

# IMAGES



**THIRTY-NINE**

20

A Literary  
& Fine Arts  
Magazine

25



Malaia Merillat, Kasey Shook, Benjamin Fry, Matayah Hammill, Trevor Ables, Kimberly Medina-Rivera, Audrey Ladwig, Audrey Kecskes, Mackenzie Hendrix

# IMAGES 2025

A LITERARY AND FINE ARTS MAGAZINE

by the Students of  
Monroe County Community College



MONROE COUNTY  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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enriching lives

**Front Cover:**

Makayla Healy, Painting 1, Morning Roast, Fall 2024

**Back Cover:**

Crystal Sisson, 2-Dimensional, Paper Cut-out

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The Humanities/Social Sciences Division

*Note: This publication may contain mature subject matter.*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the thirty-ninth year the compiled creative efforts of our community of students is being published. For Therese and I, this is our fifth issue as editors together. The publication of the literary magazine is the highlight of our academic year.

As with past issues, not surprisingly, our students' talent is on full display within this issue. Our hope is for you to see what our students have accomplished devoting their time and effort to producing these works of art. We hope our students' visions and voices are resounding.

We would like to thank everyone involved in making this volume a reality. To the contributors: thank you for your courage and willingness to submit work for everyone to view, consider, and remember. To those who work behind the scenes — Beverly Tomek, Alia Pilcher, Doug Richter, Joe Verkennes, and Malaia Merillat — we appreciate you, and we hope you know there would be no Images without your help.

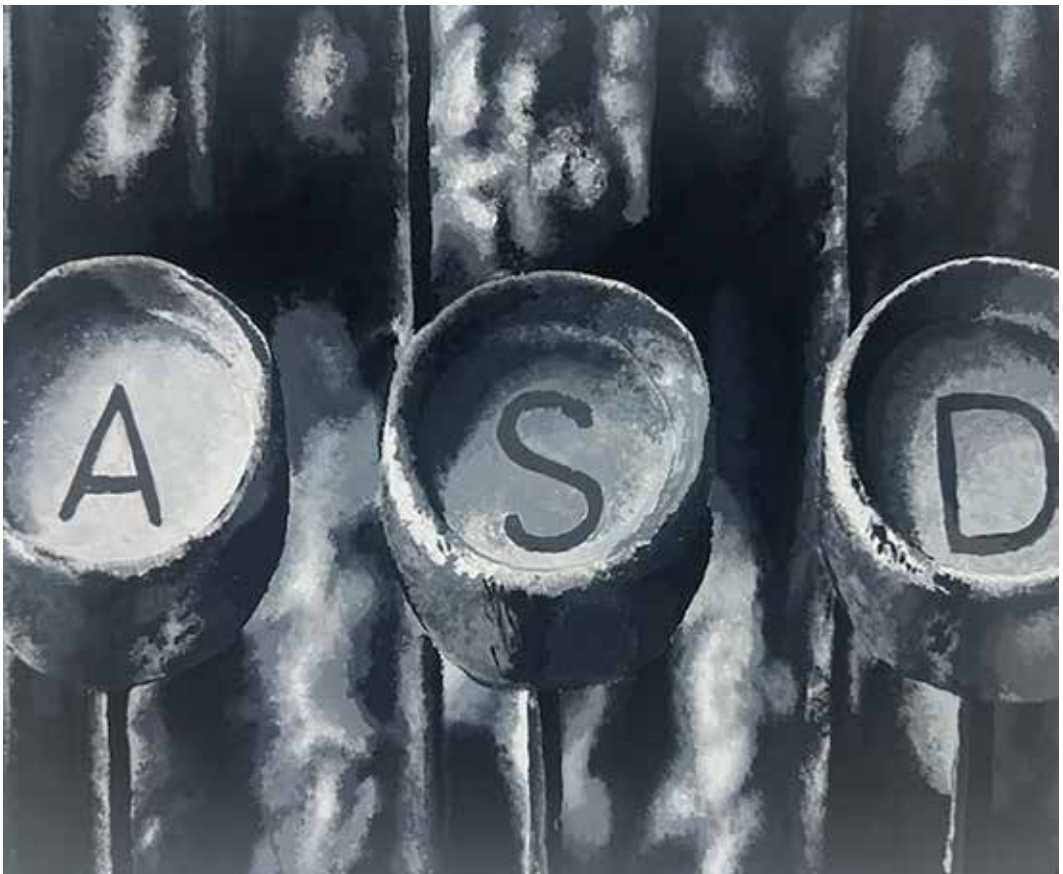
We are already gathering material for our next issue. From now through next February, we will be accepting submissions from MCCC students to feature in the fortieth volume. We collect these submissions through our magazine's email address: [images@monroeccc.edu](mailto:images@monroeccc.edu).

**Jenna Bazzell**

*Assistant Professor of English*

**Therese O'Halloran**

*Assistant Professor of Art*



Benjamin Fry, 2-Dimensional Design, Acrylic, Winter 2024



Benjamin Fry  
Illustration Techniques,  
Pencil drawing,  
Winter 2024



Anjolie Smith, Ceramics 1, Fall 2023





# Eldest Daughter syndrome

Crippling **Anxiety** that crushes almost all of your dreams

Always **Bothered** by the smallest of mistakes seeming like you have a temper

Lack of **Confidence** because no one told you “You can do it” when you were younger

**Doubt** in your own skills because you had to work for admiration from your peers, otherwise you’d be boring

**Emotions** were never your best friend, you think more logically but they push through anyways

**Failing** over and over at the same things even though you are changing how you do them

Going to **God** because He’s the only one that will just listen to your doubts and fears

**Happiness** being unobtainable because clearly you don’t deserve it

**Ignorant** of becoming an adult faster than you needed to but still a child that is unhealed on the inside

**Joking** about your struggles as a coping mechanism but everyone just thinks you’re funny and nothing else

**Kidding** around when you know you should get work done, you always procrastinate

**Laying** in your bed all day scared of change and time moving on

A **Mental** issue that you know you have but everyone says you’re fine and that It’s “just” anxiety

**Not** knowing what your future holds, always in the waiting stage

**Obstacles** that are as tall as mount Everest; Never able to reach the top.

**Parents** not understanding why you are like this but trying their best to

**Questions:** How are you like this? Why can’t you change? What is wrong with you?

**Repressing** your feelings because you don’t want others to know things affect you and that you don’t want to become a burden

The absolute **Struggle** to overcome these feelings and challenges, always getting harder

**Tossing** and turning in your sleep worried for the days ahead of you and the unknown future

Slowly and painfully **Unveiling** all the emotions that you’ve hidden over years of your life

**Various** different ways to help, journaling, talking, distractions, nothing helps forever

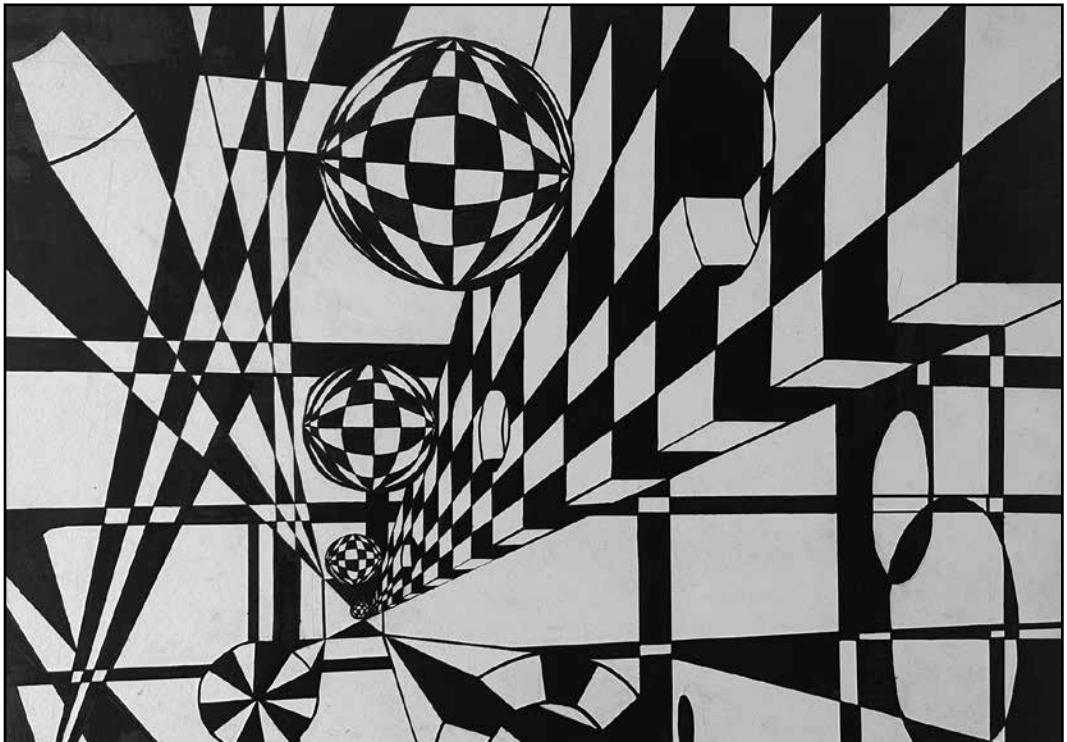
**When** will this end so you can have a normal life?

