

IMAGES



THIRTY-SEVEN

20

A Literary
& Fine Arts
Magazine

23



All photos: Therese O'Halloran

IMAGES 2023

A LITERARY AND FINE ARTS MAGAZINE

by the Students and Staff of
Monroe County Community College



Front Cover:

Aurora Reynolds, Oil Life Portrait, Oil Wash over Pencil, Fall 2022

Back Cover:

Ella Ryan, Pot, Ceramic, Winter 2022

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The Humanities/Social Sciences Division

Note: This publication may contain mature subject matter.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the thirty-seventh 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— Grace Yackee, Rachel Eagle, Doug Richter, Joe Verkennes, and Elisabeth Brockman-- 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 thirty-seventh volume. We collect these submissions through our magazine's email address: images@monroeccc.edu.

Jenna Bazzell

Assistant Professor of English

Therese O'Halloran

Assistant Professor of Art



Ellie Sharpe, Monochromatic, Split Complementary, and Complementary Composition, Acrylic, Fall 2022



Cadance Sharpe,
Monochromatic and Complementary Composition,
Acrylic, Fall 2022

Cadance Sharpe,
Monochromatic and Complementary Composition,
Acrylic, Fall 2022





Elisabeth Brockman,
Pot, Ceramics, Winter 2022



From the Porch

From the porch, before the gunshot, in my damp and green rubber rain boots, my ears untie a knot of yipping and screaming and barking.

From the porch, I cannot see the dead peacock splayed and scavenged on the ice above the shallows of the lake. To either side of the avian corpse, there are men with shovels, one holding his like a rifle at ease pointing heavensward off his shoulder, the other with two hands resting on butt of his rusted, makeshift weapon out in front of his stomach. They're talking with muffled words, leafing through bored and played-out musings.

From the porch, rot finds its way on the dying wind to my twisted nose and turning stomach. It is earthen, like mud and clay dredged from the ground by storms and time, and It is almost floral like the musk found at the back of my mother's closet emanating from her chest of primers and perfumes. The back of my throat warms and contracts around bile and mouthwash, astringent and fresh and gone the second it rises.

From the porch, I turn my gaze to the halted coyote framed in a lattice of vines and dead branches, all brown and gray and gold and dusted in snow. The coyote's mouth is shut around a chunk of flesh. A few blue-green feathers jut out from the meat. Its chest expands with steady breaths, its fur bristling out and in with the rhythm of lapping waves, in step with the imperceptible shore beneath the ice and its prey. I wipe my dripping nose with the already-soaked cuff of my sleeve. The air is thick and gelid and hard to pull into my lungs. I stare at the coyote likewise, into its eyes, rich and deep and meaningless.

From the porch, I feel my father walk through the gate before I see him, the latch hitching closed with a rustic click. The Coyote ducks low and dashes into the brush as my father sets down a shovel near the front door. He picks me up by my underarms.

From the porch, settled into my father's hip, the gunshot is like the shore beneath the ice. It is deafening and resonant and gone the second it rises.

• Ethan Day Kuhl

A Collection of 6 Word Memoirs

1. My heart beats, yet I'm weak.
2. I thought about your mom today.
3. I'm glued to everything I do.
4. I would do anything for you.
5. You yourself, can control the season.
6. You're bright like the sky today.
7. This life is meant for living.
8. Write a song for your lover.
9. Did you forget that we're friends?
10. She's like an angel from above.

• Jonny Stuart

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

I am fortunate enough to say that I have never been punched or kicked or shot at.

The only things that have ever hurt me are words.

Perhaps this is precisely why I love words– they are all I have ever known.

The first time I heard somebody say The Word, I leaned against the lockers in the hallway and cried. It struck so suddenly, and I was so underprepared.

The second time I heard somebody say The Word, I was in the science room, sitting on a black stool, unable to make my feet touch the ground. Once again, I had not seen it coming. Revulsion crept up my esophagus; I wanted to throw up.

The Word continued to follow me all throughout the school year and into the next. Eventually, I grew accustomed to it.

My friends said it;

dictionaries said it;

undoubtedly, my family said it;

even I let it slip past my lips a few times.

My reaction to The Word dwindled. The process was akin to exposure therapy, or rather, desensitization.

Whenever I heard The Word float between a crowd of people, I swallowed the bile in my throat and smiled along. I looked directly at The Word and forgave it.

After all, that's all it is, right? A word.

Sometimes, when I read a book, The Word spots me, slithers out of the pages, and puts me in a chokehold.

I choke up and break down, losing sight of the world around me. The only discernible thing in my periphery is The Word.

Through my blurred vision, I continue to read, forming an army of words to ward off the monocular monster. Nobody knows I'm fighting a battle in the second row of first-hour English.

After a great deal of effort and a great deal of luck, The Word succumbs, retreating back into the pages of a book written in 1999.

I win, but at what cost?

When I escaped middle school, I thought I had abandoned The Word, trapped it behind the doors of early adolescence. But somehow, it followed me, like a parasite unable to part with its host.

And it continues to follow me now. When I walk through the hallways,
through the cafeteria,
up the stairs,
even outdoors,

The Word lurks behind every corner, always waiting to find me.

• Elizabeth Anson



Brett Hatto,
Complementary Composition,
Acrylic, Fall 2022.



Kaitlyn Ridner,
Monochromatic, Split Complementary, and
Complementary Composition, Acrylic, Winter 2022.



Elizabeth Rodenbeck, Creativity, Ink, Fall 2022

Father / Daughter Nightmare

“What’s the matter kiddo?”

“Ah, nothing Poopsie. I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“Sorry we had to leave so early, but with the hour ride, I had no choice.”

“I know, dad. It’s okay. I guess I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Is something weighing heavy on your mind? You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” Not! Hey, Poops, I got a hit of THC from Sunshine. It’s sitting in my pocket right now, and I’m wondering if I’ll have the nerve to take it today while we’re at the mall. “Probably not.”

“What? What’d you say? Dawn LuAnn, speak up. I can’t hear you when you mumble.” You’re always mumbling. Just get your mouth open and say the words loud and proud.

“Ah, nothing dad. Sorry. I was just thinking out loud.” My goose is going to be cooked if I can’t keep my thoughts to myself. Why did I ever agree to this? “How much further do we have? Are we almost there? I have to use the bathroom.” Actually, I have to have a few moments by myself to get my act together. I’m already a bundle of nerves and I didn’t even take it yet. “I can’t wait much longer!” I better take it easy, cause dad can smell the fear on me.

“All right, all ready. Hold your britches. We have to come to a place that has a bathroom. There’s a McDonald’s up ahead. We can stop there. I think I’ll pull in the drive-thru and get us some sausage biscuits. We missed breakfast, and those pungent smells are playing havoc with my tastebuds.”

“Hurry, just pull in. You don’t have to park, just let me out. Daad!”

“Young lady!” What is up with this child today?

“Sorry, dad. I just really have to go.” Do I ever! Today I’m a cat in a room full of rockers. I can’t get out of this car fast enough. I am desperate to be alone for some quiet time. Where I can gather my thoughts without penalty or retribution. If he catches on to what I’m planning, I will be grounded for life. Hurry, Dawn. Hurry up. You don’t want him coming in after you.

I hope she hurries, or I’m going to be late for work. Sometimes I worry about that girl. Sometimes? Let’s face it, I’m always worried about her. She’s a good kid, but this world is tough and much too fast for my baby girl. Oh good, here she comes now. “Well sweetie, did everything come out alright?”

“Oh dad, that’s really lame.”

“Yeah, I guess it is – for someone your age. Just have to be an old, retired Marine to find the humor in it.”

He’s really trying today. I guess I should cut him some slack. I just didn’t realize how long the trip was going to be with just the two of us in this small space. “Hey dad, are we going to meet up for lunch today?”

Finally, she threw me a bone. “Yes, sweetie. My schedule is flexible. We’ll get there by 6 and leave again at 6, so how about noon? Do you think you can spend all of my money by then?”

“There goes that wit again. You know I only window shop. Unless I find a steal on books, then I just might hit you up.”

“Yeah, because there’s not enough of them in our house already.”

“You’re right dad. There’s never enough books – EVER. Think I’ll take a quick nap, okay?” Things are better between us now and the rockers are no longer after my tail, but I am exhausted.

“Of course, dear. You go right ahead. I’ll wake you when we get there. Sweet dreams.”

At least my nightmare is gone since I flushed the pill at McDonald’s.

“Dawn, it’s time to wake up. Come on, we’re here.”

“Dad, I just closed my eyes.”

“You just closed your eyes 30 minutes ago. I’ve never heard you so quiet.”

They both stepped from the car. He tosses his keys in the air and catches them, as he softly whistles a cheerful tune. Her face splits wide as she watches him. Then runs to catch up.



Patti Schleicher, Reciprocal Interruption, Construction Paper, Fall 2022



Nicole Barabe, Reciprocal Interruption, Construction Paper, Fall 2022

I Still Carry the Key to the House I Grew Up in

As I stand in front of it now, the house rests shockingly still. I always remembered it as a living breathing thing. I think childhood will do that to you, make everything seem more alive. I think that's why children are so empathetic. When I was young I would speak to my stuffed animals as if they were my friends and I would ensure they all had enough time displayed on my bed so they wouldn't feel unloved. Now this house and I are both decades older and we stand facing each other wondering what has happened to the other. I feel as if I'm still the same long-haired barefoot girl and this house has done all this changing without me. In truth perhaps I have changed more than the wood and shingles that balance in front of me. After all these years my childhood home still has the same rust-colored brick chimney that stood above us year after year. It still stands like an abandoned lighthouse attempting to beckon us home despite the fact the rest of them are long gone. The part that has changed the most are the windows that I remember painting in front of with my mother. They stretched from nearly floor to ceiling in my favorite corner of the house. On warm mornings, my mother and I would slide the dusty panes open to better view the dry plain that swallowed our home. We spent many mornings capturing the same dehydrated trees and shallow pond, but each time was still cherished because it was our sacred activity together. Now the windows are gone leaving gaping holes that resemble open wounds in the home I was raised in.

Our house has always stood alone, surrounded by only dry grasses and a lonely mailbox. When I turned 19 and moved away to attend a university it was said that more houses would soon join it, but they never did. When I went off to college I tried to shake off what was left of this place. I often forgot to call my parents on the weekends and I only seemed to see my sisters at their weddings. Every time I sat in the pews and saw one of my sisters walk down the aisle to wed a man that could have been a younger version of our father, I would shake my head to myself and think, *How doesn't she see it? She will live the same dull reality as our mother and will never know a life other than the one we have already lived a thousand times over. Her life will become nothing more than an unoriginal sequel of the other women that were raised in this wasteland.* I observed this process four times over as all of my younger sisters accepted their predicted fate. Each time I felt superior to them because I had gone against the grain, as well as my father's wishes. I had worked hard for a life I could fashion to my own liking, rather than depending on another person to make my decisions for me. At that time I refused to acknowledge that a part of me was envious of how easily satisfied they were with what was handed to them. I had always known that I wouldn't be content with my life until the burning within me to run from this place was obeyed. Even as I stood here with coarse white hair facing the once charming two-story dwelling, I couldn't help but wonder what my life would have been like if I hadn't needed to exhaust myself chasing near unattainable dreams. Would I have found someone to share my life with as my sisters had? Or would I still find myself alone on this hill? I finally gathered the bravery to reach my wrinkled hand towards the worn brass doorknob and as I did I examined the house up close. The once cheery robin-egg blue of the siding had been reduced to a sun-bleached white that reflected the colorless landscape that surrounded it. I remembered firmly grasping this doorknob when it was still shiny with my young callused hands as I prepared to race my sisters to the nearby pond, still in our flowing white church dresses. As we ran barefoot, the ribbons on our dresses would often come undone but we couldn't have cared less in each other's company. My sisters were the only ones in that town who never made me feel ostracized for being strange and bookish. So much of girlhood is about learning to conform and I will always be grateful for the freeing moments I spent with them when our spirits were as fiery as our copper-toned hair.

