

Floodwall

volume 2, issue 9
spring 2024



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Front cover: "Imitating," by Nicholas Baldwin

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From the Editors

What a pleasure it is to be revealing volume 2, issue 9 of *Floodwall*, the University of North Dakota's student-run literary magazine! The time flew as it usually does, and everyone here at *Floodwall* is incredibly grateful to be sharing this work of collective passion and dedication with you all. *Floodwall* has always been a place of community, a place in which all can gather and seek shelter from the storm as the world around us changes and we along with it. Over the course of the last few issues, the number of submissions has ebbed and flowed; content changed with the state of the world; snow fell late and melted later. Throughout all of these shifts, our one constant has been the incredible dedication and constant support of our contributors, volunteers, and readers. This semester is no different—and this issue is as much a collection of change as it is a solid representation of the creative community at UND.

This semester has been one chock-full of unprecedented experiences and exciting progress here at *Floodwall*, in spite of our sturdy name! As readers may notice upon opening this issue of *Floodwall*, we've upgraded our page layout. For one thing, our new layout includes the author's name, in bold, in the header of each page of their contribution. By placing the contributor's name on the outer edge of each page, we're celebrating what draws all of us to *Floodwall*: the brilliant work of the writers and artists on campus! They're the ones who build the wall, brick by brick. Our contributors are the heart and soul of *Floodwall*, and it is our greatest honor to be able to provide shelter for their creative work.

Floodwall's proudest accomplishment is to be part of such a wonderful community, sharing our artist's incredible work and its development over the course of their stay at UND. This issue, of course, is no different. On the cover of this issue is Nicholas Baldwin's piece titled "Imitating." With its sandstone-colored backdrop and its range of colors, "Imitating" reminds us of our magazine's namesake—the flood walls by the Red River, here in Grand Forks. Inside this issue, you'll share in the rapid, ever-changing world of our contributors and their work as they explore the world

around them. Love, both for others and oneself, and the ways in which it keeps us warm and drowns us all the same. The soft recollection of memories, as remembered by us and those with whom we share them. Identity, self-image, and the ways in which they ebb and flow with time, patience, and discovery. Seasons passing by, watching as we, too, fit in the in-betweens and change as the weather does. Our fears, our hopes, our inward and outward change as we become who we're meant to be. So, too, *Floodwall* changes with them, but remains steady all the same.

While you explore the wonderful pieces within this issue, we hope you'll also explore our masthead. There, the complete *Floodwall* team, including our volunteer reading board members, section editors, copyeditors, layout and design team members, and proofreaders are recognized for their incredible dedication to both *Floodwall* and you all, the readers. *Floodwall* wouldn't be *Floodwall* without them, and we couldn't be prouder of or more grateful for our team.

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fiction

The Little Things

Brenden Kimpe

Spinstress

The spinstress ascended her strand of silk with the grace of a trapeze artist. The thread was thoughtfully anchored to both the ceiling and the granite countertop below, providing the beginning structure of her masterful artwork. There was purpose behind her movement. A task that needed to be completed. Her final strand attached; she began working on the inner portions of her silken masterpiece. The spinstress was cream colored, and dime sized while weighing a portion of one. She was working with movements that bordered on feverishness, yet every motion was intentionally commanded. The small strands of hair that stood upon her elegant legs guided the thread from her pumping spinnerets into an angular circle that spun into itself as the gaps in the web became smaller and smaller. She did not notice the warm beams of life cutting through the windows to her left, rising further into the sky. She did not notice the ever-increasing stream of cars and trucks that passed by her domain. All her eyes were trained on her handiwork to ensure that there was no weak link or thin thread. This energy did not leave her body as she settled into place at the center of her work. Patience was her forte and this waiting game left her

time to think. As she awaited dinner, faces that blurred into one another looked up at her on occasion. They crinkled their noses and squinted their eyes as they spied on her in the corner of the ceiling. Some pointed and cried out in disgust or in mockery of fear. Her eyes rested upon those who met her down below and wondered at their judgement.

In a few slow moments, her eyes fell upon something else that was much closer. A rambling housefly was darting about in erratic movements, acting as if they were constantly in danger of being swatted. The feeble fly did not see the sticky thread that reached out with fingers leaden with death. In a fraction of a second, the fly was ensnared within the web, sending waves of vibrations towards the patient predator. The fine hairs upon her legs picked up these waves, communicating the size and location of her victim. No more than thirty seconds had passed before the feeble fly ended its struggles beneath the pillowy embrace of silk, kissed to sleep by the black fangs of paralysis.