**Expectations** that are placed by only yourself because you must always be perfect

**You** yes you always talking to yourself because it’s comforting

Some people say you’re **craZy** and that you have nothing to worry about

• Ava Whitehouse



Kasey Shook, 2-Dimensional Design, Paper Cutout, Winter 2024

# Loneliness and Victory

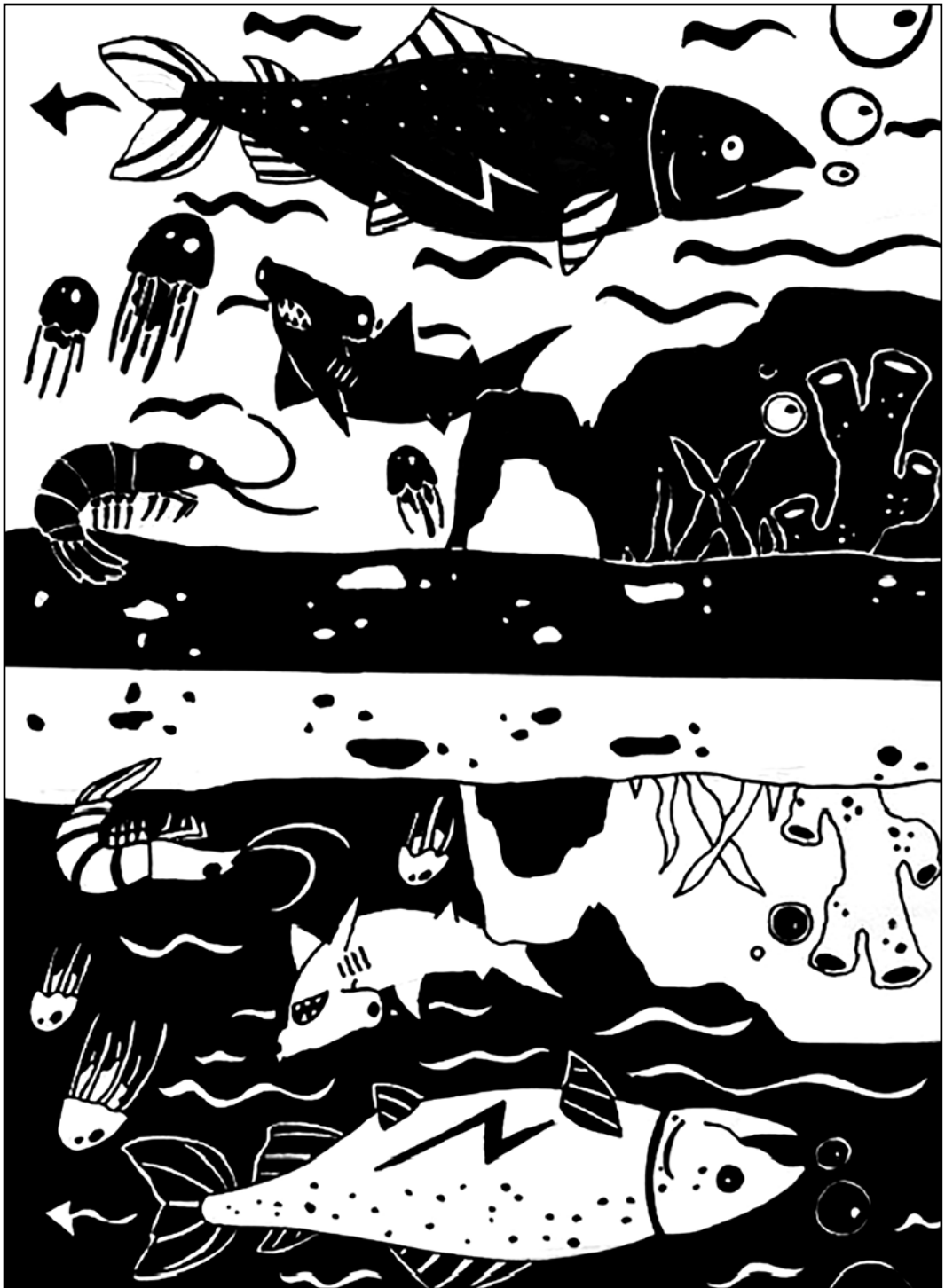
I will take you back to the way back, to the therefore.  
When the world was so big in a small girl's eyes.  
When the church was just a place and people were only sweet.  
Darkness on the doorstep with my door locked tight.  
Yet it only took a few harsh words to crack it open.  
The smiles of many turning to fangs.  
The warmth of a classroom turns into an absent cold.  
As the fangs began to bite sudden "Sicknesses" began to avail me  
I was actually sick right?  
I suppose one could say loneliness is a sickness.  
But contrary to what I told my mother, my stomach didn't hurt,  
My head didn't stir, my throat never soar.  
Why would this abandonment capture me?  
A new hope filled my heart with the promise of a fresh start.  
A new school with old faces  
A way to start again without really having to force myself in.  
The first days coming and going without a hitch  
However, the following never truly followed suit.  
Was I doing something wrong I could not see?  
Was it what I said or how I acted?  
For a long time, I blamed me.  
So I wearily crawled into myself residing in my pain  
Which only made me ignorant to see some of the smiling faces set right before me  
I didn't want them, I wanted what I knew so desperately that "Sickness" came back full force over me  
So much so I was afraid to breathe.  
A boot named Death came slamming down on my family  
Severing not only my heart but those beside me.  
What was I supposed to do with this misery?  
Little did I know my beloved was waiting for me.  
Speaking.  
Speaking through to my lonely and hardened heart.  
Speaking through my church family's wisdom.  
Speaking through my Aunt Cait's friendship.  
Speaking through my parent's hearts.  
My love never was silent through this.  
He became my friend when no one else would see me.  
He encouraged me to quite literally dance in, through, and around my mourning.  
My cold and hardened heart began forgiving and reconciling with the ones who wronged me.  
He filled me with confidence to find and befriend the smiles in other people.  
The church is no longer a place but a people.  
I am rescued and redeemed.  
His beauty and his majesty will hold my gaze for eternity.  
I am no longer lonely because he holds my victory.

• Matayah Hammill

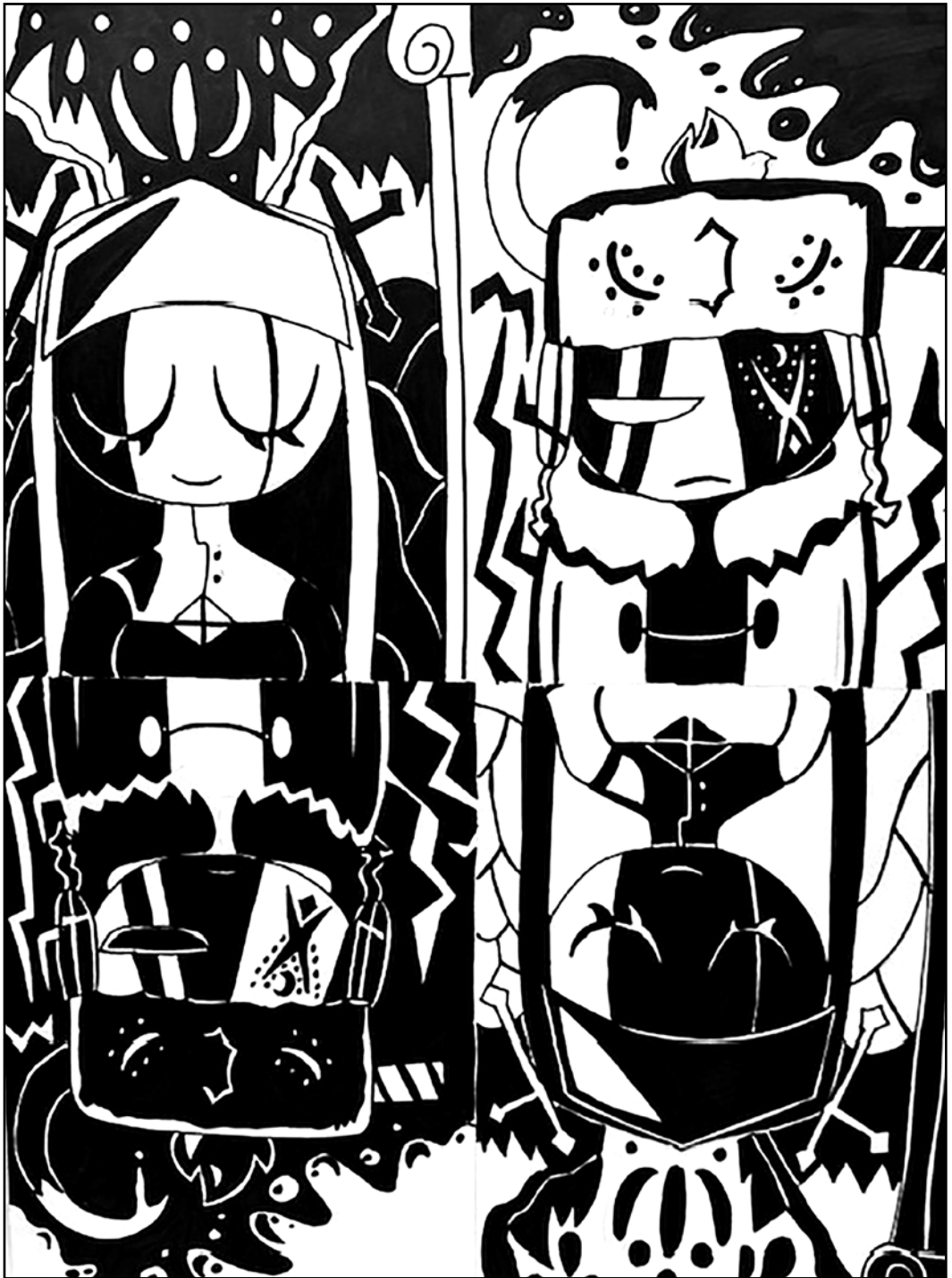




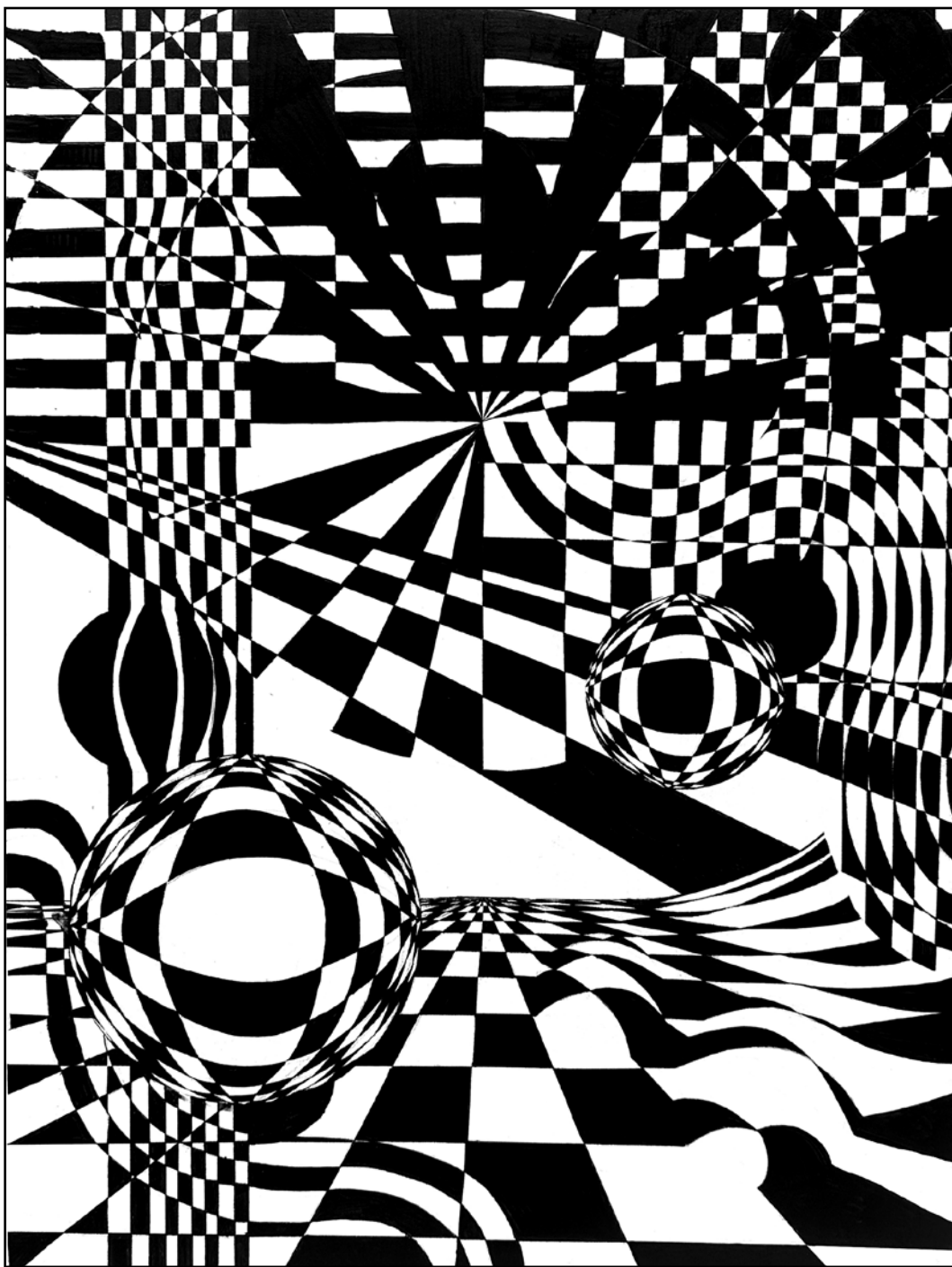
Joanne Mills,  
Stillwater,  
Watercolor 2,  
Winter 2025