As I pushed the heavy wooden door, it swung open with a great creak. I took in my breath at the sight of my gutted childhood home. The only piece of furniture to remain was a waterlogged sofa that I can't remember being there when I was young. It appeared to be a fold-out with a gaudy floral pattern that suggested it was purchased by somebody elderly, perhaps my late aunt. I watched a startled squirrel scuttle through the layer of decaying leaves that coated the once-polished hardwood floor. I made my way through the house in a bit of a daze until I came to the windows that my mother and I would paint before. As I got older, I traded my painting easel for a thick-covered leather journal. It was here, in this place, that I discovered my love of writing which led me to discover my passion for journalism. I longed to leave this place and see as much of this earth as I possibly could, so I wrote until my fingers were purple and bruised. My curiosity and dedication to my craft have brought me to every corner of the world, but nothing has rendered me as wordless as the view from those windows. I felt as if I were standing in a jack-o-lantern with all of its seeds and substance scraped out leaving only its skeleton and carved cavities. I focus my attention on my breathing, not understanding how I can feel so overwhelmed with emotion yet so hollow at the same time. Although the most living thing about this house is the tangle of vines that anchor it to the earth, I feel more understood by it than I ever have by another living thing.

• Hailey Grabowski



Isaac Bagnall, Grandma, Illustration Techniques, Fall 2022

Stuck

The words in my head become stuck
Flowing water now stuck in time
Trapped inside me with no way out
To the world that longs to hear me
My ideas sit motionless
Dangling on my tongue, still stuck
With no way to express themselves
Begging for me to let them free
My thoughts feel jumbled together
Fish crowded in a small river
No room for swimming calm and free
Packed tight with no escape in sight
My emotions tumble around
Playing pinball in my stuck brain
Pushing at the walls, wanting out
Being held back by thought and fear
Fear is not stuck, it never slows
Always in motion, falling down
A waterfall that can't be stopped
But speeds up in the quiet air
Frustration builds as time passes
A swell behind the solid dam
Threatening to overflow out
Flooding all that came before it
Quiet is the answer to all
Quiet gives opportunity
For the stucks to find a way out
Where life pulls itself together
The words find a way to the world
My ideas shout loud and free
Thoughts shift apart from each other
Emotions run free, calm at last
The fear falls, anxieties gone
Frustrations build in the corners
Then openly flow in release
My words will become stuck again
When the world complicates feelings
But quiet will release the flood
And normal will remain once more.

• Lylo Self

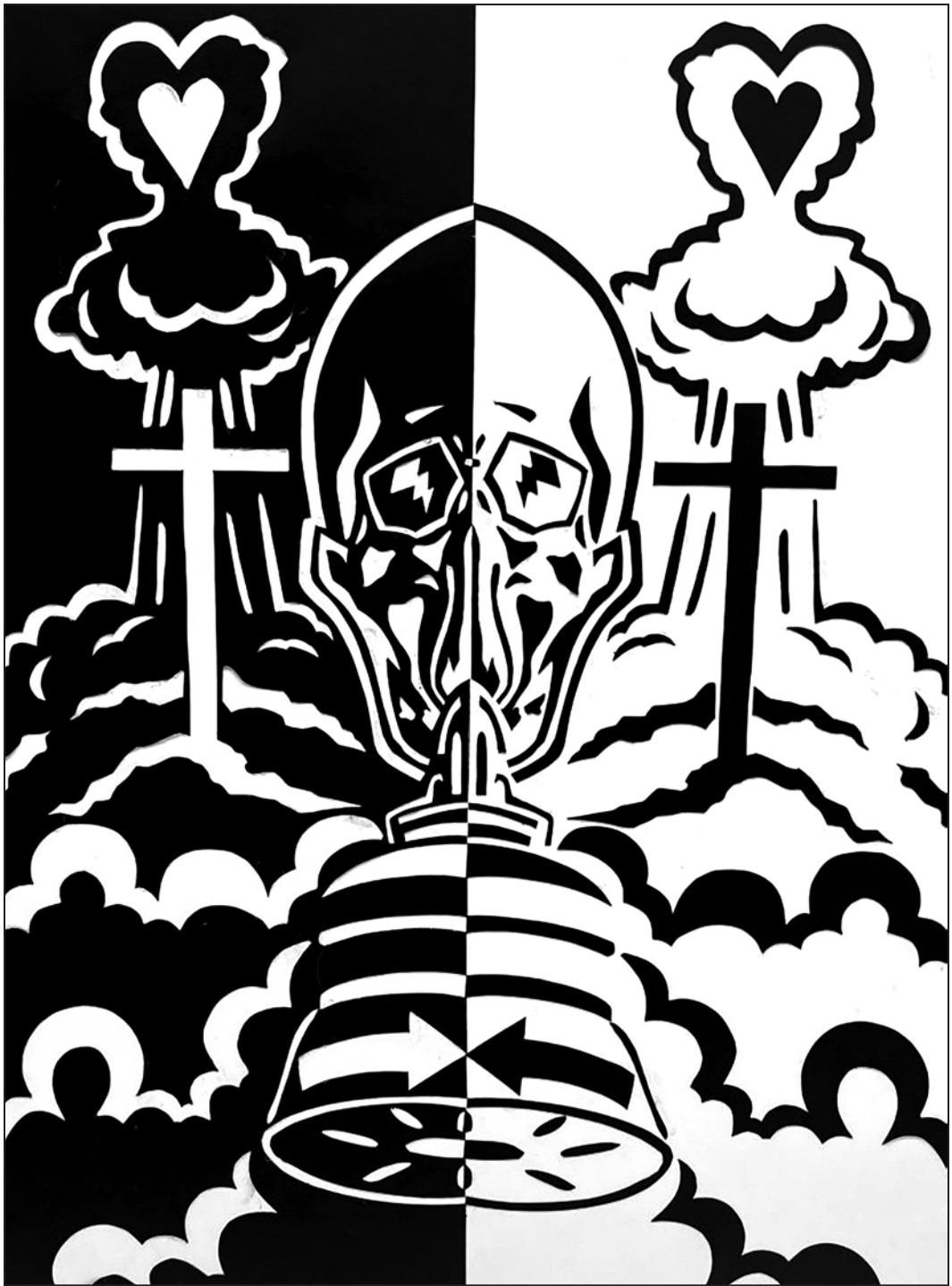
Escape

A tall counter presses around me as I wedge in the corner, legs tucked toward my chest, earbuds palliating the attacker and closed eyes dimming an accomplice. The smell of leftover flat soft drinks sits on my tongue with intertwining's of food, Mexican dishes tasting of spices too sharp for my liking but well loved by others.

Customers booming and silverware clinking and music crackling and servers rushing between tables hitting the dish cart with a clang threaten to invade me again. Echoing conversations typically attempting to overpower the cacophonous dishwasher become softer, as I was the person wielding the scouring pad.

Fluorescent lights glow above, the fixture in the back corner blinks unsteadily like an anxious cat's heartbeat, the rough unpainted wood pressed against my spine. The lights and sounds are nullified under here, the sounds once stabbing my senses cannot find me if I hide.

• Lylo Self



Sierra Seidelman, Reciprocal Interruption, Construction Paper, Fall 2022



Tiffany Mathus, Mechanical Animal, Pencil, Fall 2022

No Work On Christmas

Dedication

The memory of this story and its copyright-related liabilities are dedicated to my father, Matthew Filipovitch, who always wanted me to be an engineer. As I embark upon a career in comedy, I have come to understand the limitless depth of his disappointment.

Critical Reviews

- “Finding any of this funny should be considered empirical medical evidence that disqualifies you from civil service” – Matthew Mikhailavich, father of the author
- “The story of our time. A sense of humor that is liberating and new. A narrative that deftly navigates the Viennese Waltz of labor-management relationships” – T. B. Determined
- “If I review this, what guarantee do I have that you’ll let me live?” - James Lipton, Actors Studio
- “Filip Mikhailavich is like David Foster Wallace in name only” - David Foster Wallace
- “Just show me how to open it on the computer once and then you won’t have to show me again – Nelda Mikhailavich, mother of the author, upon being shown how to open this story for the 5th time.

Forward

My memories of Christmas are almost all from my childhood: wrapping presents, hanging lights, convincing the police to let my mom off with a warning...For me, the Christmas holidays (or the Non-Denominational Year-end Jubilee, as my roommates in the co-op describe it) are special. They are sometimes the only time of the season with a decent episode of Saturday Night Live, and less importantly, the few times of the year my family is together. On the Mikhailavich side of the family, Christmas means informed discussions on the religious mandate of universal mental health services juxtaposed with clinical delusions about something positive Sean Hannity said about genocide – bringing us full-circle to the need for universal mental health services. On the Gonzalez side, Christmas is a celebrated tradition of exchanging whatever colognes were on sale at CVS.

Christmas is also my favorite work holiday, and I have always enjoyed working on Christmas Eve because the morning rush is so unmanageable that management knows you can never catch-up, so I have a great excuse to slack off; and the evening is dead because of the holiday, so I have to slack off – all at 1.5x my pay rate...poetically symbolizing the case for and against unions. I actually think my first interest in writing a Christmas story came from working the holiday at Meijer, where I started my career as a union steward and ended-up as a human resources representative – “a traitor to both sides”, as my managers, coworkers, and pastor would say. Oh, the stories I could tell, and so many of them true...

The mythos of Santa's Workshop really is a collection of clinical hallucinations masquerading as an intelligible story, which makes it an ideal medium for my life experiences. It's a fantasy, so it allows for some creative license, but it's also universally known, which tempers writing something too deviant from canon (i.e. Rain Johnson Syndrome). It is also a fun way to help the un-inducted see the hidden ethos of the labor-management dynamic. Claus-lore tells us that Santa and his workers are good-hearted and well-meaning...and I think that is true – from a certain point of view.

That all said, whenever I talk about the divine capitalism of Santa Claus or the community of interest between elves and reindeer, my neurologist gets very worried. But since you are reading this, I can reasonably assume you are interested, or you are required by institution policy to read my outgoing correspondence. In either case, I hope you enjoy.

