C. Gibbons (They/Them)

EC Gibbons is a senior at Lees-McRae College in Banner Elk, NC where they are studying Theatre Arts. They write in honor and memory of their grandmother as she was always their push for creativity. (Featured on page 42)

Pati Vedia Sanchez (She/Her)

Pati is a senior college student at Lees-McRae College majoring in Communications Arts and Design with a minor in Athletic Coaching. She is originally from Spain and moved to the United States to continue both her academic studies and her passion for tennis. Pati has been playing tennis since she was six-years-old and has experience working as an assistant tennis coach at a country club, where she enjoys helping young players improve their skills and confidence. She is also interested in videography and video editing and enjoys creating visual content. In the future, she would like to work in digital marketing, especially in areas related to content creation, design, and social media. (Featured on page 44)

Lod (He/Him)

Lodrick is a student athlete at Lees-McRae whose creative mind landed him an internship with Lees-McRae Athletics in their digital content department. (Featured on page 45)

Grace Doss: Editor-In-Chief and Designer (She/Her)

Grace Doss is a junior undergraduate student at Lees-McRae College in Banner-Elk, NC. She is majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing and Appalachian Studies. Originally from Sutherlin, VA, Doss considers her muse to be the dense woods, myriad of woodland creatures, and tobacco fields of her rural upbringing. Doss has been previously published in *The Meadow Collective*, *The Stairwell Magazine*, and *Ragweed*, her school's literary journal, where she is now the Editor-In-Chief.

Mercedes Hawks: Poetry Editor (She/Her)

Mercedes Hawks is a student currently studying at Lees-McRae College, located in Banner Elk, North Carolina. She is currently pursuing a degree in English and a minor in Creative Writing and Appalachian Studies. Her work primarily deals with the dichotomy of life inside Appalachia, and outside of Appalachia. She has been featured within literary magazines and journals, some including: *The Jardin Zine*, *The Chartium Magazine*, *Apotheca Journal*, and *Paradise on Parchment*.

Gwen Wooley: Art Curator and Designer (They/Them)

Gwen Wooley is a senior English major at LMC. When they're not writing, you can catch them holding goats, sculpting sheep, or crashing bird-watching sessions.