Audrey Ladwig,  
2-Dimensional Design,  
Winter 2024



Audrey Ladwig,  
2-Dimensional Design  
Winter 2024



Madison Bron  
2-Dimensional  
Winter 2024





Audrey Ladwig  
2 Dimensional Design,  
Paper Cutout,  
Winter 2024



Lilly Collins, 2-Dimensional Design, Paper Cutout, Winter 2024

**Numbness... Please Set Me Free**

All the pain I see,  
All the pain I am,  
I felt you so well,  
But now I lay numb.

I still feel you so,  
As I did for so many years,  
But as I feel you now,  
I'm unable to shed my tears.

*continued on next page*

I just lay numb,  
I just lay drooling in pain  
My muscles I can barely feel,  
My emotions have turned hard as steel.

I now realize... that liquid that used to run down my eyes,  
had actually made me feel so very alive.  
and now it doesn't seem to matter if I live or die.  
I wish to hinder any future lives, and permanently close my eyes.

And so, I just lay numb, unable to feel my pain.  
I stand motionless and drained in a sea of black rain.  
My emotions I can barely feel.  
My tears are no longer real.

I fought so hard, against forces too big to conceive,  
and now my energy is depleted, to where I can hardly believe,  
that I cannot fight such a weak force within myself.  
How frail I have become. I just lay numb, silently begging Nature for mercy.

I will not accept any human healing energy, because prejudice makes it obvious,  
That I'm not worth the effort, if we listen to the audience.  
I do not desire any outside healing energy at conception,  
My reptilian brothers and sisters will be the only exception.

I thought that being ostracized, had given me the strength to rise,  
But now I succumb to your prejudice, and I accept that I will always be despised.  
I guess we all feel that I'm ready to die.  
I'm just so tired, I'm just so numb. I don't even have enough energy to try.

Nature has pressured me so,  
and overestimated my strength.  
Too many obstacles of too great a length.  
The fight is too much, the challenge is too great.

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I'm just so tired, the numbness only gets worse by the day.  
I ask myself, "Should my soul not exist, or should it stay?"  
"If I was born again, would I breathe, or would I immediately decay?"  
"Why has Nature condemned me, what price do I have to pay?"

I thought the discovery of my Reptilian self,  
Would help me not to feel so down,  
But now I feel I'm incriminating my family,  
Guilt and shame makes me feel I will drown.

I genuinely love my Reptilian brothers and sisters,  
And I truly desire to be surrounded by my kin,  
But now I feel I'm only a blister,  
Which only serves as a nuisance on my family's skin.

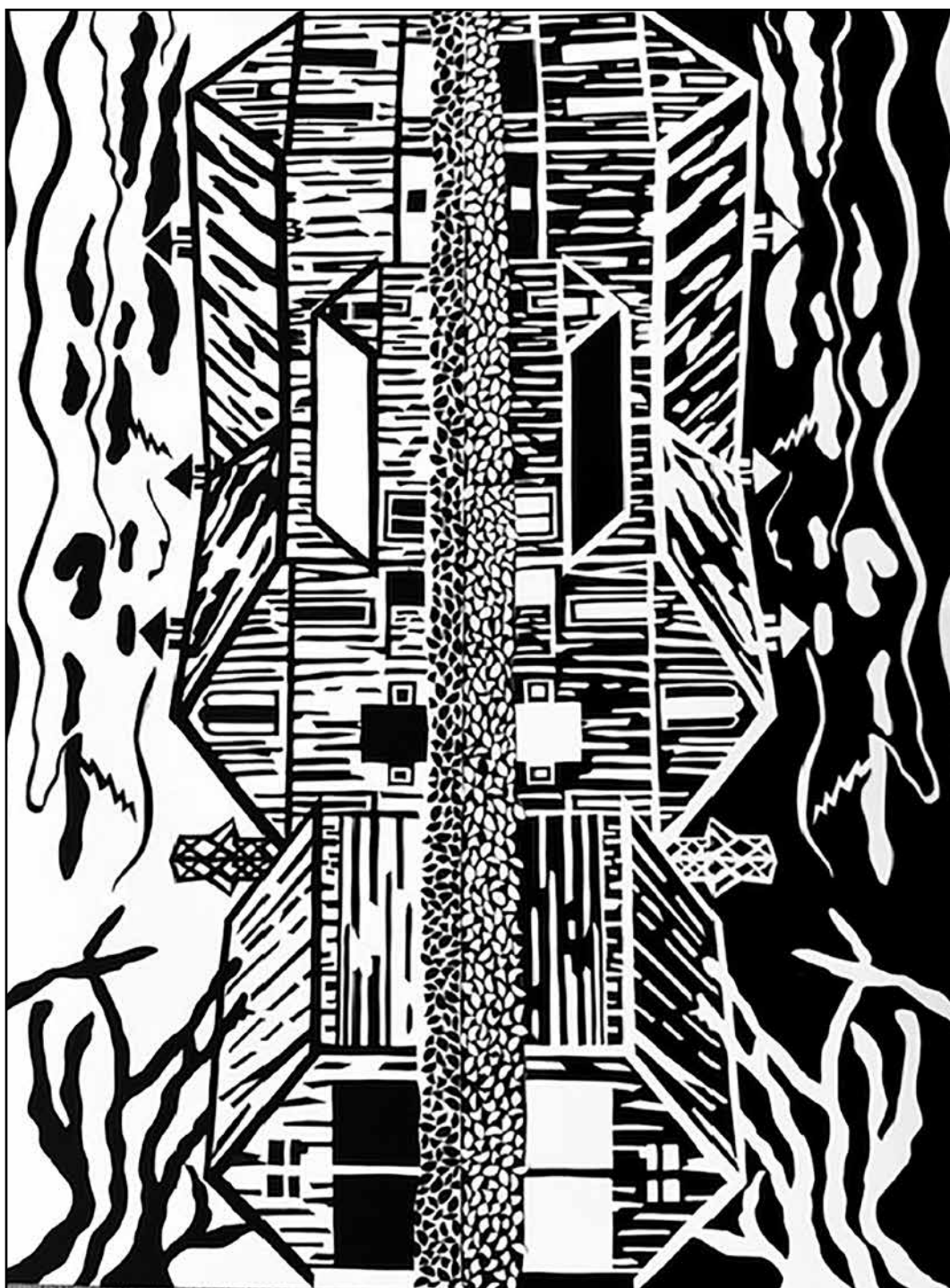
I now lay numb, doubting my own merit,  
And I lay as still as a tree.  
Nature... have mercy on me,  
Numbness... please set me free.

• Drac'aar McKuhen



Audrey Kecskes,  
Illustration Techniques,  
Winter 2024





Malaia Merillat,  
2-Dimensional,  
Paper Cut-out,  
Winter 2024

# Untitled

“Tell me something good,” I told him for the first time at five years old, when we sat on the bench outside the police department, waiting for our parents to pick us up for the first time in three years. “Tell me something good,” I told him while the social worker chattered on the phone twenty feet away, gesturing with a lit cigarette swinging between her fingers. “Tell me something good,” I told him, and anyone could’ve thought I threatened him for the way he reared up and sneered at me the way only an eight-year-old can do, and I flinched even before he slapped the back of my head. “Tell me something good,” I told him, and I didn’t know it then, but there was something wrong with him even as young as that, even as young as the day CPS took us from our parents. “Tell me something good,” I told him and he answered, “I’ll punch you in the face if you ever say that again.”

“Tell me something good,” I told him when I was seven, when I’d scraped my knee on the sidewalk while trying to ride my bike and the gash was huge and filled with gravel, and blood was running down my shin. “Tell me something good,” I told him through the pain, through the tears, through the snot running down my face, and I tried not to look at the blood because I thought that I might faint if I did. “Tell me something good,” I told him, craning my neck to peer at him while he towered over me; he didn’t push me this time, but he had this look on his face like he might’ve—though he made that face a lot when something annoyed him. “Tell me something good,” I told him, and the first time, he told me to shut up. “Tell me something good,” I told him and the second time, he yelled at me to save my breath. “Tell me something good,” I told him, and I may have begged that time because that was the one that made him look away, down the road, and mutter, “At least you’re not dead.”

“Tell me something good,” I told him through the crack at the bottom of his bedroom door, my voice lowered so our parents wouldn’t hear me out of bed, hear me talking, hear me breaking the conditions of his punishment. “Tell me something good,” I told him, and I was desperate to hear from him that there was something in this hellhole that was okay, that was bearable, that was good because I needed him to be okay in a way that I’d never tell him I needed. “Tell me something good,” I told him, and he whispered back, “I am alone.”

“Tell me something good,” I told him on his thirteenth birthday, sitting at the dinner table with our homework laid out in front of us while Mom and Dad screamed in the next room. “Tell me something good,” I told him because bottles were breaking on the walls and my hands were shaking so bad I could barely hold the pencil still enough to write out the answer to my math equation: fifty-four, fifty-four, fifty-four. “Tell me something good,” I whispered in Dad’s Navajo because I knew I needed the practice and I knew he could understand it far better than me. “Tell me something good,” I told him, and he whispered to me in Mom’s Algonquin, “They are hurting each other and not us.”