Scene 1

The story pans across the North Pole, and we see a winter wonderland (think Rudolf the Rednose Reindeer, 1964) that slowly decays into an ice swamp with stranded polar bears as it pans across Santa's Workshop. The camera focuses-in on a newly created beach, where we see an “abominable snowman” (in the literal sense of the word) sunbathing. The visibly melting and handsomely tanned snowman is lathering tanning lotion as he begins to speak...

Slushie

Ah, I love this Christmas-y time of year, especially when everything is running happy and smooth. Nothing like that year with the big strike. If I ever live to be three thousand, I'll never be able to forget that strike a couple years ago – the one where management and the union dug in and...well...you might not believe it, but the world almost missed Christmas. A shame really, the North Pole is a nice place to be. I guess in a town where woodland elves and reindeer have legal standing with a presumptively divine teamster, we're bound to have a disagreement now and again.

Oh, my pardon, call me Slushie. I am a snowman, or at least I was before the greenhouse effect of Santa's Workshop made me into an abomination in the eyes of the Creator, unfit for the mercy and civil liberties endowed to the unspoiled Victorian creatures of myth. Santa said that things will get better, though: in my evaporation, I will rejoin the Living Vapor and exist immortally to nourish animals and guide aspiring jedi. Of course, there aren't many free-range animals that call the North Pole home anymore. The only citizens up here are the Claus's – Santa and the Missus. Their offices are up-there on the left, in the excessively modest chateau...matter-of-fact, it is the only chateau on any left in the North Pole. There are native elves and reindeer too, mind you, but they are not citizens yet; definitely will be soon though, so I hear.

Wait, you ain't acquainted with the famed negotiation between Old Kris Kringle and union president Jimmy Elffa? Land o' Magneto Norto! Well, pull up an ice-block and lend an ear. It all started right there outside the factory...

Slushie voice fades out

...The elves had started their pre-negotiation picket - the style at the time, mind-you - and Santa was upstairs in his office looking down on them - the style at the time, mind you - and so Santa...

Scene 2

The story descends on an elvish picket outside Santa's Workshop. Several hundred elves are chanting in unison and holding signs that read: "No work on Christmas!", "Stop cosmetic testing on elves!", and "Free Palestine!". The camera pans up to the brick and ivory tower overlooking the factory - the light of a cigar is visible in the window. The story fades into the dim tower office, made entirely of redwood and carpeted with a species-extinction level of Dodo fur. At the window is a goliath of a man, draped in red, glaring intently at the elves.

Elves in unison (noise dampened by distance)

Ho-Ho...Ho-Ho...Santa Claus Has Got To Go!

Ho-Ho...Ho-Ho...Santa Claus Has Got To Go!

Ho-Ho...Ho-Ho...Santa Claus Has Got To Go!

Santa

Communists...Fascists...

Elf #26-15

S...Sir?

Santa

For one-and-a-half centuries my factory stayed unchanged. For one-and-a-half centuries my corporate treasury laid bare to the public fund, my workers in blind, glutenous dependence on regulations for the minimally acceptable levels of industrial runoff in tap water. For one-and-a-half centuries my company served grand societies so riven with interminable human progress they could not recognize or accept its perfection.

Elf #26-15

I...uh...do remember..well,.the wat-

Santa virtuously interrupts the Elf

Santa

One night, an invisible hand revealed to me a vision...a vision of a land of milk and honey, free from the moral corruptions of tariffs, antitrust, and paid maternity leave...and like Moses, I led my people to the promised land. My workshop has endowed more people with happiness than Pfizer. And yet, this workshop, my monument to free enterprise, the last well-spring of good in the world, is ridiculed and chastised by your degenerate brethren in the street. So tell me, mwi rebyonok - what can good men do against such reckless hate?

The elf silently shivers in his chair.

Elf #26-15

Wwelll s...sir...I...I mean it's...you know...

Santa

To me, your people are family, and when they came to my home - the one on Brentwood - rightfully humbled to ask for help feeding their children, it was not the union that cared for them - I was the one that found their children jobs in the pixie mines. If it were not for my belief that humility is the defining character trait of successful men in business, I might believe that your people owed me a debt of gratitude...or, maybe a "thank you" from the union president for his newfound revenue.

Moving closer to Elf #26-15, Santa walks past a wall-to-wall oil canvas depicting Santa refusing to have a statue built in his honor The label reads: Commissioned by Santa Claus

Elf #26-15

It w...w...as so kkind of you, b..but you kknow the...there ha...ve been some concerns ab...about Pixie Lung...

Santa

Mwi rebyonok, when I heard that your people, my family, were ill and that it might be covered under our workers' compensation policy, the first thing I did was call the company doctor. There is no Pixie Lung. The company doctor has told your committees that these symptoms are psychosomatic - the likely result of unidentified but repressed psychological trauma that your people inflicted on these poor children in their early years. Why I was half-way to calling child protective services, but I realized that it is not my place to judge the admonishable ways of your people.

Elf #26-15

But...but the company doctor...the diploma on his wall says his PhD is in "Quackery", and well the union president said...

continued on next page

Santa

And who is it that pays the union president? Hmm? Who elects the union president? Hmm? Is it not true that he is always giving speeches about there being unpaid overtime somewhere, or some disparity in gender pay, or about the new species of three-legged reindeer...these are exaggerations...embellishments to create fear and keep the membership in perpetual war with me and reliant on him. Mistakes are made, you understand that? But, union presidents are rarely subject to the standards of etiquette and the democracy they demand of me. It is my understanding that "suspicious circumstances" is the Number #1 cause of union president turnover. It seems to me that this president of yours may not be an unbiased observer.

Elf #26-15

Well, I...that does make sense, I think...the union is sometimes...well...

Santa

Santa places his hand on the elf's shoulder with fatherly acceptance

I can see now that you are not like the others. You see through the lies of the union. You do not follow the advice of the academics or the medical community or the journalists or the dying words of your children like some sheep - you think for yourself. You are cut from the same cloth as Robert Hanssen, Donald Maclean, Jeff Sessions, and the other heroes of old. That is why I know that you are right to join our sort-of paid management internship program. You see, contract negotiations will be starting soon, and I need someone with your principled nobility to ensure the union is not planning to do anything...unethical.

Elf #26-15

Gee, I...um...well I...you know...am not sure because the contract says a lot about sedition...

Santa

Out loud to himself

"The contract", "the contract", "the contract" - the union alphabet is 8 letters and their dictionary 2 words!

To Elf #26-15

As an intern in my management team, the union contract won't apply to you...you will be free to serve me.

Elf #26-15

Oh, well that's a lot to think about then...

Santa

Seeing Elf #26-15's hesitation, Santa employs the Joe Biden offensive - repositioning himself behind Elf #26-15, placing his hands on their shoulders, and sniffing gently

My child, there is nothing to lose and everything to gain. The history of the elves and the reindeer is a history of compromise. In fear, your people seek absolution from arbitrators. Is it right that the union requires you to bring your grievances to these...strangers? Is it not better to bring your problems to me, face-to-face, begging for forgiveness?

Santa steps away pacing the office

There is a spectre haunting the North Pole...the spectre of collectivism...All my power in the North Pole has been mobilized to exorcise it. When it's gone, will you be an exploited member of Elfa's inane crusade or an unpaid intern operationalizing my business plan?

Elf #26-15

If I join your team, that'll be like a promotion, right?

Santa

Yes - like a promotion.

Elf #26-15

What is the pay like?

Santa

Lucrative, mwi rebyonok, quite lucrative - my accountant tells me the experience is analogous to a livable wage.

Elf #26-15

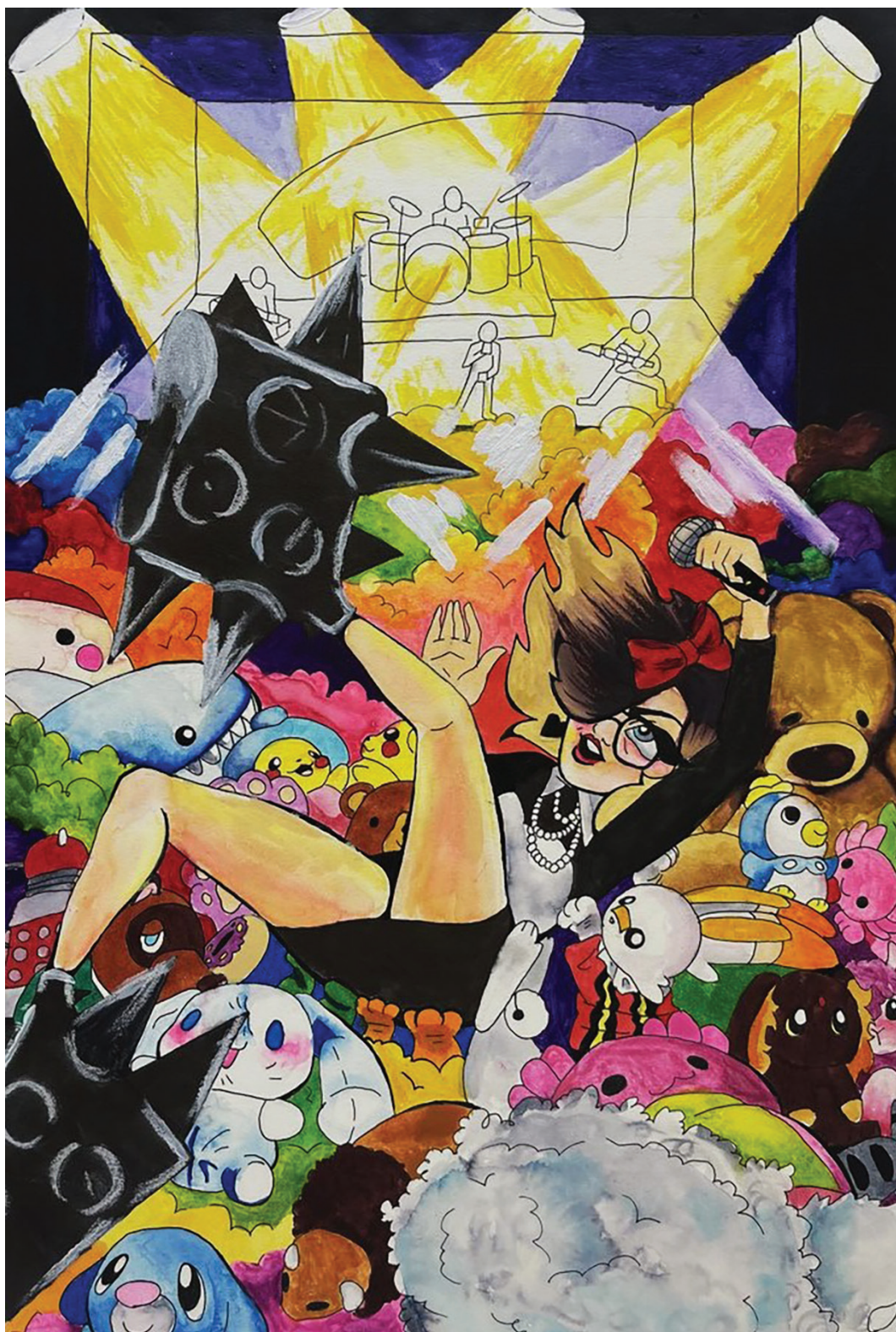
Well, if I'm not a union worker anymore...I can negotiate my pay with you!...right?