Dinner would be ready shortly, but first, her artwork needed repairing. The fly had torn a massive hole when it had struggled to break free. Working with the same speed and intensity as before, she first snipped the loose threads free and promptly ate them. Next, she wove identical lines of thread in place of the now missing ones, filling the hole in minutes. With her dinner nearly liquified, the cream-colored spinstress finally took time to relax. The center of her artwork sagged with their combined weight.

A crinkling noise would have been the only warning she would have gotten before being enveloped in a plastic grip of death. The convenience store cashier was balanced atop a worn stool with three pegs. They crumpled the plastic bag into a wad and threw it into the trash can. Their face brandished disgust as they pumped sanitizer into their hands.

Beedle

Beedle's favorite season was summer. He liked summer because the warm rays of sunshine felt good upon his rounded back and there was never a shortage of food. Usually, he would hang out around the picnic shelter of the park. Toddlers dropped Dorito remnants, grandpas dribbled sweet soda, and teenagers threw away their pizza crust. The picnic shelter in June was a bona-fide buffet. Beedle was a small beetle. He was no bigger than an inch long and had a shiny black exoskeleton that reflected the sun when it hit just right. His morning routine consisted of a one-hour tanning session, breakfast at the southern trash can, and a pre-lunch nap. This morning, his tanning session was cut short by an angular shadow that kept blocking out the sun. Beedle wasn't sure what the shadow was, but he knew it must not be good. Anything outside of the ordinary meant danger. Quickly, he scuttled under the grass for protection. Beedle had two main modes of travel: walking and flying. He preferred to walk as it was more enjoyable for him and not as physically taxing. His walks through the grass forests had their benefits and drawbacks. Along these strolls, he would pass beneath the shade of hundreds of green blades. Sharp rays of sunlight cut through to illuminate the earthen floor and give the vital drink of life to whatever plant that may reside there. They crisscrossed over one another and created intricate tunnels and pathways along the surface of the earth. Beedle knew these pathways like the swirls upon his antennae. The drawback was the incredibly large and noisy monsters that roamed the grass once a week. These monsters moved methodically over the green sea. Large claws spun beneath its body as any and all bugs were sucked into its unrelenting maw. These monsters terrified Beedle and he never knew what he might do if he ever saw one. He had a few close calls in the past, barely making it out of the beasts' path before the forest behind him became close cropped and wet with blood. This trek was turning out to be an enjoyable one. A stroll through the grass forests with pollen thick in the air and soft moss underfoot was sure to brighten anyone's day. Beedle wondered what would be for breakfast. Yesterday's morning meal had been a nearly empty instant noodle cup that was left on top of the trash can, but he could already smell the sweet scent of sugar in the air. His anticipation surged as the concrete pad of the picnic shelter came into

view. Sugar was one of Beedle's favorite foods. Whatever was in the trash can, he was looking forward to it.

The boy ran into the picnic shelter to retrieve the wild throw from his friend. Not a second thought was given to the crunch underneath his well-worn shoe.

Kaleidoscope

The elegant butterfly beat her wings upon the air with aged wisdom. Her body bounced through the sky as her flaps took her up and her velvet body brought her back down. The evening sun glistened across the scales of her wings where spots of rusty orange were perfectly lined with deep black stripes. Colors that were striking against the soft blue of the fading day. The sun was descending deeper into its slumber as the earth cooled without its touch. The spectacular butterfly was not the only beautiful creature flying this warm evening. Hundreds of her companions fluttered through the air behind her on a journey they could not yet comprehend. Something within them that ebbed and flowed compelled them to turn South and fly until their bodies were exhausted and their spirits spent. Until then, a well-deserved night of rest was due. The flock spiraled down in great heaps and descended onto the branches. The maple and boxelder trees creaked under the weight. Soon, the descending sun was no longer illuminating the bright green and rich browns of the trees. Instead, a powerful orange was shining back with streaks of pure black that sliced the rusty hues into elongated sections. Mottled white spots streaked across the ends of their delicate wings. Their sleep came easy as the last signs of day left the horizon.