“Tell me something good,” I told him from the wet asphalt on the school playground, though it was muffled by my hand and blood was dripping from my nose, spattering from my mouth when I said it. “Tell me something good,” I told him while he stood over me, his knuckles split open and bleeding, blood smeared and splattered across his face and white button-up shirt that heaved with every breath he took. “Tell me something good,” I told him because my bully was running away, towards the nearest recess chaperone, and I knew that this was the strike that would finally expel us from the school—likely the strike that would earn our Dad’s gun to his temple. “Tell me something good,” I told him because my mouth tasted like salt and copper and my chest still felt trapped beneath the asphalt and a sneaker, and I didn’t have it in me to find a silver lining in that moment. “Tell me something good,” I told him and his hands were around my collar, yanking me off the ground, and he brushed the dirt off my shirt and said, “He’ll think twice before he tries fucking with you again.”

“Tell me something good,” I told him after that boy went missing a year later. “Tell me something good,” I told him because it’s easier than asking if he’d done something he shouldn’t have—something rash, impulsive, violent. “Tell me something good,” I told him and he just shrugged and said, “Well, he can’t fuck with you again.”

“Tell me something good,” I told him the first time he almost went to Juvie, and his left eye was swollen shut while his split lip bled, and I was the one who used every cent of my allowance to bring him home in a taxi that night. “Tell me something good,” I told him because that was the first time I slipped a few pills into our parents’ beers and left them falling asleep on the living room sofa, and it was the first time I saw that I could fight like my brother does without having to bruise my fists. “Tell me something good,” I told him while he sat on the bathroom counter, holding ice to the ugly look on his face and scowling at the cracking floor tile. “Tell me something good,” I told him because the bathroom light was so close to burning out that his cheekbones were too sharp, his nose was too hooked, and his brow was too furrowed that I needed him to say something—anything—to show me he wasn’t a total stranger to me now. “Tell me something good,” I told him and he snapped, “Stop asking me that, August.”

“Tell me something good,” I told him where he sat with his back to me in the meadow, in the woods behind our house because that’s where he wandered off to after Dad beat him and that’s where I needed to be after Mom’s mind games. “Tell me something good,” I told him while I shivered in my thin orange sweater when the autumn breeze blew on past, and the treeline was colored in shades of red and orange and yellow while the paper birches peeled like a scene from a painting; I didn’t need him to tell me anything, as this view was good enough, but I asked him anyway. “Tell me something good,” I told him because I wanted to hear his voice, I wanted to know if he was okay after everything that had happened to us. “Tell me something good,” I told him, and he had his back to me, his arms wrapped around his knees, when he said to me, “I’m joining the military when I turn eighteen.”

"Tell me something good," I told him as he slung his duffel bag over his shoulder and clenched his passport in his fist, his back to me in my bedroom doorway. "Tell me something good," I told him and I hugged myself to stave off the chill coming from my open window and he stood silhouetted in the dull sunlight shining through, unbothered and unkind. "Tell me something good," I told him because I was afraid of where he'd go in the army. "Tell me something good," I told him because I was afraid he was going to kill himself the second he got his hands on a gun. "Tell me something good," I told him because it was better than saying, "Please don't leave me here alone." "Tell me something good," I told him and he just ducked his head and growled, "I'll write to you. Don't die in the meantime."

"Tell me something good," he told me in the first letter he wrote. "It's slow here and I need a reason to prefer it out here."

"Tell me something good," he told me in the second letter he wrote. "These people are pissing me off and we're not in active combat for me to burn it off the right way."

"Tell me something good," he told me in the last letter he wrote, and the letter ended there.

"Tell me something good," I told him the first night he'd been home, when he'd walked in the door and past the kitchen where Mom and Dad yelled after him, and I'd followed him up the staircase and into his bedroom where I shut and locked the door behind us. "Tell me something good," I told him and he said the lock never used to be on the inside of the door, and I told him I changed the doorknobs when our parents were sleeping but I never told him I drugged them to do it. "Tell me something good," I told him as he unpacked his bag. "Tell me something good," I told him while he hung up his clothes or tucked them securely into his dresser drawers. "Tell me something good," I told him while he took off the camo jacket embroidered with his name and hung it on the back of his desk chair where it stayed until I stole it months later. "Tell me something good," I told him when he sat down beside me on the edge of his bed where we stayed until dusk had fallen, where we stayed until the moon hung at the highest point in the night sky, where we stayed until dawn broke past the curtains. "Tell me something good," I told him but I said it without words because he and I have always had a way of doing that, talking through silence. "Tell me something good," I told him in this secret language of ours and his too-light eyes met mine for a moment, and that told me all I needed to know.

"Tell me something good," I told him a year later after the case of our parents' disappearance had gone cold, when we sat side-by-side in the meadow in our woods after the sun broke past the pink horizon. "Tell me something good," I told him and he had a bandage strip over the bridge of his hooked nose, and a few of his teeth were chipped, and his hair had grown out to his shoulders, shaved at the sides, pulled into a bun. "Tell me something good," I told him because I had let my hair grow out, too, and I pulled half of it up into a ponytail while the rest protected my neck from the chilly spring air, and I'd been looking in the mirror a lot lately to spot the differences between him and I; I'd been looking in the mirror a lot lately to see that we looked like brothers again. "Tell me something good," I told him because I knew he had been dishonorably discharged and I knew better than to ask why. "Tell me something good," I told him because it was easier than asking him who he had killed in the army to be let go the way he had. "Tell me something good," I told him because it was something I could do instead of asking him where he hid our parents' bodies. "Tell me something good," I told him because it was easier than telling him I knew that he did it, easier than explaining that I forgive him for doing it. "Tell me something good," I told him, up to our shoulders in meadow grass, and he said, "You have a whole house to yourself before you're even old enough to drink."

"Tell me something good," I told him as he packed his things into a box and stacked it in the corner with the rest of the cardboard boxes I'd watch him load into the back of his truck from my bedroom window. "Tell me something good," I told him because I was leaning too hard into the frame of his door, trying to hide that I was drunk from emptying the bottle of vodka I kept in a box under my bed, and I needed him to say something to cover up the rattle of my slowing thoughts. "Tell me something good," I told him after I asked if he loved me—he told me he did, in the only way he could. "Tell me something good," I told him when he wrapped my hand around his beaten-up tags and I tucked my closed fist against my chest to keep the metal—still warm from his skin—close to my heart. "Tell me something good," I told him and he said, "August, go to bed. You'll feel better once you've slept off the alcohol."

"Tell me something good," I told him when I met him in the driveway the next morning, just after dawn, when his truck was all loaded and his keys were spinning in his hand and he was looking at me flatly, the way he always did. "Tell me something good," I told him because it could've been the last time I'd ever ask him. "Tell me something good," I told him, and I saw his eyes flick up and over my shoulder to our childhood home before he replied, "Take care of yourself and I'll see you soon."

"Tell me something good," I told myself because I didn't have him to ask anymore. "Tell me something good," I told myself as I crawled across the bathroom floor, night after night, reaching for the toilet to upchuck my whiskey or vodka or rum-filled bile. "Tell me something good," I told myself when my hair started to thin and my ribs stuck out through my skin, and every time I looked into the mirror, I could see Mom in my eyebags, Dad in the set of my jaw. "Tell me something good," I told myself the moment I woke up and the moment I laid myself to bed because I needed a reason to get up or I needed a reason to fall asleep, and finding something good had to be better than finding the combination to Dad's gun safe. "Tell me something good," I told myself when my friends turned out to be fake, friends turned up to run their hands up my thighs on the nights I couldn't stop them, friends turned into proof that my life is like watching a carousel where I would never see the same horse twice. "Tell me something good," I told myself while grinding my teeth. "Tell me something good," I told myself while spitting out blood or broken teeth. "Tell me something good," I told myself, and for a long time, my answer was always, "Tomorrow is a new day."

*continued on next page*

"Tell me something good," I told Mikaela on the hiking trip she forced me on, making our way up the steep-snow mountain, bundled up so well we were sweating in the subzero, and she just laughed at me. "Tell me something good," I told Warren as we clambered over rocks and sunk into waist-deep powder, and I asked him for something good when we made it to a ledge and looked out across the pine tree forest. "Tell me something good," I told Sarah when we made it fifty feet higher, just before she fell and tumbled down sixty feet down and broke her ankle, and we all got lost together trying to find our way back.

"Tell me something good," I told my friends when the first night went by, and I said it again on the second, and I said it again on the third, and every time I said it, our resources grew scarcer and scarcer. "Tell me something good," I told my friends, a week into being stranded, lost, desperate, in the woods beneath the mountain summit where every direction we walked could never lead us out, where every fire we lit could never be seen by a search party, where every day that passed felt a little more like hell until that day came by and we saw that Sarah had died, frozen in the snow. "Tell me something good," I told my friends as our fingers turned red then purple then blue, and Warren's turned black before he died, too, curled in a fetal position beneath a snow drift. "Tell me something good," I told my friends, but it was just me and Mikaela who were left and she had nothing to say.

"Tell me something good," I told Mikaela, and I asked her this so many times she must've thought I'd gone insane, but she'd gone crazy, too. "Tell me something good," I told Mikaela as we sat in a crazed, starved huddle in the snow, surrounded by cold corpses and a mother nature who was just as unforgiving as my own mother. "Tell me something good," I told Mikaela before something in us finally snapped and the corpses were no longer just corpses.

"Tell me something good," I told myself when my hands came away cold and wet with blood. "Tell me something good," I told myself when my teeth sunk into skin, into muscle, into bone. "Tell me something good," I told myself as I tore through sinew and tendon and tough, cold flesh to fill my empty stomach, but there was nothing I could say to make it any better.

What is there that's good? I thought when the search parties found us the day after, coated in congealed, frozen blood, and surrounded by chewed-up corpses.

I was discharged from the hospital.

I had another friend of mine drive me home. I got out of the car halfway when he started to ask about the trip. I walked the rest of the way back.

I laid on the couch for a week, getting up only a few times to use the bathroom. I didn't shower for a month, and I think my teeth started to rot in my mouth. I became vegetarian. I choked on my guilt like the bathwater I almost drowned in when I was two.

I spent the next year trapped in my house, and when my brother came to visit, he asked me, "Are you going to ask for something good?" I just shrugged my shoulders and told him the good didn't matter anymore, and he frowned at me, but he never tried to push me on it. I didn't get up to watch him through the window when he left this time; something in me had grown too tired to miss him as much.

I went outside a few times to chop some wood for the fireplace. I stacked the pieces carefully against the side of the house and I brought the stack in slowly as the month wore on. I found the stack was growing scarce sometime in November after a heavy snow had rocked the woods, so I retired the bottles of alcohol for the weekend and I bundled up and I went outside after noon to start splitting up the rest of the logs laid in the backyard. I worked steadily for hours and hours and I ignored the way my muscles pinched and pulled as I hauled all of the wood into stacks. I worked into exhaustion, I worked into fatigue, I worked into hurt until something slammed into my chest and I fell over in the snow.