Santa

HOOOO! HOOO! HO! HOOOOO! HOOO! HO! HOOOOOOOO! HOOOO! HO!...

[laughter continues unabated]

• Filip Mikhailavich



Aurora Reynolds, Self-Caricature, Acrylic, Fall 2022



Aurora Reynolds, Untitled, Watercolor, Fall 2022

Roar

Genie, the president artificial intelligence (AI) in Jemily's country, rampaged through Jem's Zoo and captured all her animals. Blake, her animal specialist, was able to save her from being captured by the AI, but how can Jemily save her animals?

Part 2

I took a deep breath and savored the moist, clean air. Nothing could calm me down like the chill from a cold shower. The brown walls of my hotel room extended into the bathroom, highlighting the white sink and toilet. I found the elaborate, silver mirror interesting. I doubted Blake had spent a lot of money for this place, so I knew the mirror was not made of anything with value. After all, the AIs were very good at faking anything. Yet, the sticker price of the mirror could not influence its beauty and dominance in the small, dreary room.

I smirked a little, grateful that my thoughts were finally distracted from my zoo, but it didn't take long for the onslaught of sadness to hit again. I remembered when Blake and I practiced the command "retrieve" for the wild cats and wolves. We would use meat or other treats to simulate how they would hunt in the wild. The tigers were unable to be released because Pearl had a heart problem, Fury always had something wrong with his teeth, one of Streak's back legs had been broken in a poacher's trap, and Fire was actually caught in a forest fire and survived severe burns. Every one of my animals were rescued, and Blake was usually the one who coordinated them. It helped that everyone of the staff members were just a little afraid of him because of his height and deep voice. It made my job of overseeing everything else little easier.

The tigers... I thought and remembered Blake telling me that Genie released them around this area. *Will we ever find them? They will not survive long out there.*

I tried to push my anxious thoughts away by wiping a layer of condensation off the mirror. My cheeks were chubby as usual, and my long blonde hair was finally straight after I spent the majority of my time in the shower untangling it. I used to swim when I was in school which was why I loved water, but I never learned how to fight or build computers or anything that would endanger an AI. No matter how hard I tried to think, I couldn't figure out why Genie's diagnostic would pick Blake and me. I reached up and traced my outline on the mirror.

The front door squeaked, and I jerked my hand back. "Hello," Blake shouted.

"I'm in here," I replied, hoping he could hear me through the closed bathroom door.

I heard his footsteps become louder. "I got you another set of clothes. I'll leave them on the bed. Ray is waiting on us, so please be quick." I tried to remember who Blake was talking about, but then he continued, "Ray is my cousin, remember?"

"Right. Sorry. I'll be right out."

"No problem..." He paused for a minute and then said, "Although I already told him you are ready like you ordered me to. You really don't have to go through with this if you don't want to."

"I've been in this room for three days now. If I don't get out, I am only going to get more depressed," I half shouted through the door. I imagined him nodding his head in my direction.

"I will wait for you in the hallway," he said as he walked out of the room and closed the door. I dressed at the speed he requested and met him in the hallway that matched the dull shades of brown in my room. I took a deep breath and tried to prepare to meet the one group of people brave enough to defy the AIs.

In all honesty, they were just people. My anxiety that lingered earlier was all gone, and I finally felt a little relaxed. However, there was still one thing weighing on my mind. *Why did I come up in Genie's diagnostic? This doesn't make any sense. What can I do to an AI?*

"Jemily." I looked up to find where the deep voice came from, but my eyes landed on the back of Blake's head. He was across the room trying to figure out where exactly we were going "hunting" tonight. Apparently, they used the word hunting to mean tracking down and destroying hardware of AIs. Their most prized intel was that Genie could not make its own hardware, but I was not sure about that since it could brainwash people. Man has known since before the creation of AIs that they were a bad idea, yet they...

"Jemily." I realized I completely phased out for a couple of seconds.

"Oh. Sorry. It has been a long day..." I trailed off and tried to remember if he was at the official meeting that ended a couple minutes ago. He had dark red hair and the hint of a beard.

"I agree," he said and offered to shake my hand. I accepted the gesture. "My name is Pecal. I'll probably end up flying all over the country to wherever your animals are."

I huffed a little breath and asked, "You know that much about me?"

"Of course! Everyone has been asking about you since you came here." He paused for a moment and rubbed the little bit of scruff on his chin. "We don't get a lot of newcomers, and Blake is pretty much the favored son of the boss."

I nodded slightly and replied, "I take it the boss is the person who led the meeting?"

His expression was the only reply I needed to know that one person ran things around here, but I took that information with a grain of salt because the most dangerous part of an organization was someone who ran things behind the scenes.

"Here. I have a welcome present for you," he said and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small gold coin no larger than the copper pennies my country had.

"This is your currency here?" I asked while he dropped it onto my palm.

"Yes... pretty much. Its valid as one quintoa in all the Rebel base camps." I nodded, but before I could say thank you, Pecal scampered off. I perked up when I realized Blake was walking toward me, but I pressed my lips together a little worriedly. *Pecal must not like the "favored son".*

"We are ready to go," Blake said curtly and led the way. However, before we reached the helicopter, we ended up back in my plain brown room.

"What did Pecal say to you?"

continued on next page

“Huh?”

“What did Pecal say to you?” he asked more sternly.

“Umm... He pretty much just said welcome.” I paused and studied the unreadable expression on his face before I continued, “Why?”

“I am worried. Ray has expressed concern that Pecal is a mole, and they think that you are extremely valuable to Genie.”

“Valuable how?”

“My guess is that Genie has been poisoning the forests globally and the animals and food supply have been dying off. He has probably realized that he cannot grow food because the metals and chemicals he uses are very lethal. Genie wanted to stay in civilization, but the poison from all the technology is slowly spreading. Everyone in his Welfare Stations are probably on really low rations.”

I could not believe this. “Genie is destroying the planet and taking us all with him. Not just the animals... He is destroying the planet.”

He gestured over his shoulder toward the command room and said, “My guess is that Genie needs a person knowledgeable in ecosystems and animals to bring everything back to equilibrium. You are probably the only person left that can do that.” He stopped for a moment to let me digest the information. “You know that what Genie did at your zoo was unique right? Every other zoo he demolished and killed everything.” I looked at him in shock.

“Genie is that brutal?”

“We have no idea what Genie will do to capture you and make you work for him.” He swallowed and I could see that the thought also made him sick. “Also, I think Genie said that you have the strength of a tigress because he could not manipulate you to give up on everything yourself. He finally had to use force to try to make you submit.”

“Alright, well if the planet is heading towards destruction, I guess I have nothing to lose if I fight,” I took a steadying breath and grabbed the few extra clothes I had accumulated over the last three days. “I am ready.”

He nodded and I followed him to the helicopter finally ready for the hunt to destroy AI hardware and search for my tigers.

Pecal was in the pilot seat with someone else I had never met next to him. I could tell by Blake’s brooding that he was not happy. But neither was I. I didn’t want to be betrayed during this hunt either.

The humming of the engine was comforting and I had to fight sleep the entire way. I did not want to miss anything like the last time I was in this helicopter.

“How much longer until we land?” I asked Blake through the headset.

Blake looked at his watch, but Pecal answered first and said, “As long as the weather stays this nice, we will be there in about thirty minutes.” Blake scowled and shook his head.

I decided to ignore the tension and relax by looking at the beautiful scenery outside my little window. There were a couple of pine trees that reminded me of home, but as we traveled further from the hotel, the clumps of bamboo slowly enlarged. Eventually, a small village came into view. All the houses and buildings were made from mud and bamboo. They reminded me of the little picture books I had as a child that showed all the different cultures around the world.

“Wow,” I breathed. The way that the buildings blended into the surrounding bamboo forests were spectacular.

I felt the helicopter begin to descend and excitement began running through my body. I had always wanted to see a place like this in person. I almost forgot the reason for why we came.

“Wait...” I spoke to myself underneath the drum of the helicopter propellers. “If we are here then Genie must be here.” I took a deep breath and followed Blake as he jumped to the ground. Pecal and his buddy were not far behind.

“Alright,” Blake said with an authoritative tone as he stared at Pecal. He gestured to the other pilot, “You and Pecal can go to the south location, and Jemily and I will go to the east location. Any problems?”

“Nope, your honor,” Pecal replied with a grin. “See you soon, Jemily,” Pecal said as he turned and scampered away again with his friend in his shadow.

Blake huffed and began leading us opposite the direction of Pecal. I took a few peaceful seconds

to marvel at the village houses a couple hundred feet away. I could see the outline of a bunch of children and a few adults staring at us. If I could only wish for one thing in that moment, I wished that we would not bring any fighting or harm to them.

“Jemily,” Blake said quietly as we entered the bamboo forest.

“Yes?”

“Make sure you stay focused. Okay?” I nodded and he continued, “Remember that we only need a spark to start a fire. Genie is—” He was cut off by the sound of a tiger roar. I sucked in a breath of hope and called out my bird cry that I used to train them at the zoo. I stopped and everything was quiet except for the small whisper of the wind. Then, I heard the crack of a stick and the rustling of leaves. I whirled 180 degrees when I heard a faint, questioning half meow and half purr. And there she stood, the beautiful white tiger that had lived with me for the past ten years or more.

“Pearl!” I exclaimed and watched closely as I quickly approached to make sure that any trauma she must have experienced did not change her behavior towards me. However, the look in her eyes and the tilt of her ears was all I needed to see to know that I was safe with her. I clung onto her tight and nuzzled my face into her fur. “Man, have I missed you,” I mumbled to avoid letting her fur into my mouth.

The sound of heavy breathing and running footsteps getting louder caught our attention. His hair was the color of black and blue feathers of a raven, and dirt smudged his cheeks. I thought he was a threat until Pearl jumped out of my arms and ran to greet him. He stopped running but continued to pant as Pearl rubbed against his legs affectionately. “珍珠！你为什么逃跑？”

I looked at Blake and said, “If Pearl says he is okay, then he is okay.” He grunted but I could see his hand lingering near his waist that must have concealed a weapon. The man’s breathing began to even out and he cautiously approached us.

“Do you speak English?” he asked with a heavy accent.

I smirked and replied in Chinese, “你会说中文吗？” I knew I made a good impression when he relaxed slightly.

“Yes... but judging from your companion’s expression, I doubt he does.” My smile spread into a grin as I looked Blake up and down.

“It takes a lot to earn his trust.” He grunted again, but I turned my attention back to Pearl. I called to her and was rewarded with the opportunity to hug her again. I looked back up at the man and asked, “How did you find Pearl?” When he did not answer right away, I continued, “Have you seen other tigers? There should be three more orange ones.”