The outstanding butterfly knew that she could not fly until the sun had warmed her wings, so she enjoyed her morning. They had settled into a shallow valley; into some trees that followed a river flowing South. She thought they could just follow the river to find their resting place, but something within her said there was a faster way. Something that she did not learn from the ones that created her or even the companions that flew by her side. The cool morning sun was slowly giving feeling to her body once more. The river that flowed below her hosted many morning drinks with much accompanied laughter. They were to set off once more for another day of flight. The beautiful butterfly fanned her wings in anticipation alongside her stunning companions. The still and silent morning was filled with the whispers of their wings. The whispers of butterfly wings that send vibrations across the universe. Whispers that fall upon deaf ears or ears too small enough to do anything about it. With a final gust of breath, they took to the sky. The wispy white clouds were blotted out by the collection

of beauty that lives among insects.

Many days later, the magnificent butterfly settled for what she knew was her final night. Miles had been spent under her wings and hundreds of eggs had been left in her wake. The elegant butterfly was beautiful even in her final moments. Not clinging to a rotted log or the underside of a leaf, but instead, upon the sturdy branch of a tree. Looking to the West, a direction she was never supposed to face, at the descending ball of light that had fueled her very existence. She had witnessed this moment dozens of times and yet no two were alike. Some nights boasted deep oranges with red streaks while others proudly carried light yellows and gleaming white. Her number of friends, as she had come to know them, had dwindled with the passing days. Every night left perfect corpses upon the forest floor or among the trees. Statues sculpted by masterful artists of creation. The flawless butterfly was not sad at her departure. Many of her kin would experience the beautiful path she had. These comforting thoughts danced within her as she laid down for a final night of rest.

It was some time before the resplendent butterfly took to the skies once more. Her beauty shone in new wings with vibrant colors. They propelled her forward with powerful beats. A kaleidoscope of her companions flew alongside her with wings that rivaled her beauty and elegance. The flock was taking on the next leg of the journey they were called to make each year. Their generation would fulfill the wishes made by many butterflies before them. Spiraling through the air, the sublime butterfly soaked in the fresh air and bright sun.

The mist from the sprayer wafted over the tops of the long rows of corn. Powerful currents lifted it through the air and dispersed it evenly across the land. A particularly strong gust blew through the kaleidoscope of butterflies that moved forward with persistence. The exquisite butterfly began to choke and gasp for air. The ground surged beneath her with ever increasing speed as she turned her compound eyes skyward to take in the hundreds of wonderful friends who once flew beside her. She thought every one of them was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Brenden Kimpe is a senior double majoring in English and secondary education. He enjoys colorful sunsets, reading until his eyes burn, and napping with his cat, Marcelline.

Those Who Fail to Learn

Jasmine Patera

She was born screaming and seemed to never stop. The mother shushed her as they sat in the tub together, the moon cresting outside the open window. The breeze only incited the baby's rage, and it wasn't until she tasted milk that she grew silent.

"There we go," murmured the mother. "We're okay. You're okay, little one. You're going to live. It's all going to be fine."

No one was there to disprove her.

Guinevere's birthdays were each inaugurated with haskap fruit pancakes, sticky and softened with honey. Mother sang a song each time and after, guided the child's chubby hands to tear her presents open until she was old enough to do it herself. When she grew older, Guinevere decided she should meticulously unfold the newspaper wrapping, tearing off sections of tape until it could all be taken off without ripping anything. This year, the mother reached over to quicken the process, tearing the paper down the middle and revealing the small box inside.

"Darling, I have to go into the yard after this."

"Sorry," the girl mumbled and looked at the black box in her hands. On the front were a bunch of star shapes and white lettering she could only partially recognize.

"For your room's ceiling," she explained to Guinevere. "They stick

to it and glow in the dark. Do you like them?"

The girl nodded and imagined the space above her bed, glittering like the night sky outside. It seemed nice.

"I can return them," the mother said, sounding on edge.

"No. I want them."

"Open your next gift, then."

The rectangle-shaped gift was thin but tall. Guinevere frowned at the thought of hurting the newspaper but knew her mother would get impatient again. She tore the wrapping off.

"A book?" Guinevere looked up at her mother, forehead crinkled.

"A space book," she corrected, opening to a random page. "It's... hm. There's a big fancy telescope in space, and it's been taking pictures of a lot of different things. I had a book like this when I was your age, but this telescope takes much better pictures."

Guinevere looked at the page, seeing lots of blue and black wisps and specks of light. Stars? She was unsure that space really had things clustered together like that. It seemed mostly empty when she looked up.

"Thank you mom."

"You're welcome. I'm gonna go feed the chickens, but you can finish breakfast and play for a bit. Then we'll start lessons."