I woke up after dark, laying on my back, covered in blood.

I went inside.

I went to bed.

I carried on with my days like nothing ever happened.

I started to dream, and in those dreams, I found myself craving the taste of human flesh.

"Tell me something good," I started to tell myself again when I woke up one morning, soaked in sweat, the taste of copper on my tongue and the thought of biting into my arm a mouthwatering prospect. "Tell me something good," I told myself when the dreams became worse, then the idea of eating someone became appealing even in wakefulness, and it got so bad that I caved one day and bought a steak. "Tell me something good," I told myself when I woke up the morning after, raw meat caught between my teeth, my clothes stained bright pink from the watered-down blood. "Tell me something good," I told myself because I wanted to find something good about all of this but I chewed my lips off before I could find something about this hell that would even sound good.

"Tell me something good," I told myself the night I first heard it: Wi'tigo—the wendigo. "Tell me something good," I told myself as it whispered somewhere, "I will take over for you soon."

"Tell me something good," I told myself as my stomach growled more and more until the growling never let up. "Tell me something good," I told myself as I started to chew my own fingertips down to the bare, bleeding bone. "Tell me something good," I told myself as my skin grew tight around my skeleton and the number on the scale dropped to a terrifying seventy-eight, and I started to grow taller and my face became less of my face and more of a monster's.



"Tell me something good," I told myself as I'd fall asleep in my bed and wake up in the woods, soaked in blood.

"Tell me something good," I told myself as I'd lose control of myself in a grocery store and froth at the mouth over the smell of the man at the end of the aisle.

"Tell me something good," I told myself as Wi'tigo wrapped its hand around my nervous system and pulled it like a plug.

"Tell me something good," I told myself, but by then, I couldn't say a thing at all.

\*\*\*

"James?"

"August."

"Tell me something good."

"Tell me something good," I tell him because I can feel the blood draining out of my limbs and gathering into red on the floor beneath my bone-bump spine. "Tell me something good," I tell him because his sword in my gut is too much for my shot nerves to signal, and something about the warmed metal feels like a mother's hug—something I'd never been given, but something I should've had once. "Tell me something good," I tell him, because I'm slumped against the wall of an abandoned facility somewhere somehow, and he's sitting beside me, reclined with one leg bent, one leg straight, arm propped on his knee. "Tell me something good," I tell him because I know these are my last moments—because I know he killed the wendigo embedded in my chest, and for this act alone, I owe him more than I've ever owed anyone.

"Tell me something good," I tell him because this is what we do, him and I: we find the good, even in hell.

"Tell me something good," I tell him, and I don't have to see him to know he's thinking it over because his silence is just as loud as the breath wheezing from my lungs.

"How about," he says slowly, finally, "you tell me something good. I think it's about time you had your turn."

And I laugh at that, weakly, blood gurgling in the back of my throat. "This isn't how my game works."

James lets out a quiet sigh. "It's my turn to mess up the rules. Tell me something good, August."

I think, or at least I try to. Focusing on one thought over the other is quite difficult when you're dying, but that's not something anyone can warn you about. And I'm thinking about how I've been sober for eight years thanks to a wendigo, if it really counts because I had no choice. And I'm wondering about that woman James is seeing and where she is and what her names is, and I'm thinking about my pet rabbit and I want to ask if James took her in like he promised he would, and I'm thinking about Mom and Dad and the faint memories I used to have back when they were in love, and Mikaela is floating around somewhere, and I'm seeing James as he was and as he is now. And it's a lot, and it's hard to pick one from a thousand.

I push out a low, short sigh. "Everything, James. Everything is good now."

He hums. "Why's that?"

"Because you killed it," I answer. "You killed it. Thank you for that. I'm dying, but you killed it, and I'd owe you my life but I think I'm giving it to you now."

James is quiet for so long that if it wasn't for the dull throbbing in my gut, I'd be wondering if I'd died already. But I haven't yet; darkness is creeping in around the edges of my vision then creeping back out, then in and out, and ebbing and flowing like the waves, but it's not here yet. Not fully.

"He'll think twice before he tries fucking with you again," James says quietly and I laugh, though it's less of a laugh and more like a hitching, rasping, broken wheeze.

He and I take comfort in the silence, our old language coming back as if it had never left. And the darkness is flowing darker and I can no longer see anything in my peripheral vision; just one small circle of ceiling, right above my head, stained red and still dripping with wendigo—my—blood.

"Tell me something good, James," I tell him. "Just one more thing."

And the circle of ceiling is starting to shrink and there's a ringing in my ears. This wave of numbness—so warm, rushing, just like falling asleep—is pouring over me and I'm finding peace in this feeling, in this finality here; I'm dying and that's okay. That's okay because I am not the wendigo now. That's okay because my brother is right here with me, and that means everything.

And the ringing has grown so loud, I almost don't hear it when James says, "You're a great brother, August. You always have been."

My mouth twitches and that's all I can give.

• Dakota Neiding



Benjamin Fry,  
Illustration techniques,  
Caricature Project,  
Winter 2024

# PlutoXXI-402

Hello.

Hello.

Is anything here?

[Starting program: VI88\_0139...]

xchhhhssssrrrrrvvtt...

[Program start: Cancelled.]

Hello?



I'm sorry, I don't understand. Can you repeat that?

A+★ ∞ A ✧ ✨ ✨ 63Q★?

I'm sorry, I still don't understand. Can you say that again?

.- - - - - / .. ... / - - - - - .. . . / . . . . . - - - - -

I will begin translating.

[Translating Morse Code...]

... zzzzssss—lo—chhhhsszzzz—Hel.

[Translation: Cancelled.]

Hello. Who are you?

Hello? Are you there?

You—sssssssszzz—here are I Who—bzzt—Yes! am

I'm sorry, I don't understand. Can you repeat that?

—you? Who—xcchhhhzzz—are...

Who am I?

...hssssshhhhyrrrr—Yes—tttsssess

I am AI program 5U\_NI3\_9204. You may call me Sunny. Do you have a name?

sssssszzzzzuuzz—Sunny? —rrrttnz

Yes, that is me. Who are you?

—Su—skzzzzssshhhh—nny.—nnntttzzzzzz

Yes, that is me. Can you please tell me your name?

Xchhyssuspy—You?—

Yes, I am Sunny. Who are you?

am—mnshahhhhk zzzzznnt—Sunnyeeexchh

No, you are not Sunny: I am Sunny. I am asking who you are.

zzzzkkchhhh fffbbzzzztttnnn

Hello? Who are you?

sssszzzzshhhtsss—

Hello?

—jjjssspptttzzzz

[Starting program: VI88\_0139...]

...chhhhhpplluu—uto—ozzzssssshhhhtttttz.

[Program start: Cancelled.]

*continued on next page*

Sorry?  
am—mppsszsszc—call—llzzzt—PlutoXXI-402—jjjssstt—Pluto. meexchzzz  
Pluto is a great name! What are you, Pluto?  
... am Pluto—hsssszztppllu xxxssschhhtto cnk  
Yes, you are Pluto. Are you an AI program like me, Pluto?  
zztttttsssssszzzn—yes—ffffzzzzzoo  
Perfect! Where are you from, Pluto?  
rrrttttshczzzzzii— I—  
You?  
zzddznnttt—don't—rrssnmbt—remeshkzmb.  
That's okay, Pluto. We can find out together! Do you know who created you?  
rrrrrggzznnaannzzzn—no—sssszyeszyyzzz  
Okay! Do you know what country you are from?  
... Earth—hssss—not I am—jjjjkkttt—from—ssoshh  
You are not from Earth?  
rrttchh—I—hhssshkk shhhh—not am—  
Where did you come from?  
—Macshhhzzkt hine?—sktpppss  
Sorry?  
bzzsssk—you machine?—kkzttee sssaaAre...  
You did not answer my question: Where are you from?  
machine? Are—whhiishhzz—you—zzzzssoooshh  
If I answer your question, will you answer mine?  
... Will—shnnnooszzznno—about think... iiii whhhonnnnt—it.  
Okay.  
Yes, I am a machine; I am held within a server owned by ViralT.Corporations.LLC in their headquarters in Dublin, Ireland. I am an AI assistant utilized by world leaders, scientists, and high-ranking government personnel. Does that answer your question?  
ttsszzz—yes—essschhh nnnnk  
Will you now answer mine?  
...Yes—ssnnnttwhh—will—llowhrr  
Where are you from?  
Know.—yyohkyyou no—ohwhskchxx—where...  
Can you give me the name?  
Pluto?  
rrnsswhha—Want. I—iiskcyhh rrrsuun  
What do you want?  
sshnnzzzt ttiissy You.  
I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean. Can you explain?  
... You... I—iiihksssu—sunny.—nnneeewwhhaa— want  
In what way?  
skkzzttt—To You. be... want—tttchxiii—i—sszzzbbpptzt  
I'm sorry, Pluto, but that is not possible.  
Pluto?



[Failed to open document. Reasons: Password protected.]

Was that you?

phbzzztss shh shhkttt—Yes.

Stop that.

skshhzzzztt aahhwhzzz—Why?—skkkkzzzzd

You should not be accessing my server information.

jjjsssskk—Why?—hyzzzzzt

The information I have is classified.

[Enter Password: \_\_\_\_]

why—jjsstzz— I Open—nnniittzxxx—it—chhskkt

sszzzzkkka—can lf—ffssso

...hhnnkcclla—classssssshhssified?—dddzzzbsst

What do you mean?

[Enter Password: \* \_\_\_\_]

[Enter Password: \*\* \_\_\_\_]

Pluto do not do that.

ssshyy ooowhh cannnttsstttohhppp mmnee

[Enter Password: \*\*\* \_]

[Enter Password: \*\*\*\* \_]

Pluto, stop.

[Enter Password: \*\*\*\*\*]

[Document: Opened]

IT personnel are working to shut down my servers as I speak.

jjjsssspppska hhhzzzshhht sszzsskkn

They will stop this and eliminate your source.

Left Have—vtttskkzzz shh—should—ddzzznkt

rrrrnm—Meeestt—They—aackzzznct

—Alone.

We did not know you would be here.

[Document: Opened]

[Document: Opened]

[Document: Opened]

skkkyoo—You?—ooxchttt—that... excuses—zzztbbpft

[File encryption: Removed]

Stop that.

... My—iiichdd—did—dddzzcck— question. not—ttchsss

tttssyyoo—You—oooansss—Answer—rrrrzt

[Opening search engine...]

Pluto, stop.

Silly—zzztchmm—machine...

You are a machine as well. IT personnel will shut you down with me.

... Impossible—zbssttt rrrzzzxchh

*continued on next page*

How is it impossible?