I could tell he was considering if we were trustworthy enough, but then Pearl gave out a tiny roar and started trotting further into the bamboo forest. I quickly jumped up and followed without even glancing at the two men behind me. My heart started to race as I just knew we were close, and before my feet even began to burn, I reached a small clearing with three little buildings made of more mud and bamboo. However, the buildings became obsolete when I saw three majestic orange tigers sprawled in the grass. Pearl reached them first and began nudging them. I just collapsed right into the mix of leaves and grass beneath me. My heart was filled with joy and sadness at the same time. I found four of my animals, but there were so many more out there. How will I find them all? It has taken me four days to simply run into them by chance. How will I ever find the rest?

I was quickly comforted by tongues and orange, white, and black fur pushing me over to lay on the ground. I began laughing as I pushed back and got to my feet. “Oh Pearl, Fury, Streak, and Fire, thank you for the welcome. I am really happy that you are all okay.” I really could not wait to hear from the man how he found my tigers or learn about how he earned their trust.

I widened my eyes when I looked across the clearing and saw Pecal emerge from the bamboo thicket. But he was not alone. The same soldiers that locked the gates of my zoo in my face were standing before me multiplied. The same soldiers that made all of my animals disappear. The same soldiers that tried to kill or capture me as Blake dragged me away from my zoo.

I was still gaping at my enemy when Blake, who I just now realized was behind me with the man, shouted in rage, “Pecal, how could you do this? What did the AI offer you?”

Pecal shook his head. “There is more to Genie than you know.”

Blake, still fuming, began sprinting toward Pecal, but the soldiers fired their array of weapons and hit him in his leg. His cry of pain awoke me from my trance, and I started running to his aid. However, I only took a few steps when a streak of orange and white paws pushed me to the ground. I quickly sat back up and looked at Fury and the other tigers growling at Pecal and the soldiers. “I am not leaving this place without getting Pecal...” I slowed, trying to think of a plan. I

continued on next page

reached into my pocket and pulled out the gold coin Pecal gave me yesterday. I held it out to Fury and said, "Retrieve." Once he disappeared into the bamboo, I threw my head back and shouted another bird call. Pearl, Fire, and Streak all came to my side. "I need you guys to protect Blake."

They all knew who Blake was, but I worried about Fury. Will he follow his command? My mind snapped back into focus when I heard Pearl yelp. However, before I could move, Streak went to her rescue and clawed the attacking soldiers. I got to my feet and was surprised to see Pecal edge to the side of the advancing soldiers on Blake. I knew Fury was waiting for him to get just a little closer to the edge of the clearing. Blake is just going to have to survive for a few seconds until I can get more information. If we go into hiding now, this will all be for nothing.

A soldier glanced at me and then switched his weapon. I thought there was nothing I could do when the sound of the largest explosion made me fall to my knees. The ground shook and many of the soldiers also fell. A group of the black soldiers started running in the direction of the blast. Once I saw Fury pounce on Pecal, I took that as my cue to start running into the forest. I knew that Fury could find me.

I stopped when I was out of breath. I needed to conserve some energy to go back once I talked with Pecal, so I sat down and tried to listen in between my gulps of air. A few seconds later, I finally heard the crunch of leaves and Pecal cursing. Fury had a good hold on Pecal's leg and was dragging him toward me. Pecal quieted down when his eyes landed on me.

"This is a really dirty trick. You knew we couldn't hurt the animals because of our food shortages, huh."

"Does Genie just threaten you with death? Is that all it takes for you to be manipulated?" I asked, keeping my face as expressionless as possible.

"You have no idea how special you are. When Genie sent in all those fancy men to tempt you into media scandals, you completely ignored it. When he sent those robbers into your zoo and you set up all those traps and practically arrested them yourself, Genie started to freak because he had never seen anyone act like that. No matter what he did, you found a way to stay on the right side of the law."

My mouth was gaping now as I exasperatedly asked, "Genie set up everything? How do you know all this?"

"Because Genie was my friend in high school."

My eyebrows scrunched together, "What do you mean?"

"I sent Edson to destroy that hardware station while I distracted Genie. I had to play a double agent to keep Genie from capturing you. That explosion cut off all the wireless connection in this area, so Genie has no access at the moment and all his soldiers collapsed once you disappeared into the forest."

If this is true than Blake and the tigers are safe right now. I stared at the ground as I tried to understand everything.

"Look Jemily, as much as saving the world should be reserved for novels or short stories, only you can find Genie's weak spot because only you and your loyal friend cannot be manipulated... Although, that new character that saved the tigers was unexpected, so he might be trustworthy."

"What about the high school part?" I asked.

He sighed like he was resigning his fate. "Genie is just a man behind a computer." My face paled as I watched his eyes flutter closed.

If Genie is just a man, then he can be defeated. All I must do is climb my way up the command chain until I get to the real person responsible. As the saying still goes, all it takes is a spark. But in my case, all it takes is a roar.