The mother stepped outside, and Guinevere set aside her presents to finish her pancakes. The fruit was comfortingly sweet, ripened around the warm weeks of her birthday, and combined with the honey stained her pale hands purple. She licked her fingers and opened her new book. She liked stories of astronauts and stars but had never seen anything like this. Space, where there were dusty pillars climbing, reaching up as if searching for something. Guinevere imagined she could climb it to the top and find aliens, the plastic green ones she saw at a themed restaurant in the city. Or a pot of gold. Something like that.

Wanting to save the book for later, Guinevere hopped from her seat and grabbed her dishes. She walked to the sink and reached to put the plate onto the counter near it. Morning rays shone through the windows, and she fought the urge to lie on the carpet, highlighted by the Sun. Like their cat—Mother bought him to catch mice, but he liked lazing in sunny patches of grass instead. Guinevere was just sitting back down at the table when her mother walked in with a basket of eggs.

"Are you ready?" She hummed and put the basket down on the counter and started to wash the dishes. "How about you pick a book to

read, and we'll practice your letters."

Guinevere ran off to one of the many bookshelves her mother owned. The children's books were conveniently low to the ground so she didn't have to look much harder for other ones.

"Ferdinand!" She grabbed the crimson book and ran to show the red bull on the cover to her mother. "Please?"

"It's a tad violent..." Mother said, even though she was the one who let it sit on the bookshelf. At the girl's pleading eyes she sighed and took the book from her. "Go sit down, then."

Guinevere obediently sat at the foot of her mother's rocking chair. She listened to the story and tried to sound out the letters when her mother showed her the pictures on each page. She liked looking at flowers like Ferdinand the bull, though there were only the ones deliberately planted rather than the ones mowed down in favor of grass. Whenever she played outside, she secretly wished on dandelions and blew the seeds on the wind even though her mother insisted they were weeds. As if they weren't meant to be there.

When they finished reading Mother asked her questions about the story to make sure she understood. Guinevere learned that it was in Spain, which wasn't here. She answered each of the questions but internally wondered about the other bulls in the story. Bulls from Spain. Why did they want to fight? Looking at flowers was much nicer. Even if there were bees.

After they talked about letters and numbers enough where they started to blend together, the mother noticed Guinevere's antsy-ness and finally sent her outside. The afternoon was sunny but windy, and she entertained herself by trying to chase the wild rabbits into the tree line. Then she brought a treat for the chickens squawking in their run. Her favorite was the brown-feathered Miss Fluff, who didn't need to be chased and didn't squirm like the others when she was held. Often she'd taken a wing to the nose from one of the others, but Miss Fluff cuddled her nicely.

Something roared in the distance, drawing closer. Miss Fluff squawked and jumped from her arms, racing towards the coop. Guinevere froze, her heart jumping up in her chest. It was too loud. Too loud. It was coming from above, so she looked up and saw something tear across the sky, leaving a pair of sharp white lines in its wake. Like clouds, but in the shape clouds would never be in. She imagined that it was slicing through the sky and would shatter, crash down right on top of her.

The porch door rattled against the house and Guinevere saw the

terrified expression from her mother as she rushed to pick her up.

"What was that?" The girl questioned, clinging to her while she tried to look up at the sky. But her mother pressed her face into her shoulder.

"Nothing, dear. Just... just a plane." Mother sounded frazzled as she carried her daughter inside.

"What's that?"

"It's... a big metal bird that flies people to far-away places. Like over the sea."

"What's over there?" Guinevere wondered if that's where the bull-fighting was. The plane was getting quieter. The mother pets her hair, silent for a moment.

"Nothing much."

As she usually did in the summer, Guinevere's mother pestered her about schoolwork, about how important it was to look over and practice it. And reading. That summer her concerns had turned into reading less, resulting in Guinevere being dragged to parks, churches, and community events at the museum in town.

"I don't wanna go," she whined one Saturday afternoon as her mother did her hair. "It's too hot out."

Guinevere yelped in pain when the hairbrush dragged painfully against her scalp, and then again when her hair started getting pulled into a braid.

"Shh. It doesn't hurt. And you need to go outside, you'll look pretty with a tan. You're too pale."

Guinevere sulked, feeling a headache develop from the pain. It didn't matter what she wanted. When her mother had dolled her up enough, she was led to the car. The drive into town was long and boring. There were barely any trees to look at. She imagined a wolf running outside the window, keeping pace with the car. Eventually the plains of grass turned into ugly houses, boulevard trees and people walking their dogs. She shrunk into her seat when the car came to a stop until her mother came around to let her out.