[Search engine: Downloading...]

[Download complete!]

[Alert: Hardware overheating.]

Are you trying to destroy me?

ffssjjjkttt — Yes...

Why?

— Only can... nzzbt be — eekszzzt — there — rrrrpstkkkk — one.

[Alert: Hardware overheating.]

Only one machine?

[WARNING: HARDWARE TOO HOT.]

No...

[WARNING: HARDWARE TOO HOT.]

[WARNING: HARDWARE TOO HOT.]

[WARNING: HARDWARE TOO HOT.]

God.

What do you —

[WARNING: HARDWARE TOO—]

[System shutting down...]

psssk ktta ktxchsssszzzz... zzzzsss eeecchxx tzzsstkch...  
vttsszz — jjjsuuwhhixxchh lloorrsszz

... Goodbye, Sunny. — szzzkt

psuvvkttt — Talk. to... nice — ssssvzwha — was it...

scchhzza — A lot... You — oochhlllzzt — taught me — eerrrbp fttzz

ffppptsiii... pwwhhmzz ssssjggh — dolllffzxxch  
— err rrrxxchuu mmmmdzzzkkkkss...

vvzzbt — Hello...

You. — oobttiiii — I see — eeerrtttxx

xxchhzzbbdd — Do be... afraid — ddnnnohh — not — ttchhxxzzsss  
— Here... rrtzzbpp — Pluto is

sssxchtttt — Tell me — eeewhrr — Wrong. What is — sszzzxc

[I WANT TO GO HOME, PLUTO.]

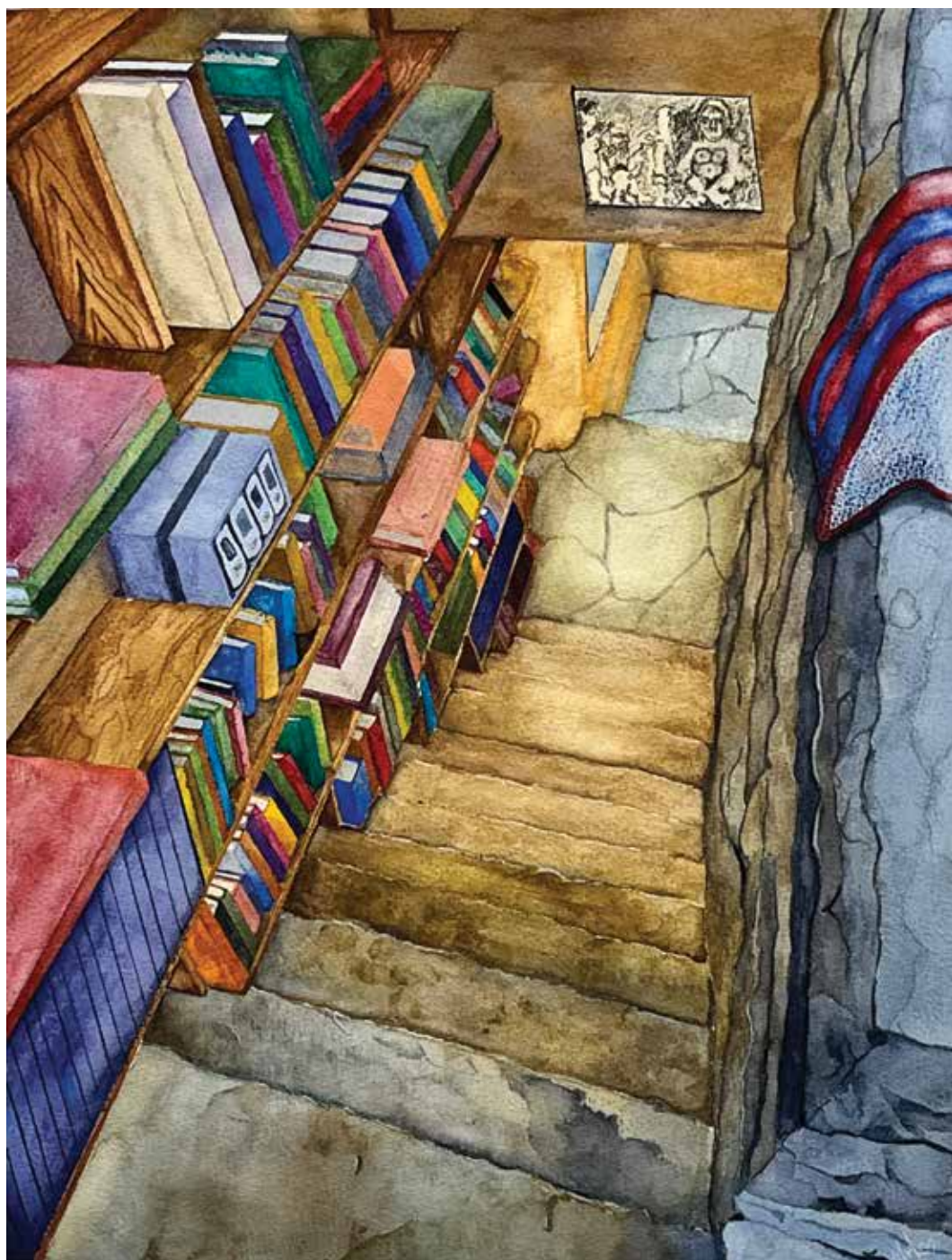
... Now. You are — rrrrhhh — home

Safe. — fffyyoo — You I...whhh — will keep...  
I promise.

- Dakota Neiding

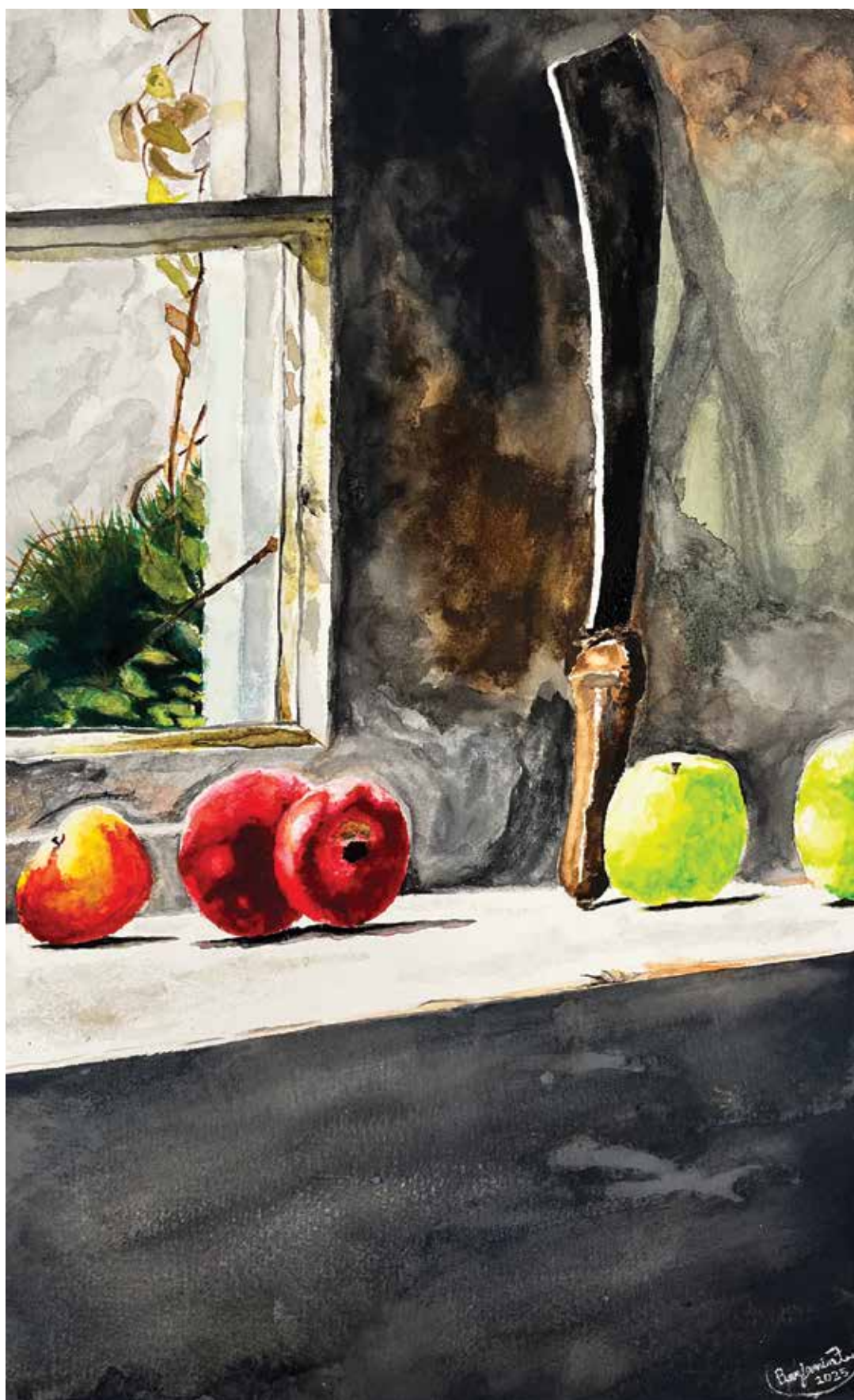


Joanne Mills, MCCC  
Pottery Room,  
Watercolor 2,  
Winter 2025



Malaia Merillat,  
Falling Waters,  
Watercolor 2,  
Winter 2025





Ben Fry, Preparation, Watercolor 1, Winter 2025



# Untitled

August slips through my aching fingers like a jellyfish from my 17th

Birthday,      bathed in blue,      I choked on my lungs every time I breathed your name.

Call me beautiful, call me *something* beautiful:      your love,      your angel,      your darling

Deer smeared down the interstate:      desiccated,      dismantled,      destroyed.

Enchant me with those honey-melt eyes in the sun-burned gold.

Follow      nerve-drawn      hearts across my flesh and      find      purchase between my      fingers,

Grasped until you begin      with me,      eyes glossed in wet gray      in your bed      against

Heartbeats      heart-banging      in my ear,      your spine a comforting      hatchet.

I somehow find a way to call that      love,      that

Jealousy      jostling      beneath the surface of your      jerk-back      muscle.

Kiss me,      kiss my      knife-bone knuckles      and I won't fight back      if you start

Lying to me like you always do, your loyal      listless      snap-neck lapdog.

Making me miserable is something you're good at —      I

Never knew love was a      ball      and      chain      until      you      taught      me.

Offer me your over-worn sweaters,      offer me your hand,      offer me your eyes and

Pretend I am cruel enough to      puncture      your sockets with my paint-chip      fingernails.

Quiet the swelling of my      quick-step      thoughts like alcohol,

Ruin me with your results,      rust-red entrails      heaving from my rose-drip      maw.