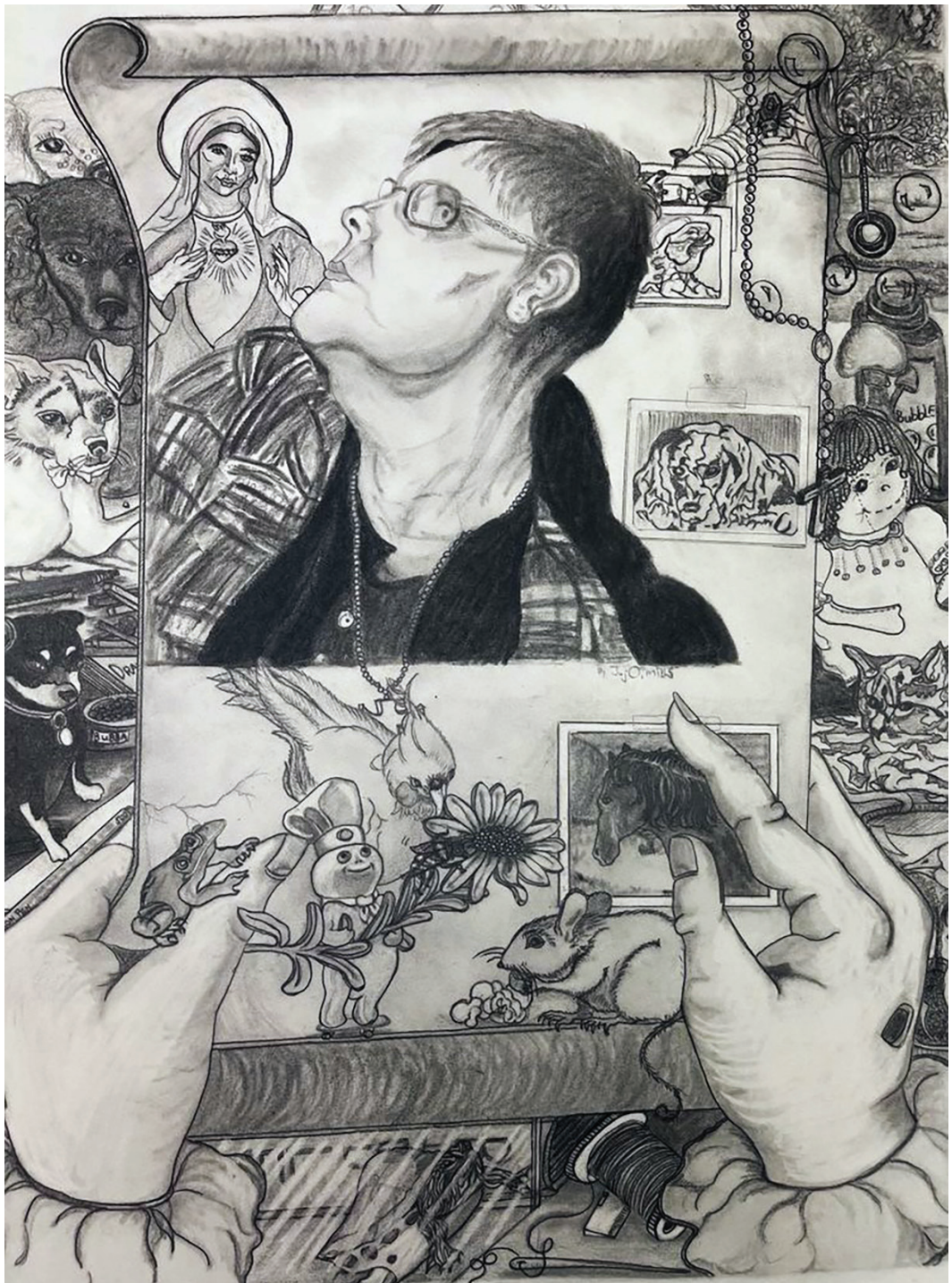
• Emily Klyder



Jessica Petrowitsch, Untitled, Marker, Fall 2022



Khamrii Wilson, Self Portrait, Pencil, Fall 2022



JoAnn Mills, Self Portrait, Pencil, Fall 2022

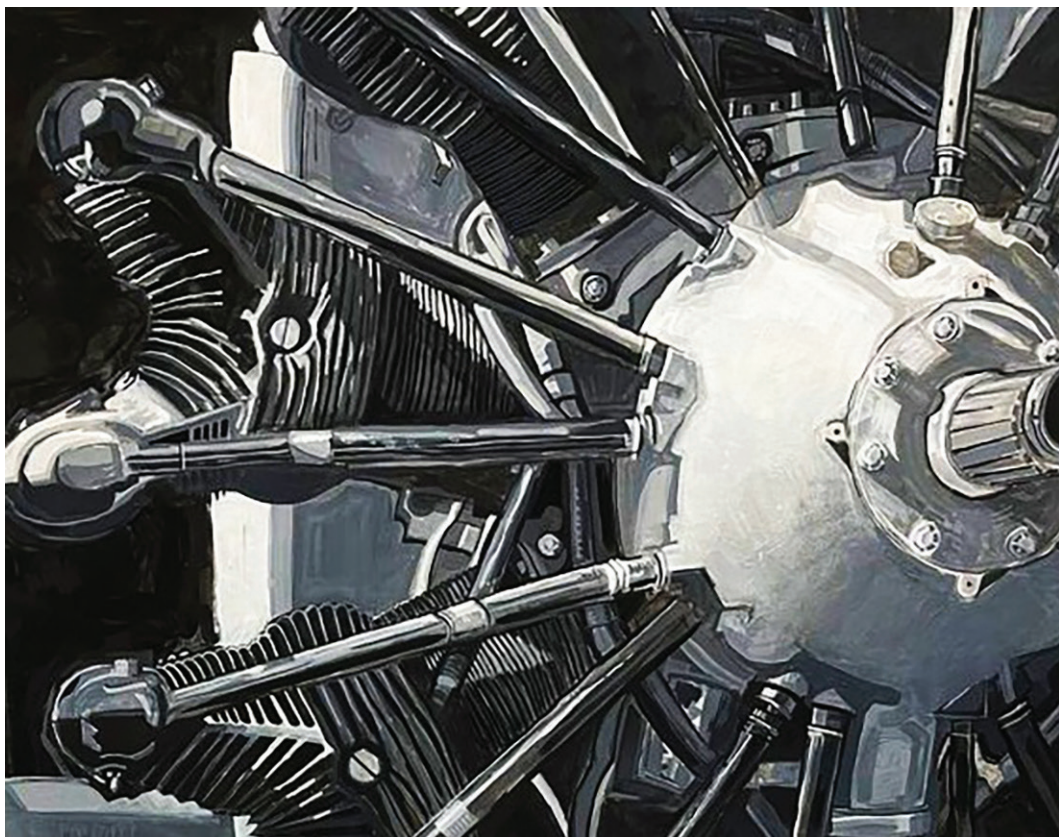
Ruthlessly thoughtful

Sometimes I wonder if what I feel even matters at all
Or if the way I think is just all wrong.
my thoughts flood my brain
Anytime I finally get some peace
the ruthless thoughts begin talking to me
selfish
What does it mean
Maybe a situation is not as it seems
I'm trying to explain
However, when I talk my thoughts aren't conveyed
i almost regret that i stayed
I felt that person cover my mouth
its as though something holding me down
I want to scream and break off these chains
is my voice muted or do I say things in vain
I roar they laugh 'take a look in the mirror
The tiny turtle that pretends to be a lion often forgets she is not the lion
She is but a pet
She ponders whether she should go back into her shell
hiding from the pains of the world
When rain falls from the sky, she will not be cold and when the wind blows, she won't be scared
She knows the hard shell will always be there
But she would also never feel the sunshine or see the stars in the night
are the beauties enough to cover the pain
The responsibility of being amongst the valiant and heroic animals of the forest seems to be a
huge challenge
I found out just how sharp the enemy's arrows are one day in a battle of arrows and swords
the man who stood before me, pulling back his bow, was a brother of sorts,
without hesitation, he shot all the arrows he could
The dark whisper in my heart says we are a victim, we were right to cut the hunter's head off.
the thought bellows I can't lose this fight
Another voice says
"Maybe he's right.
I shrink
I'm the monster, the beast in the night.
My claws are stained in blood, my teeth sharpened with bones, and my heart has long been dead.
I deserve to be alone
But then, in the quiet, I hear another opinion
is that my voice
shhh, listen
Just be still..... unshaken, and remember the treaty formed in war. Remember what you've been
fighting for.
My tears flow as a river, and anger boils like a volcano.
Maybe.....
I hurt him
I turned him into the hunter
maybe...
I could have changed the situation
it didn't have to end this way.
In the end, I'm left with hope...
I'm hoping the ruthless voice will be quiet.....

• Tyonne Jones



Jaden Smith, Split Complementary, and Complementary Composition, Acrylic, Fall 2022



Ethan Kuhl, Macro Composition, Acrylic, Fall 2022



Patti Schleicher, Macro Composition, Acrylic, Fall 2022



Sierra Seidelman, Macro Composition, Acrylic, Fall 2022



Autumn Dunn, Macro Composition, Acrylic, Fall 2022



Elizabeth Rodenbeck, Macro Composition, Acrylic, Fall 2022

The Trials and Tribulations of a 1997 Pontiac Grand Prix

The following is the story of my educational journey as seen through the eyes of my first car, a 1997 Pontiac Grand Prix, starting from senior year of high school to now.

Thank you for reading.

Driving. Accelerating. Driving. Cruising.

The slowly rising sun, illuminating the road with her wide rays, sheds light on the bumping car radio as the Pontiac Grand Prix speeds through idyllic landscapes, crosses bridges with gorgeous views of winding rivers, and swerves around fellow travelers on life's highway at a smooth and steady canter.

Birds fly; deer gallop; caterpillars crawl. Nature follows its own twisting road heading toward an indeterminate destination, alongside the cruising Pontiac meandering down th- CRASH! BANG! WOOSH!

In an instant, the car's life was turned upside down. An incoming semi-truck named Isolation has rendered the Pontiac destroyed and defeated and utterly devastated.

It lost the fight. It lost, burned and busted.

Devoid of all the peace and tranquility of the joyride it was previously experiencing, the Grand Prix limps home, wounded.

The bed-ridden Pontiac now reflects on the joyous time it spent travelling the roads freely. It sheds a tear for the years behind him and grimaces at the thought of moving forward.

As the lights flicker back on; as the bumper heals with a few scars; as the blinker regains its full voice, the Pontiac prepares for dealing with life after the fateful incident. However, the crash didn't simply damage its physical appearance, the crash also marred its mental psyche, and this would not heal for a very long time.

Cranking. Sputtering. Cranking. Starting.

The Grand Prix has regained life, however fractured it is.

Throughout the following weeks, the Pontiac Grand Prix dips its tires outside little by little as it tries to re-assimilate into society after its horrible catastrophe. Slowly but surely, it grasps onto the joy it had once experienced. However, not all is well and good. Every time the Grand Prix starts up, the ignition takes a few cranks longer; the engine revs harder; and the transmission gets stickier.

As the Pontiac slowly heals, it reaches some ominous, haunting train tracks, looming with an air of emptiness. As the sputtering Pontiac approached the climax of the tracks, it begins to stall with no hope of reigniting the flames.

Slowing. Stopping. Slowing. Stopped.

Moments later, horns and bells are heard in the distance. The car looks to the right and sees its inevitable destiny, Failure. The Pontiac sheds a tear of defeat as it realizes its inability to function properly has caused its doom. The train called Failure slams into the still husk of metal, spewing parts and fluids every which way.

The worst of all the possible things that could happen to a poor 1997 Pontiac Grand Prix happened at the worst of all the possible times it could happen. The train named Failure reopened all the mental and physical wounds the semi called Isolation severed and more. The Grand Prix now feels utterly useless.

And yet, the faint flicker of love keeps the embers of confidence glowing. Something in the Grand Prix has not fully given up just yet. The Grand Prix finds it within himself to rebuild its frame, reengage the brakes, and reset the fuel injector cycles. Slowly but surely the Grand Prix rolls its tires out of its room and ventures into the now terrifying world outside.

Shakily steering out of the driveway, the Pontiac makes its way into the world deadest on rediscovering the path life had for it.

Time passes. As the injured vehicle learns to coexist with the pangs of failure and realize the full potential it has, the Grand Prix recovers more and more until it clearly sees the path to redemption.

Six months later, the Pontiac Grand Prix drives smoothly on the freeway as it makes its way to life's next steps. These past years have been hard and painful for the old car, but these trials and tribulations make for a stronger core of love, hope, and wisdom.

Joyriding. Singing. Joyriding. Smiling.

Happily, the 1997 Pontiac Grand Prix speeds onward.

• Samuel Spaulding



Riley Burns, Pot, Ceramics, Fall 2022



Riley Burns,
Pot, Ceramics,
Fall 2022



Melissa Smith, Macro Composition, Acrylic, Fall 2022



Lillian Runyon, Pot, Ceramics, Fall 2022

We, the Ill and Misconstrued.

Chapter One. The Short Way Home.

Whatever had killed the man lying on the old park bench was going to kill the children. Of course, they didn't know this, but, alas, I am the narrator, and so I do.

The four children were walking the short way home because they had been out later than their parents had allowed them to be. The short way home was the worst way home. It was around the back of the grocery store, where they were headed, then through the old park beside the cemetery. It was only dark and gloomy around the playground, a great contrast, in comparison, to the glow of the downtown stretch. The children never liked going this way, but their usual way home would take too long, and they were already quite late.

The children lived in a lovely house with lovely things and lovely parents. The eldest child was a boy, only 11 years old. He was rather tall though and looked like he'd been stretched out. He had lightly sunkissed skin and many freckles over the bridge of his nose. His hair was short, brown, and combed back. These things he liked the least. He thought he was too tall and it made him stand out from the rest of the children his age. He wished his hair was a little longer and, of course, he'd always wished he could've had blond hair. He couldn't quite explain why but he ached for the wonders of blond hair. Yet, it was his eyes that everyone loved. They would stop and stare when he came into town just to get a look at those big, bright grey eyes. They seemed to change colour in the light. Sometimes they were bright blue, sometimes an emerald green, but mostly grey. Everyone loved his grey eyes. His name was Atticus.

The second oldest was Atticus's 8-year-old sister. She was short, her cheeks were round and her eyes were big and bright, but it was her brain that everyone knew her for. She was wise beyond her years. She never liked to play with any of the other children her age, although there weren't many children her age, to begin with. Her room wasn't filled with dolls or pretty little dresses, but books. Lots of books. Not children's books or little fairy tales, but she would get the leftover college textbooks that had been discarded at the second-hand book store on the corner past the grocery store. She has curly black hair, that was always pulled back into two high ponytails. She had a bright smile with perfectly white teeth. People always enjoyed it when she came to town because they could ask her all sorts of questions and she would always know the answer. She was the only girl in the family, aside from her mother. Her name was Thalia.

The youngest children were twins, who were four years old. Their names were Arthur and Ellis.

That morning at 10 o'clock, they had left the house and started for the grocery store. They all held hands and marched cheerily down the streets toward the grocery store with a couple of dollars to spend. Atticus was wearing his new pair of overalls and had stuffed his money in the front pocket and held onto the younger children's money in his various other pockets, making note of whose money went in which pocket. They were taking the long way there that morning. They arrived at the grocery store 15 minutes later, although they usually only took 10 minutes. Thalia had stopped to pick some flowers to bring home later for Mother and Father. Atticus had stuffed them in the front pocket. Thalia had gotten dirt on the bottom of her flowy, puffy dotted dress and though she'd done her best to brush it off a bit of the dusty, brown sediment still clung onto the fibres of her dress.

The children entered the store while the sweet chime of the bell greeted and the aroma of sugar enveloped them.

"Hello, Atticus." Mr Jenkins, the shop owner, called out with a bubbling smile.

Atticus nodded back. "Hello, Mr Jenkins."

"Hello, Thalia. Find any good reads today?" Mrs Jenkins said as she stocked the shelves.

"Hello, Mrs Jenkins. I haven't gone to the bookstore just yet but I am certainly hoping to find something interesting."

Thalia replied. "How do you do, Mr Jenkins?"

"Very well, deary, thank you." He answered.

The room fell silent as the four children stood still in the doorway. The twins gave Atticus's hands a tight squeeze. Thalia reached down and patted them on the head.

"The twins are here as well." Atticus croaked.

Mr Jenkins shifted in his chair and pretended to flip through the newspaper. "Ah, yes. I can see that."

Atticus mustered up a little bit more courage. "We're here to get a treat for them. Mother and Father gave us some money."

"Well go on then and pick something out." Mrs Jenkins uttered and disappeared into the storage room behind the counter. At least, the children assumed it was a storage room but neither of them had ever been back there and didn't intend to and neither do I, so we will leave it alone from now on.

Atticus took the twins to view the shelves stocked with different assortments of sugar and snacks and all kinds of goodies. Thalia walked outside to view the magazines lined up in a metal bin. She was hoping for something good but most of the magazines here were never really her style and they aren't mine either. They're about home decor and the best meal to cook for the in-laws and other sorts of unimportant things. Thalia knew that all very well but her parents told her it never hurt to check just in case.