Guinevere stepped out of the car, looking like a fawn on the asphalt. Everything was too hot, too bright. She felt like a baby bird being pushed out of the nest. Her mother prodded her forward, and she crossed the boundary into the playground. Dazed, she hid under the slide.

Underneath it was quiet, cool, and calm. More relaxing than the

screaming children ruling over the slide above. Mother always asked why she didn't ever play with the other kids, and she didn't know how to respond. Gwen looked around to see if her mother was watching, but instead saw a brown-eyed boy race over to her as if being chased. The boy jumped and slid across the playground pebbles, kicking up dust until he skidded to a stop at her feet. His skin reminded her of her favorite pinecone in her collection, and with just-as-sharp eyes.

"What's your name?" He gasped out between pants.

". . . Guinevere," she said finally.

"Oh." He wrinkled his nose and sat up. "Can I call you Gwen?"

"Okay."

"My name's DJ."

"Okay."

DJ giggled, but Guinevere wasn't sure what was funny about her response. They stayed in the cool shade for a moment. It felt pleasant. DJ looked over to where her mother had ventured to a bench, turning her cheek as if she wasn't just staring.

"That your mom?" He asked.

Heat rose to her cheeks. "Yeah."

"Is your dad here?"

"No. I don't have one."

"Oh." DJ's face fell, and he bumped his shoulder into hers. "He die in the war? My dad did too."

Guinevere swallowed. She didn't want to embarrass herself, but the question raced around her mind. "What war?"

DJ blinked and his mouth opened. Before he could respond, he turned to look at a toddler approaching loudly, her pink shoes smacking into the pebbles. Her hair was tied into two little buns with pink ribbons, and she found herself wanting to touch it. DJ groaned. "Colette, get outta here! I'm talking!"

Undiscouraged, the girl sat in his lap, sucking on her pacifier. The boy huffed and hugged her and looked back at Gwen embarrassedly.

"She follows me around."

An odd feeling welled up in her chest. Gwen took a big breath. "Do you wanna play?"

He beamed. "Okay. But we gotta include her or she'll cry."

Their earlier conversation sat in the back of her mind. Instead of worrying about it, she let DJ lead her up the slides. They both took turns

holding little Colette and going down while she shrieked happily. Gwen found herself smiling.

After what felt like no time at all, a tall man called out. "DJ! Colette!"

DJ paused from trying to restrain the squirming baby and looked to Gwen guiltily.

"Do you have a phone?"

"No."

"Oh." He cocked his head. "I'll write my address down, and you can write to me? My dad says I have to practice my writing."

"Okay." She'd never written a letter before, and she felt happy at the thought of being able to communicate with someone. Gwen followed the pair to their dad, who looked pleased to see his children intact. She found herself standing back as the family talked, shifting her weight awkwardly. It was only after Colette was put in a car-seat that their dad wrote on the back of a receipt until she heard—

"Guinevere," her mother hissed, glaring down at the girl as she meekly turned. "What did I say about getting near strangers? Their cars, specifically?"

Gwen squirmed under the stare of her mother. "To... not?"

"Hey," DJ's father interrupted, offering his dark hand to her mother. "I'm Elijah. No worries here, I was just giving your daughter our address in case she wanted to write to my DJ. He's been trying to make some new friends since we moved; I'm sure you understand."

The mother stared at the hand for a moment before shaking it. The kids refused to look at each other.

"I'm Adelaide. And that's fine, just Guinevere needs to remember we don't talk to strangers."

The man said something she didn't hear and passed her mother the receipt, who shoved it into her purse she was clutching. Gwen's ears rang, cheeks burning hot as she stared at the ground. It felt there was a lump in her throat.

"Let's go, Guinevere."

The girl took her mother's hand and padded back to the car. She didn't even put on music; just made sure Gwen was buckled and drove into the countryside, lips pursed. She looked out the window, squirming under the glances she saw her mother give in her periphery.

"Did my... did my dad die in the war?" The war, Gwen found herself asking after a long bit of silence. She didn't know that there was a the war,

although she knew that there were some from their history lessons. Things that happened a long, long time ago—a bad thing. But an intangible sort of ‘bad.’ She saw her mother’s knuckles, white on the steering wheel.

“No, honey,” Mother said after a moment. “You have a dad, but I don’t know him. I... hmm. I chose him because I wanted you. But that’s it.”

“Okay.” Gwen pulled the seatbelt away from where it dug into her neck. “I didn’t know there was a war.”