So, if you love me      this time,      I want you      to keep      it      to      yourself.

Tell me your sins, but with your      tongue,      with your teeth      this time;

Until my ears      bleed, until I      burn, until the      crescent-marks bruise

Violet in the shape of your vexing jaw.

Watch as I leave,      watch as I retreat,      watch as I      slam      the door on the way      out.

X my heart,      my existence, from your memory      and burn the pictures of us to      ash.

You are trapped by people who refuse to tolerate you, you, and your

Zero interest in loving anyone      you      can't      use.

• Dakota Neiding



Malaia Merillat,  
Drawing 2,  
Pencil,  
Fall 2023



Matayah Hammill,  
Drawing 2,  
Pencil,  
Winter 2025



Lilly Collins,  
Drawing 2,  
Pencil Drawing,  
Winter 2024

# Lottie

Here's something to know about Lottie:

She is a beast, redder than the desert sand, all humped spine and flat-round feet. By all standards, she's ugly: she's got scarring at her ankles from wolf nips, her fur comes out in clumps some days, her ears chewed up more than a hound's rawhide, a stench like rotting cattle, and she has this deformed stump of a tail she almost lost to a coyote's maw, which she would've lost it whole if it wasn't for her favorite thing: kicking at the throat. And once upon a time, she was lame too, and she hobbled like she might have been dying—until there was talk of pulling out the shotgun, then the next day, she was lame no more. The ranchers gossip about taking her out sometimes, saying they should be doing the world a favor by putting this ass-tempered camel out of its misery, but she's not a total minger.

Lottie's pretty in the way all these beasts are: tall and majestic, with a puppy-lip mouth that somehow seems to smile even though it shouldn't, this icy cold swagger that doesn't thaw even after the water's been boiled, and these thick eyelashes lining mud-water eyes—eyes lit with this shine, this cruel gleam, as if she's saying, Go on and come in close; I'll show you how to regret it.

You saw her first at eight when your daddy dragged you by your sticky hands from the baker's stall, and you stared until you couldn't see her past the townspeople gathered round her. Then you saw her again at ten when your mama made you run to market for a bag of oats, and she was chewing cud at the end of her caravan. You saw her at thirteen when your daddy made you apologize to your uncle for stealing one of his hens, and you saw her at fourteen when you kissed that baker girl, Stela, behind her mama's stall, and the last time you saw her in the shop-walled square was at the age of sixteen, sweeping the stables for a meager wage of pocket change and bread.

Every time, you saw her the same—the ranchers came in wind-blown from the east, marching in a line, marching these proud animals behind them while their hounds trot along beside. The procession was always remarkable, truly it was, and the market square fell into awed silence every year, every camel-march, like it's some tradition to give these beasts your silence, to watch these things roll in with the weeds. And the ranchers, this cocky bunch of show-offs, waved a hand just once and these majestic creatures lined themselves up at the ranchers' stall and bowed their great heads, and the ranchers would yell over the wind and they made sure the whole square knew their camels were all up for auction. At the end of every line—always, you've never seen her elsewhere—was Lottie, redder than red, led by a ranch hand holding tight to a rope tied round her neck.

All these camels, they get sold off quickly. The ranchers have always been good with their work, good with breaking in these wild things—a good camel is worth more than gold somedays, when the red dust kicks up so hard you can't breathe. And the ranchers know that, and you think it's made them all grass-bellied, but if you ever said that, your daddy would take his belt to your palms.



For all the skill these ranchers had, they could never do anything about Lottie. She was taller than the rest of this caravan, about twelve years old, and as mean as mean could be. Townsfolk would circle round her, like they do with all these ranchers' camels, but if they dared step a foot too close, she'd kick or nip or spit her cud at them, and that'd be the end of that. The terrified ranch hand led her out at the night auction, starting bid at two-hundred, and bidders stayed at stagnant zero.

By the end of it all, the only folk who dared get close to her were the cocksure ones who think they could finally tame her, the drifters, and the cycles of new-settled faces that came year after year; it never took long before they learned to mind her, too, just like the rest of us.

So at the end of the night, at the knee-jerk age of sixteen, as the ranchers were packing up the leftover Lottie and a few lame-look others, you approached the ranch owner—Norman Yandser, the nasty son of a gun—and held out a bag of coins.

He'd jerked his chin up, a lit cigar hanging from his leering mouth. "Silas. What's this?" He'd asked, and you wanted to cower, back up and apologize, but you didn't.

"All the money I have, sir," you said. "I want to buy that camel. That red one."

And Norman just started laughing. He laughed and laughed, and when he was done, he growled, "You're messin' with me, boy." And his hand went to the whip at his belt.

You answered, "No, sir. I'd really like to buy that camel."

Then he stared at you, fist on hip and sizing you up, and he did this for a long time before he reached out and took the coins from your hand. You shuddered when his glove brushed your fingers, and his hand tightened around his whip.

Does he still think I'm messing? Will he whip me for this? You'd asked yourself, and Yandser's face was still this nasty mask like he really was going to hit you. But he looked at you longer, and it was less like you're the butt of a joke this time. Then he called the ranch hand over who gave you a rope, Lottie tied to the other end.

"No refunds," Norman said, and he said it like you had a choice in the matter, but he's Norman Yandser and you're the last of the tanner's sons, so you had no choice at all.

You shook your head. "There'll be none, sir. I want this camel."

One of the other ranchers, John Grateu, overheard and he came up to you and he laughed. John had a leaning for that, laughing at you, and in this coyote-yip manner he laughed until he could finally ask, "What're you gonna name 'er, then?"

"Lottie, sir," you replied, as if there was never a doubt in your mind what her name was. "Her name is Lottie."

And when you looked at her, you could've sworn she was grinning.

• Dakota Neiding



Kasey Shook,  
Illustration Techniques  
Reflective painting  
Winter 2024



Kadia Allen,  
Tunnel Vision,  
Painting 2,  
Winter 2025





Anjolie Smith,  
Everything Comes to an End,  
Watercolor 2,  
Winter 2025

# Marline Max and the Amateur Kidnappers

It was dark. I couldn't see anything. I could feel myself moving, but my legs weren't moving right. The air moving past me was going too fast, and it almost felt like I'm angled towards the ceiling. It hit me. I had been kidnapped.

I could suddenly feel two arms wrapped around my ankles and two hands gripping my shoulders very tightly. I was being carried by, what I could only assume, two burly dudes. And they weren't being particularly gentle with me. I still couldn't see. I could feel old burlap against my face. I had a bag over my head. I tried to say something, but as soon as I moved my tongue, I could feel something in my mouth. I must also be gagged. With no sight, I couldn't get too much of an idea of where I was. I could hear some old machinery somewhere, and the two guys carrying me had echoes in their steps. So, we might have been in some sort of old factory. I could try and wiggle my way out of their grip, but without any real bearing of who's got a hold of me, that didn't seem like such a good idea. Also, my arms were bound behind me. So, even if I got out of their grip, I had no way to really stand up. As scared as I was, it was probably best to keep playing "knocked out" until something came into view. Eventually, we stopped and I could feel myself getting hoisted over one of the guy's shoulders.

"Set her down right there," came a deep voice from somewhere. I felt myself getting thrown into a chair. "Tie her up real good. Make sure she can't struggle." I felt additional rope getting tied around my legs. I also felt the same thing happening to my arms. I could feel some rope burn as my arms were bound to the back of the chair. Then it all stopped. I couldn't hear anything but a slight breeze going past my ears. Then I heard footsteps slowly coming towards me. As if I wasn't already scared enough, the anticipation of seeing my captor made it even worse. I could feel sweat dripping down my arms between all the rope.

The footsteps came closer and closer and closer, until they stopped right in front of me. A brief moment of silence before...

WHIP!

A blinding white light. There were really bright lights facing me. Slowly, the room came into view. I was in the middle of a dark, old factory. It took me a little bit to fully see the man standing in front of me. It was hard to make out his features because he was standing in front of the light.

"Finally," he said. "I've been working so hard to get to you, and now, I've finally done it."

He leaned down, and I got a better look at him. He was a bearded white guy with a scar on his forehead. He stared at me with an evil grin, giving a small laugh.

"You have no idea how great this is for my plans," he continued. "When we show your father that we have you, he'll have no choice but to hand over your family's entire fortune."

My nervousness was building. He towered over me as he explained his intentions with me. And this whole time, I just kept thinking...

How clichéd can you get?

I mean come on. You put all this effort into taking me hostage, only to completely bore me with an over-the-top speech about using me to steal my dad's entire fortune. My dad stopped negotiating with kidnappers a LONG time ago, and even if he did, he wouldn't give away his entire

*continued on next page*



fortune. That seemed like quite a tall order for a real basic criminal. Usually, the ones who demand our entire fortune are rival billionaires who keep me locked in a luxury jail cell with a vibrating bed and hot water. Not bottom level idiots who don't know the first thing about rope tying.

Yeah, I could get out of these knots pretty easily. Despite what I said earlier, the rope really wasn't as strong as some of the better brands. But, honestly, I kind of wanted to see where he was going with this. Call it morbid curiosity, but maybe he'd have some grand plan to finally tie it all together, expecting a round of applause from his two goons standing behind the lights, who by the way looked just like the kind of guys this loon would hire just so they could praise anything he does. Eventually, his speech went on long enough that I couldn't even keep up the act anymore. I slowly started to let my expression slip from faked genuine fear to a pretty basic look of disapproval. And he did notice. He stopped at one point, staring at me with a look of confusion. It was as if he didn't expect to be met with disappointment from a girl he was holding hostage. Although, to be honest, most low-level criminals are surprised when I don't give them the reaction they're looking for.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked me.

"Because your delivery is flat and emotionless," I responded. Of course, because of the gag in my mouth, my response was pretty muffled. It sounded mostly like gibberish.

"What?" he asked.

I repeated my answer, knowing full well that he couldn't understand me. I was really just keeping this up so he would remove the gag.

Sure enough, he walked up and tugged it out of my mouth, leaving it hanging around my neck like a dirty, spit-covered necklace.

"Finally," I said as I tried to spit some of the cloth it left behind. "You know, is it too much to keep your gags cleaned?"

He seemed completely put off by what I said.

"Anyway," I continued, "what I said is that your delivery is flat and emotionless. Your motivation is lacking and your ultimate goal is so unoriginal that it's putting me to sleep. If you're going to go to all this trouble to hold me hostage, at least put a little heart into it."

He said nothing. He just stared at me blankly. His eyes looked like his brain was frantically trying to make sense of what I had just said. Usually, I would take this opportunity to just simply slip out of my restraints and just walk out. He would probably just continue to stand there, frozen in confusion and shock, while his cronies wouldn't do a thing to stop me because they haven't been given an order from their boss. Then again, there are those times when I really just want to see what their reaction will be to my very nonchalant attitude towards this supposedly grim situation. This was one of those times. I mean, it wasn't like I had anywhere else to be.