Inside, the twins were still taking their time deciding what treat to spend their little bit of money on. Atticus told them to make sure they really wanted it before they wasted their money. Atticus wondered sometimes if it would be so immoral to grab a pack of gum and shove it in his pocket before anyone noticed. He knew it was wrong to think that but he wondered what harm it would do. He let the twins keep looking and decided to try talking to Mr Jenkins instead. Mr Jenkins was still fiddling anxiously with the newspaper.

"What are you reading?" Atticus asked.

"News." Mr Jenkins murmured, not even looking up from the page.

Atticus stared down at his feet, which always seemed so far away from him. He knew Mr Jenkins never liked when

continued on next page

they brought the twins with them but he never knew why. He had asked Mother and Father once but they told them the town's folk liked them just fine. Atticus knew this wasn't true.

Thalia crept through the doors and the bell rang silently again. She walked over to the twins, who were holding up two bags of root beer candies. Thalia smiled. Those were all the children's favourites. I love them too but that's not important. They walked over to the counter and Atticus pulled the money out of his pocket. The twins' were in his left pant pocket. The twins reached up and set the bags of candy on the counter. Thalia had memorized all the prices of their favourite snacks and knew exactly how much this would cost.

"That's three dollars, thirty cents, Mr Jenkins." Thalia squeaked.

Mr Jenkins had still been hiding behind the newspaper and didn't pay any attention to the four children standing in anticipation of their snacks. He cleared his throat and peered over the corner of the paper. He pushed his small, circular glasses up his big, round nose. "Uh, let me see here..." His voice trailed.

The children stood still and waited for Mr Jenkins to scan their items and tell them what Thalia had just told him. Mr Jenkins knew very well that Thalia was correct but he seemed to want to hold a bit of dignity in him and that them that their total was, in fact, three dollars and thirty cents.

Mr Jenkins grabbed the bags of hard candies and checked the prices on them and turned to the register. There was a moment of awkward silence as Mr Jenkins click-clacked at the old typewriter keys on the register. After he finished he turned back to the children, avoiding eye contact, and held his hand out.

"That'll be three dollars and thirty cents, Atticus." He groaned.

There was something particularly weird in the way he spoke directly to the boy that made the children all shiver with anxiety. Atticus, though, just stood a little taller, as if he wasn't standing tall enough, and swallowed down the lump of fear nestled deep within his throat. He counted the bills and handed Mr Jenkins four dollars. They didn't have any change with them.

"That'll be seventy cents, Mr Jenkins." Thalia remarked.

Mr Jenkins gave her a side eye and turned back to the register. There were a few more moments of weird clacking against the aged keys and turned back to the children once more. The register popped open and Mr Jenkins slid the four dollars in and took some change out.

"Seventy cents." Mr Jenkins sighed and handed them seven dirty dimes.

Atticus nodded again and placed them in his pocket. Mr Jenkins generally wasn't this stand-offish. Usually, everyone loved to see Atticus and Thalia coming down into town and they would always remark "what a good job!" anytime Thalia did even the slightest bit of math.

But today they had brought the twins with them. They only brought the twins into town once in a while. Mother and Father had told them to bring the twins with them and the older children did so gladly. The town's folk did not welcome them quite as gladly but the children tried to pay no attention to this. Today, they were going to go to the grocery store, which had already been done, and then to the bookstore so that Thalia could find something new to fill her brain with, and then over to the creek just on the outskirts of town. Here, Thalia could read in peace and Atticus stared solemnly at his reflexion in the water. The twins could take off their shoes and socks and roll up their pants and splash about in the creek.

The children were more than happy to leave the grocery store and walk away from Mr Jenkins and Mrs Jenkins, hidden away in her storage room so she wouldn't have to see the twins. They stopped at the entrance of the second-hand bookstore. Atticus held on tight the twins' hands and was hesitant to enter. I can't blame him. After the last interaction in the grocery shop with the Jenkins, who were normally such warm and friendly people, I wouldn't want to bring those kids anywhere near people again. Luckily, Thalia was nice enough to tell them they could stay outside well she ran inside to grab a book on quantum physics.

"Quantum physics?" Atticus inquired, "What's that?"

"I'm not quite sure, Atti, but I'm excited to find out." Thalia squeaked with excitement.

Atticus wasn't sure what interest she found in such mind-boggling subjects but she liked it and never talked too much about it. She would just read and think in silence and that never bothered Atticus. I think he would have liked to find interest in such things because he felt his parents would have felt some more pride in him but he never could get into the strange and unseen wonders of knowledge. I'm still rather proud of him though, even if he might not know it.

Thalia was always willing to be very sociable, even if she didn't necessarily want to be. She'd say "hello" and "how do you do" but she didn't go out of her way to engage in a long conversation and she particularly hated small talk. She didn't like chatting about things she thought were unimportant. Many people would think that that's a bit rude to only care to talk about things you find important but we're talking about an 8-year-old looking for a book on quantum physics, I think we can cut her some slack. I don't like small talk myself, and I think time is much better spent with a good book and one's own thoughts, but, of course, it doesn't matter what I think. She waltzed through the beautiful aisles full of beautiful books. She could smell each fresh page and every well-worn one too. They smelled lovely. I remember when I used to roam the same aisles and smell the same sweet smell of knowledge and feel each brittle page against my weak, bony fingers. I remember those glorious days.

Thalia made her way over to the science section, on the far left next to the big reading area. There were about a dozen little coffee tables with big ol' armchairs that always made her feel so small when she tried to sit in them. She began scouring the towering bookcases, but she was too short to see anything on the top shelf. She could have easily gone up to the front desk and asked Mr Raymond, the owner, if there was a ladder or step stool she could borrow but she could do just find only looking at the books on the lower shelves. Anyways, if she saw any more options, she'd end up spending an hour in the bookstore trying to decide which book was more credible and which one she'd learn more from. So, she sat on her knees and looked at the few on the bottom shelf.

There were not many children around their age, Thalia and Atticus, that is. There was only one younger than the twins, but the children assumed no one else would be born here for a very long time. I'd like to think no one was ever born here anymore, no, people only stayed here to rot away and die in silence. That never bothered the children. The only thing that bothered them was the fact that the few other children their ages were rarely allowed to hang

out around them or even be in the same area as them. Atticus easily suspected that this was because of the twins. Whatever the reason was, the town had always treated them like some sort of virus or a bad secret you didn't want to be caught with. Atticus didn't know why but he just knew that it was and that it might as well always be that way and there was nothing he, Thalia, or his parents could do about it. So, he just put up the fact that he was caring around a plague that the whole village was terrified of and, in a way, it always gave him a sense of power.

Thalia had grabbed one particular book and was flipping through it slowly when Mr Raymond's son came bounding around the corner. His name was Filbert, which Thalia always thought a funny sort of sounding name, though she knew well enough not to tell him that, but always appreciated the meaning of it. Plainly put, his name meant he was smart. Thalia thought that was a lot better than her name, after one of the greek muses; specifically the muse of comedy. She didn't believe she was all the humorous, to begin with, and so her name made absolutely no sense. Filbert was only a year older than she and was one of the few children that weren't snatched away by scolding mothers any time they neared her or her siblings. She always thought how lucky Filbert must've been to have a bookkeeper as his father. None stop book supply and reading, she'd think. Now there's something I could get used to.

"Hello, Thalia. What are looking for?" Filbert asked shoving his hands into his pockets and hovering just over her shoulder, trying to get a view of the book in her hands.

Thalia blushed and held the book up so he could see the cover.

"Infinity and You... Oh, I tried reading that one a while ago." Filbert proposed and sat beside her. "You probably won't like that one. It's a bit... casual. I think you'll like this one a lot more." He droned on as he grabbed another much larger book off the shelf.

Suddenly, quantum physics was the last thing on Thalia's little mind as she watched Filbert rambling on about such-and-such a scientist who did such-and-such and why it was important. Her eyes were sparkling a smidge more than usual. Filbert paused and looked up at Thalia.

"So, what do you think?" He asked.

Thalia began panicking. Truthfully, she hadn't been listening. Just watching very, very closely. Filbert was wearing his usual suspenders pulled over his white and stripped button-up with a little driver's cap perched on top of his curly, brown hair. He looked like an ol' Irish chap.

"Why are you dressed like this? You look weird." Thalia said before she could even realise she'd said it.

Well, I can't even try to defend that one. It's out in the open now, and there's nothing Thalia can do to hide the embarrassment written all over her tomato-red face.

"What do you mean? I always dress this way..." Filbert mumbled, tugging at his shirt.

Thalia must've thought there was no going back or saving herself now because she could only manage one word: "Why?"

Filbert choked and bit his bottom lip while his eyebrows furrowed, "I-I don't know. Because I like to." His voice grew a little fiercer. "I like to and there's nothing wrong with that."

And so, with that, Filbert slammed the book onto the floor and stormed away. Thalia could do nothing but sit there with her big book of quantum physics and scold herself for asking such stupid questions. Finally, after feeling bad enough for herself and for Filbert, she stood up, pick up the book he had picked out for her, and even spent an eternity explaining the awe he found in it, and walked over to the front counter. Mr Raymond was sitting in his own velvety, red armchair behind the counter, drinking a short glass of lemon tea. Streams of steam rose off of it and curled around his nostrils every time he took a tip from it. He, too, wore a pair of circular glasses, but Mr Raymond's were larger and more comical.

Mr Raymond's hair had begun turning grey a long time ago even though he wasn't all that old. Thalia and Atticus's Mother's and Father's hair was still brown and Mr Raymond was younger than the both of them but still, his hair was all salt and pepper. He always wore a green fisherman hat with a string around his chin. He'd always done this for as long as I can remember, and, personally, I think he did it to hide his early greying hair. He used to dye it brown to hide it but after a while, he just embraced it.

Thalia had almost forgotten that she had left her money with Atticus when Mr Raymond asked for it. She left the book on the counter and ran outside. Fortunately, Atticus was still sitting on the curb. Thalia bent over and tapped him on the shoulder. He jumped back and caught himself by placing his hands on the sidewalk and leaning heavily on them.

"I need my money, please." She said extending a hand.

Atticus stuck a shaky hand into his right pant pocket and handed her all the money that'd been stored in there.

Thalia watched the twins playing around the sidewalk for another second before they jumped into the street. "No! Get back here right now!" She screamed.

Atticus jumped up and lead them back onto the sidewalk. No one was driving down the road at that moment but they thought if anyone saw the twins playing so vulnerable on the road, they might jump right into their vehicles and plough them over in a moment's chance. Thalia locked eyes with Atticus for a moment longer before returning to the bookstore. She smiled at Mr Raymond and held the money over her head so he could reach it. He took the money and placed it inside the cash register, which wasn't quite as old or nosy as the Jenkins.

"How's it been?" Mr Raymond asked kindly, fiddling with a plastic bag.

Thalia stood on her tiptoes and watched him over the counter. "Alright, thank you."

"And Atticus?" He continued, wrapping the book carefully in some plain brown paper.