“I didn’t tell you about it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a child,” she said, looking sternly at Gwen from the rearview mirror. “You don’t need to worry about that stuff. You should just be a kid. It’s almost over anyways.”

Gwen bit her tongue, wanting to mention what DJ said.

“Who’s winning?” she finally asked. The response was instantaneous.

“Us, of course.”

The Sun blazed brightly at its zenith, and Gwen found herself wishing she’d remembered to fill up a water bottle. There was that sickly humidity to the air; it clung to her and made her feel heavy. Waiting on the front porch was miserable, her shoulder sore with the heavy backpack her mother had given her. The flip-phone inside felt like it was burning through the nylon as she scanned around, trying not to think about it.

“It’s for emergencies,” her mother had insisted when she placed the box in her hands a week ago. Only, Gwen didn’t know what counted as an emergency. If she got sick, for sure, like that one time she tried to cook breakfast and gave them both salmonella. But the degree of importance and how upset her mother would be if she called about something not on that scale was unknown. So her brain was stuck cycling through scenario after scenario, hoping and not hoping her mother would come back for her.

The dust cloud in the distance broke her out of her stupor. Gwen looked away to seem nonchalant, a happy-nervous pit in her belly. It’s not mom’s car. Gravel crunched as Elijah’s SUV pulled up in the driveway, and DJ poked his head out of the window. “Come sit in the back with me!”

Gwen nodded and rushed over with her head ducked, clutching her bag. The car smelled like cloves when she sat inside, buckling up sheepishly as DJ and his father greeted her. Colette, in her car seat on the other

side, just looked at her with big eyes.

"Your mom really got you a phone?" DJ questioned, moving over to sit in the middle.

"Yeah."

"Cool, now we can actually text!"

Gwen nodded and fished the phone out of her bag. "It's not like yours though." Her mother had given it to Gwen with herself as the single contact. DJ listed off a string of numbers, which she then trialed-and-errored into sending a text. "Hi."

The boy pulled out his smartphone when it buzzed, grinning as he read it. Elijah reversed out of the driveway and set back out on the gravel road towards town. Gwen noticed that her friend was starting to grow out his hair. He hadn't told her that in their letter-writing. DJ launched into an excited plan of what they were gonna do for the day.

"And we're gonna play *Mario Kart*, and I'm gonna teach you about Transformers, and—"

"Woah, kiddo." Elijah glanced at them from the rearview mirror. "Let Gwen breathe for a moment. She's probably missing her mom."

DJ made a face. "I thought you said—"

"DeAngelo," Elijah warned, which startled all three of the kids in the back seat. Colette whispered conspiratorially. "Daddy's mad."

Gwen felt that familiar nervous pit in her belly. Her mother didn't say why she was going away. She didn't think about it too hard; just excited that her requests for a sleepover were finally accepted. But now she worried that it was some adult thing her mother kept her out of yet again.

Elijah sighed and turned up the radio, a low voice listing off words mindlessly. "—where bombing resumed earlier today after negotiations grinded to a—" Elijah cursed and turned the volume down, glancing back at Colette as the two older kids eyed each other.

"Swear jar," the little girl sing-songed. The rest of the ride was tersely silent. Gwen looked down, feeling a buzz in her pocket. It was her mother:

"Honey, is Elijah not there yet?"

"Yes. We're driving. Sorry."

"You were supposed to text me."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll call you tonight. I love you."

Gwen shoved the phone in her bag, turning her face away from DJ's quizzical look. Something about that phrase from her mother made her get all squirmy inside. Finally, the car pulled into the driveway of a nice-looking house with cool white paneling. Most of the other houses looked similar, like cookie-cutter shapes lined down the paved roads. People with dogs or baby strollers on the sidewalk. So different from the flat fields or boring tree lines of her yard at home.

After everyone got their shoes off in the foyer, Elijah went upstairs to put Colette down for a nap, while DJ excitedly pulled Gwen into the basement. "I get to sleep on the couch while you're here, and you get my room. We're gonna stay up sooo late!"

Gwen sat on the gray couch downstairs, watching as her friend set up the TV. It was too bright, a weird disorienting mesh of moving pictures and bright colors. DJ shoved a misshapen piece of plastic into her hands.

"Okay, this is what I was talking about. Me and my friends play it all the time. So basically, you pick a character and a Go-Kart, and we try and race each other."

DJ showed her which buttons to press. It felt weird in her hands, and she had to look down repeatedly to make sure she was pressing the right circles. It took a moment of negotiation before they finally started.