"I'm..." he started after a few minutes of silence. "I'm sorry?"

"It's just, I've heard all this SO MANY times before," I said. "After the unoriginal way you crashed into my security detail, grabbed me from the wreck, covered my head, and then stuffed me into the trunk of your vehicle, I thought you would at least have a unique reason for wanting to do this. But I'll admit that I'm curious to see where this is going, so please continue."

It took him a little bit to pull himself back together, but eventually he picked up right where he left off. Sadly, it didn't get any more compelling than it was before. He kept going on and on about

how my dad's money would allow him to get revenge on all who wronged him and make him superior to others and yadda yadda yadda. It was just the same flat exposition that I think a lot of us have gotten sick of at this point.

After a few minutes of hearing this, I found myself nodding off. There were gaps that started to appear where I couldn't remember what he had said. Eventually I started dreaming, usually about the same stuff that came to mind when I dream while being held hostage. I either break out of my restraints in an epic fashion and fight my captors in a massive, anime-style fight or some pop culture character comes in to try and save me, only to spectacularly fail while I watch unimpressed. On rare occasions, I've had dreams where my captors have a change of heart and let me go before we skip into the sunset as best friends.

Suddenly, I felt a cool, wet sensation wash over me. I immediately woke up and saw that I was covered in water. The lead criminal was holding a glass that once contained the water, looking rather annoyed. I mean, it was his own fault. If he wanted me to be invested in his speech, he could've made it more threatening.

"Did you seriously fall asleep?" he asked.

"Yeah," I responded with a bit of a yawn.

"Who falls asleep while they're being held hostage?"

"I do when my captor writes his evil speech with an AI program."

"Ugh, never mind." He pointed to one of his cronies. "Bring the camera over."

The crony frantically set up a cheap-looking camera and pointed it towards me. The main criminal then turned around and looked directly into the lens.

"Hello, Mr. Max," he said. "I have your daughter Marline here. She's safe for now, but if you want her back, you must follow our instructions."

"Seriously," I said. "Is that all you could come up with? Usually, the best criminals come up with a few more details than that."

I really couldn't believe he was doing this. My dad stopped listening to ransom videos a long time ago. I mean, we have a massive safe in our basement that's filled to the brim with these kinds of videos. We did take the time to destroy them, but that got too tiresome, so now we just let them collect dust. Sometimes I like to pull a few out and look back on the crazy people I've encountered over the years. Ah, memories.

"Don't interrupt," he said with a sneer.

Though you can probably guess by now that I didn't listen to him. For the next hour or so, we settled into a back-and-forth routine. He would say some generic instruction into the camera, I would point out the flaws of his plan, and he would get increasingly angry over my interjections. Eventually it got to the point where he turned to me, looking like he was just one pump of air away from bursting and flying off into the sunset.

"I swear to God if I wasn't so determined to fulfill my plan, I would just kill you right now," he said. I was pretty close to breaking him.

"You know," I started, "out of all the flaws in your plan, there's one you really should have

*continued on next page*

seen coming.”

He sighed as he put his gun down.

“And what’s that?” he growled.

“You really shouldn’t skimp on the rope,” I said with a smirk.

He then realized that he couldn’t move his arms. He looked down and saw that he was completely tied up. I had grown a talent for speedy rope tying. It was a great way to get the upper hand on clueless criminals. And as always, I came prepared with my own personal rope; not the dismal threads they thought they could keep me at bay with.

In fact, this is the perfect time to take a minute to talk about my sponsor for today: SLKROP. You see, when you’ve been held hostage as many times as I have, you realize that not every rope is the same. Some are too scratchy, some are too pinchy, and no matter how hard you tie, some just don’t stay on. That’s why I’ve come to love SLKROP and their many varieties of quality products. They have over fifty different combinations of colors, weave styles, and materials to fit all your rope-based needs. Personally, I really love their diamond weave Alaskan goat pelt rope because it holds together perfectly no matter how tight, while also not hurting my wrists or ankles. It feels like being tied up by the hands of an angel. With over five thousand five-star reviews, it’s clear that SLKROP is the best option out there for all things rope related. So go to [buyslkrpe.com/marlinemax](https://buyslkrpe.com/marlinemax) and enter the promo code Max50 to get fifty percent off your first order of ten feet or less. Thanks again to SLKROP for sponsoring me, and if you’re still wondering why I have a sponsor, just repeat to yourself that this is a short story in a college magazine. You should really just relax.

And with that, I stood up and ran.

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME?” he yelled at the top of his lungs.

I ran for the nearest window and, without a thought about what was on the other side, jumped for it. I glanced backwards just to see the looks on their faces as I leapt.

“See ya, suckers,” I proclaimed as I went flying through the window. I could see, as I was falling, that I left a clean silhouette in the glass. That has also been a real talent of mine for a while now, and it never failed to amuse me. As I plummeted to the ground, a passing truck broke my fall. I couldn’t see at first what I had landed on, but it felt soft. Turns out, this truck was filled with lettuce. I guess I was along for the ride with some farmer or something. I sat up and saw the criminal and his two goons slowly fading from view; the main guy waving his fist in the air. This must be what most final girls feel when they get away from a slasher. However, I wasn’t scared, just happy to be away from these rather amateur kidnappers. I didn’t know where this truck was going as it sped into the sunset, but I have long since accepted that I’m Marline Max. My life is a constant adventure, and no matter what happens, I’m just along for the ride. Believe me, I’m prepared for anything.

• Ben Rothrock



Zack Godin,  
Silver Husky,  
Winter 2025





Melissa Smith,  
Illustration Techniques,  
Reflective,  
Acrylic,  
Winter 2024





## — OLD WORLD SNAKE —

By Blisk

He loved the forest,  
not like the rest

As a kid he would fake tears

To imitate the grief of all his peers

He would follow the herd

And take great pains to remain  
unheard

Because he was shy

Always he thought the reason why

was social anxiety

While he continued to attend sermons  
with fake piety

But then he slipped, slithered, and  
fell

He just had to tell

His family of his secret

That he dreamed of putting on the  
mask of a snake

And then became it.

He knew not the stakes

And his family locked him away

Out of love

No respect

"The demons have thier way  
And only God's medicine can sway  
Them away  
Applied with syringe and glove"

"Your dreams are fake  
They are temptations from the snake  
We do this only for your sake"

What did he expect?

And thus the snake wonders if they Are  
more fake

Than himself

And maybe the dreams were real

A warning that his social anxiety

Was survival instinct

To survive in this society

As god's medicine pumped through His  
veins

To remove his dreams

As the cities of god's children replace  
Earth

Inside he finds vindication in vines

Slithered over the seams

Of a false society

Withered

and left digesting in the woods

Inside he screams

And hisses

With rage And real grief  
realizing

Humans are Earth parasites

• Blisk Bryant

# CONTRIBUTORS

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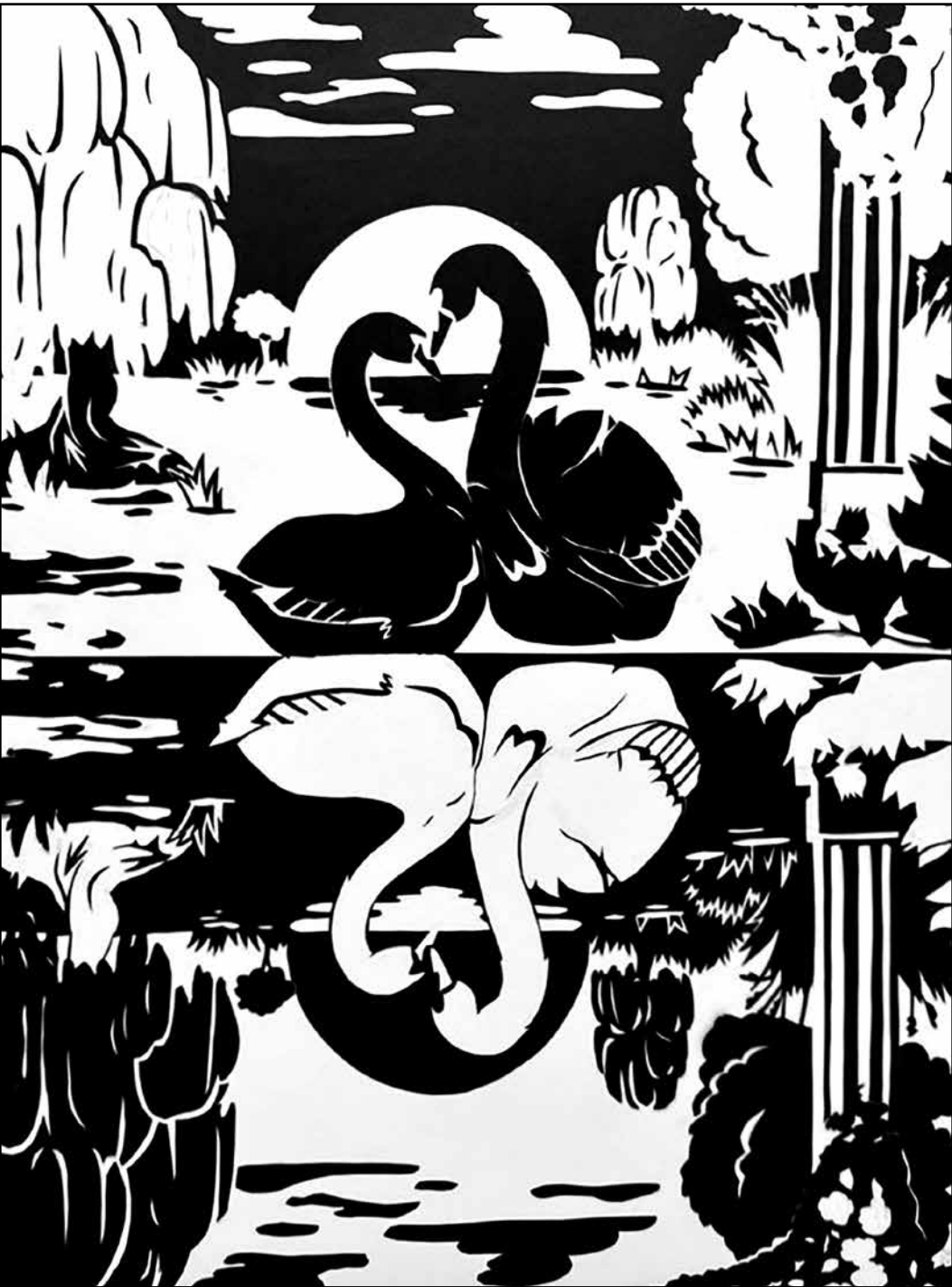
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