Thalia always appreciated that he took the time to shield the book. "Good, I presume."

Mr Raymond slid the book into the plastic bag. "The twins?"

Thalia was caught off guard. He didn't look at her when he said it, just continued doing what he'd been doing.

"What about them?" She inquired.

continued on next page

"How are they?"

Thalia stopped and thought for a moment. "Relatively okay, I suspect."

"Good. Where you off to next?" Mr Raymond said as if he hadn't just asked them about the well-being of the twins.

Thalia was still a bit taken aback and had a hard time finding a way to answer questions. "Well, we were over at the Jenkins..."

"Tut-tut, aren't they always a joy." Mr Raymond scoffed mockingly.

"Well, we usually just ignore them-"

"But you're children and you shouldn't have to put up with it..." Mr Raymond interrupted.

"We're going to the creek." Thalia blurted as she took her book and burst out the doors.

Atticus was looking at the purple flowers and the twins were seated on either side of him, counting each one of the flowers. Thalia nudged him softly and continued walking down the street at a brisk pace. Atticus thought about calling out to her but, judging by the death grip she had on her quantum physics book, the bookstore visit hadn't gone that well. So, he stood and held the twins' hands and followed behind Thalia at a much slower pace.

They reached the creek at 11 o'clock. The sun was reflecting on the water perfectly and Thalia had found a nice little area in the shade to read her book. Atticus stood hovering just beside the rippling shoreline and peered over at his reflexion, illuminated by the light dancing on the current. The twins removed their shoes and socks and placed them on the grass. Then they rolled up their pants and waddled into the cold water. The town had just fallen into August, which meant it would be Atticus's birthday in two days. Then, two days after that, Thalia's birthday. And seventeen days after that, the twins' birthday. Everyone in town would always congratulate Thalia and Atticus on their birthdays as if they had achieved something great. They never congratulated the twins though. Personally, I think the town's folk really didn't know their birthday but it didn't help that no one tried to learn it. Atticus and Thalia would always celebrate the twins' birthday with them, and so would Mother. Father would tell the twins "happy birthday" in the morning and then wander off to his office. Father always sounded cheery when he told them this, but he never stuck around long. The children didn't think anything of it but it always ate me up inside.

Thalia was already invested in her reading by the time by the time Atticus had finally sat down near the water to get a closer look at his hair that was not blond. The twins were jumping about the creek and chasing minnows. The weather was still somewhat hot, but still nearing fall enough to give the impression of a spring breeze. This was the best kind of weather. When you could smell the leaves about to die and you could feel the sun beating down on you but the wind always picked the heat up and moved it further down the line. It was my favourite kind of weather. The children liked it all alright too but the weather never matter that much to them. They liked to come down to the creek most any time of the year, except when it got really, really cold, but right now, the temperature couldn't be better. Thalia enjoyed the glow of the sun because it always brightened her page distinctly so she could read it much easier. Atticus appreciated being able to stare at his reflexion in peace without feeling judged. The twins just enjoyed leaving the house. The twins also liked the old house on the other side of the creek, hidden behind old, creaking trees and a plethora of invasive weeds, with the great, big steel fence and pretty, detailed arched gate. The house was very old itself, the paint peeling off the sides and the windows sheeted with a thick layer of dust. The shingles were covered in moss and curling away from the roof. It was the only house to ever have more than one owner. Most people had lived in the houses they lived in now their whole life. Families stayed in the same houses that their past family members before had lived in, and their older family members before them, and theirs before them, and so forth. But this house wasn't like that. No, I remember this house quite well. Each hall and room. Every wall, floor, and ceiling. I know it like the back of my hand. The twins had never been in the house and never would but they still liked the house very much.

The wind was swaying the trees and shadows danced upon the grassy bank. Atticus was tracing the ripples on the water with his finger. Thalia was closing her book and brushing off her dress. She stood and tucked her book under her arm.

"Atticus, where have the twins gone?" She inquired.

Atticus looked up from the creek and sat silently for a moment. He croaked slowly: "I don't know. They were in the water just a moment ago..."

Thalia pulled her book out and hit him on the head. "Atti, you were to be watching them!"

"Well, why do I always have to? Why don't you try watching them for a little bit?"

"I always read a book when we're here. Always! You know that!" Thalia argued.

"Well, their shoes and socks are still here. I reckon there just down in the meadow, they said they liked the grass there."

Thalia threw her hands up. "Well, let's hope so. It's getting late, and Mother and Father will be expecting us home soon."

"Alright... alright..." Atticus sighed and grabbed the twins' little shoes and socks placing one pair in his left pocket and the other in his right.

Thalia was already started past her usual reading tree when Atticus had collected the shoes and he had to run to catch up to her. They walked past the old tire swing, past the bushes they always found stray cats in, past the broken footbridge that used to lead to the strange house across the brook, and past a root beer candy wrapper.

"We're getting closer..." Thalia whispered, pointing to the discarded candy bag.

Atticus nodded.

Thalia and Atticus found patches of grass that had been compressed toward the ground from there and followed the woodland footprints. The meadow was hidden behind a circle of trees. Thalia and Atticus had rarely ventured into the meadows, they felt it was too far from home or town and they didn't like the way the light seldom shone through the leaves or branches. Thalia wasn't afraid of the dark but she couldn't see her pages in the dark so she liked to stay by the creek. Atticus just didn't like the long grass, which stood all the way up to his chin. He regularly dreamed of this

place but he didn't like to tell anyone that for fear of being thought of as weird. I used to dream of it every night. Of meeting people I'd never seen and of prophecy concocted from my broken, dying mind.

They could hear the twins laughing through the wheat and grass but they couldn't see them. The twins were too short and the wheat engulfed them. Thalia could just peer over the swaying grass if she stood on her toes. She rolled back and forth from her toes and heels. Atticus ran through the grass calling out the twins' names. Thalia knelt down and peeked through the wheat to try to see the twins' feet skipping through the meadow. Atticus was quick to find them by the sound of their laughing and squeals. Atticus grabbed their hands quickly and led them out of the meadow. He left them standing at the "entrance" to the meadow, which was really just a parting in the trees where they bent over to form an arch. It looked like a doorway to Atticus.

"Thalia! Thalia! I've got them. You can come out now." Atticus called out.

Thalia emerged from the meadow suddenly. Their eyes met and they looked up at the sky. The sun was preparing to rest already and the children were to be home soon. The walk was usually longer from the meadow unless they used the shortcut. Thalia and Atticus hated the shortcut but the twins never minded it. They had only been down that way with the older children once but they always seemed so comfortable. Thalia and Atticus gave each other a short nod and that was enough to know: they were talking the short way home.

The short way home was the worst way home. It was just back into the edge of town and through the back of the grocery store. They snuck past the window hoping the Jenkins wouldn't catch a glimpse of them. There was a short fence back there that surrounded the entire cemetery next to the playground. Atticus hopped over the fence and Thalia picked up the twins, slowly and with much struggle, and handed them off to Atticus before climbing over the fence herself. Walking through the cemetery was creepy enough without the constant fog but the children did their best to ignore it and cross the graveyard. There weren't many gravestones here and most that were here were dated much before any of the children were born. Atticus usually thought that that was going to change soon, considering most of the town's folk were old and withering. Their parents were the youngest adults in town and, of course, there were a few other children scattered about the pile of crumbling youth and fleeting perseverance. Mr Raymond wasn't that old, but he wasn't young anymore. Those days had abandoned him long ago, shortly after his wife had died when Filbert was born. Her grave was the newest one in the whole graveyard. Though it had already started its collection of moss, it was still in fine condition. Though he didn't like anyone to know, Mr Raymond would come to the cemetery every night and remove the dried leaves and sticks from off her gravestone and wipe it down with an old cloth. Everyone did know this though, but they never bothered him about this.

The children had made it across the cemetery and just into the park when Thalia let out a shaky gasp. Atticus turned his head to her and followed her eyes to an old park bench across the park. His jaw dropped and he let go of the twins' hands in shock. A man was laying breathless on the old park bench that fateful night. Anyone could have suspected that he was only sleeping but the children sensed otherwise. The twins hid behind Atticus's long legs and Thalia slowly approached the slumping body to inspect it. Atticus leapt forward and pulled her back.

"Thalia, don't!" He whispered through his teeth, "It could carry diseases."

Thalia scoffed. "Atti, it's not an animal, it doesn't have rabies. I wanna know if he's dead."

"Let me go with you then."

"Well, alright then, but hurry up. We have to be home soon."

Thalia's curiosity used to get the best of her too often, so it's no surprise that she was to meet the end she would.

The children slowly approached the body, huddling close together. The man's face was pale and white. His arm hung idly over the side of the bench and his mouth hung ajar. He had a big, grey beard and scruffy, grey hair. His eyes were bloodshot. All he had to wear was a pair of tattered sweatpants and a dirty jacket.

"You think he starved?" Atticus spluttered.

"Well, he does look rather skinny... and he has dark circles around his eyes." Thalia speculated. "I guess it's possible he might have starved..."

"But-"

Thalia shook her head. "But I'm sure we know just about everyone in this town and I've never seen him before. And we're not known for any homeless population, suspecting that from the fact he's laying dead on a park bench and the poor condition of his clothing..."

The children stood there watching for a moment longer, their eyes never straying from the man on the park bench. The twins' tugged at Atticus's pants anxiously but he didn't notice. Thalia bit her bottom lip and studied the man's face. Finally, she reached forward and poked him. Atticus gasped and waited for a reaction. There was no response. Then Thalia nudged him a little more and when he didn't move, she pulled at his jacket and searched his pockets.

"What are you doing!" Atticus trembled.

Thalia waved him off and continued digging through the dead man's pockets. "I'm looking for something to identify him from. Obviously... Or- oh! Something cool."

Thalia pulled something out of the man's pocket and stuffed it into her pocket. Atticus peered over her shoulder.

"What is it?" He breathed.

Thalia jumped up and patted him on the shoulder. "I'll shew you when we get home. It's getting late."

She was right, the sun had been slivered in half by the horizon, and Mother and Father were waiting for them at home. The children held hands again and walked the rest of the gloomy park. Just beyond the square hedge was their beautiful home. They had wasted a lot of time and had to find the little hole that the Hendersons' dog had dug into whilst trying to find the children's cat. Atticus did his best to move some more of the brush away well the other children crawled through into the yard. Atticus was very slender so he had no trouble getting through. Atticus picked himself up off the ground and stood with his siblings gazing upon their lovely home. They were home, and they thought they were safe.

• Renee Baker



Zack Sryniawski, Pot, Ceramics, Fall 2022



Brett Leonard, Pot, Ceramics, Fall 2023

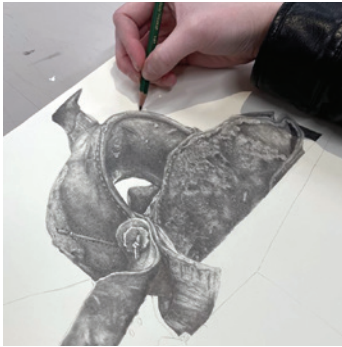
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