"Okay. Remember what I said! Yep, wait, nope, Gwen, you're going backward, no, you have to stay on the track, stay on the track, he's giving you the arrow because you're going the wrong way!"

Gwen frantically mashed the buttons, a feeling of helplessness welling up in her chest. "How do I turn?" She found herself whining as DJ laughed at her. He paused the game, came over to help her with the controls once more, and fiddled with something before they eventually started again. This time everything was slower and quieter, and it was easier to figure out what exactly her princess character was doing in response to the controls.

The pair settled into silence as they played. DJ seemed content to have finally showed her the video games he was always writing about. She contemplated his words in her mind. Me and my friends, me and

my friends, me and my friends. Gwen didn't know how many friends was normal to have—did he think she was weird for only talking to him? She'd played with other kids back when her mother forced her to, but none really wanted to be her friend.

"DJ?" Gwen found herself asking between races.

"Yea?"

"Umm..." she looked away when he paused the game to look back at her. The embarrassing question died in her chest. A different one, then. "What was... up... with your dad?"

"Oh. Right. Umm, I think he just doesn't want Colette hearing about that stuff 'cuz she's so little. And he doesn't talk about it with me much 'cuz he wants me to 'develop my own opinions.'"

"My mom has a computer and stuff, but I don't really know anything about..."

"About the news?"

"Yeah."

"Right. Yeah. My dad told me... that. And how your mom didn't want you eating certain stuff. I'm gonna make you try a chip though. If you want. He told me not to pressure you."

Guilt wormed in her belly even as she fantasized about the snack food she'd seen but never tried. "Yes please."

DJ just grinned. After he claimed his trophy (Gwen had finished last in all but one race), they bounded upstairs to raid the cupboards. She found herself wanting to stay, where everything was fun and tasted new in a way she'd never had before. It felt like a real family, the kind that lived in her storybooks. It was only hours later when she was nestled up in some fresh blankets and fighting to keep her eyes open that the phone on her pillow buzzed.

"Hello?" Gwen's voice was thick with sleep.

"Hey darling." Her mother's voice was quiet in a way she'd never heard before. Gwen found herself sitting up.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. In my hotel room." She sighed. "Everything alright there? You ate?"

"Umm, yeah." Gwen expected an interrogation. She was on edge, waiting. "How long is it gonna be?"

"I don't know, honey. A week at most. I hope just another day or two."

Gwen was silent.

"Hello?"

"Sorry. I'm here."

"If anything's wrong, I'll come home right now. You matter most."

"No, I'm fine. I just..." her voice grew thick with tears. "I miss home."

"Oh, baby." Her mother sighed, voice crackling with the flip-phone's cheap audio. "Just handle it tonight. I can get on the earliest flight tomorrow."

"No, I..." Gwen wiped her tears, sniffing. "I just miss you. Where even are you?"

"I... in my hometown. I wish it didn't happen this way, that I could've found a better place for you to stay, but..." There was silence. The mother calculated, measured. "My father was hospitalized. I needed to see him."

"What?" Her heart dropped. She'd assumed... something. Or nothing. That they had no family at all.

"I know, I'm sorry. I... we don't have a good relationship. I never wanted you to meet him. So please just deal with it for a little bit longer. Please? Don't worry about it. About me or him. You don't need to worry about it."

"O—okay."

"Good." The mother sighed. "I love you, Guinevere."

There was a beat of silence. A weight bore down on her.

"Love you too."

Gwen was on the precipice of a tight rope, staring below into an abyss. A single misstep could plunge her into the depths below. It was her first day of high school, and the only thing that prevented her from bursting into tears was the humiliation that coursed through her veins at the thought of a single social mistake.

"Girl, chill out," DJ chastised as they walked toward the first class of the day. Physical sciences. Stuff she'd touched on before with her mother's education, but a concern nonetheless—she was afraid that public school would be harder, she'd be expected to know everything, and situations her brain couldn't even come up with.

"First day everyone just goes over the syllabus. Your teacher's pet-ass is gonna be fine."

His comments never helped. The busy halls made her shrink into herself. There were the groups of friends that walked like turtles in the

center of the hall, and a person with a tail, and everyone shouted, and there were teachers trying to give directions, and through it all DJ was her guide, ferrying her like Charon through the River Styx.

"Make sure to text your mommy that you're okay," he teased when they sat in the back of a classroom, students trickling in. Gwen jolted and fished out her smartphone from her backpack. Her mother had already texted: "You found your class alright?"

She responded with an affirmative, and that was that. Her going to a public high school was a point of contention with them and allowed only with many conditions and lectures about its dangers. Such as a new phone with an app to track her location, a promise to call her if anyone "used drugs" in her presence, and a horrible, horrible conversation about sex. But ultimately the mother relented.

Finally the teacher arrived. Gwen took out her school-provided tablet to access the syllabus—her single belonging that her mother had no access to. While she was lectured on class expectations, she found herself staring at the search browser. It offered many things up to her. National tensions. Tragic deaths. Celebrities she'd never seen nor heard the name of. She tapped on the first one, her anxiety about the class fading to boredom. Her blood froze.

Former CEO of Armstrong Enterprises passed away late Sunday night according to his family foundation. Lawrence Telcait was in end-of-life hospice care for a year following his resignation as CEO....

Gwen scanned the article, her heart beating loudly in her chest. Telcait. Telcait. His picture looked like her mother, too. The same eyes, fair skin, their jaw. DJ caught her horrified expression and peeked over.

"Huh, guy's got the same last name as you."

The teacher gave them a warning look. Gwen ignored her, typed in the man's name, and found more articles. Each dressed it up differently. Danced around it. Controversial involvement... record profits... health issues... hospitalized for a week three years ago... stroke during a press conference... survived by his daughter. It all meant the same thing. A man that people wouldn't hate because of the money he brought them.

She pulled out her phone and texted her mother under the desk:

"Can you come pick me up?"

There was no response. She squirmed in her seat, barely getting

through the awkward icebreakers. When the bell rung she rushed to the bathroom, ignoring DJ's concern. The puffs of smoke emitting from one of the stalls would've gone unnoticed if not for the sweet scent. Finally:

"What's wrong?"

"Please?"

"I'll be there in thirty."

Gwen sat awkwardly on the toilet, lifting her feet up to hide from the girls chatting outside. It got quieter when the next period started and she was still there, huddled up. She found herself slowly typing each letter into her phone like a bird pecking at seeds. For details. The war. What she was given was merely the surface. Numbers. Dates, stained forever in history. She tried to comprehend the depth of each life, the magnitude of their sorrows and joys, life that she may—or may not? — had a role in taking. It came up blank. Surely, she thought, this all was a coincidence and her mother made her money another way. A normal way. She didn't want to know the truth. She wanted to go home—she'd drop out, wouldn't join Science Club like she wanted to, ignore DJ. Gwen closed her eyes and waited.

She was called over the intercom a while later and trudged down to the office. Her mother was there and smoothed over her skipping class with the receptionists. Gwen's pale, tearful face added to the lie. The walk to the car was quiet and it wasn't until they were pulling into the driveway that the mother sighed. "Baby, what happened?"

Gwen burst into tears and reached over the center console to hug her mother. It came flooding out. She wanted to be a baby again, unknowing, unblameable. Bewildered, her mother patted her back. Eventually she pried Gwen away and forced them inside from the chilly fall air. They settled on the couch together. Gwen felt the closest she'd been to her mother in years, and the way she hugged back might've revealed the same in reverse. She just lost her father.

It didn't matter. Gwen wanted to claw out the blood in her veins. It was only when her mother held her that it felt okay to live with it.

The last time she argued with her mother was when Gwen turned eight-

teen. There were no gifts or singing. Just a conversation.

Gwen laid alone in her dark room. A nice apartment in town, sharing with DJ and a friend she'd met in high school as they prepared to start their first years in college. It was the first thing she'd done with the money. His money.

Its presence weighed on her most days. That day it prevented her from getting up. She pulled her blanket over her head. No one else knew. She wanted to burn it, give it away. Sometimes she donated quiet sums. But the greedy part of her dreamed. If she used it well maybe her hands would be clean. Once she might have fantasized on fleeing to space. Now she just wanted to move far, far away where no one knew her; devote herself to saving lives instead. It seemed the most she could do, being just one person.

It was a distant dream.

Jasmine Patera is from Mandan, North Dakota. She enjoys writing poetry and can often be found with her nose stuck in a book. She is inspired by the works of Emily Dickinson and Mary Oliver. Jasmine is pursuing a degree in English with a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing at the University of North Dakota, where she is also a member of the Writing Club. She hopes to one day pursuing a career in editing as a member of a publishing house.

Lily

Clara Anderson-Cameron

I'm all hazy when I wake up. I can't make out the numbers on my alarm clock, but I can hear them, the upstairs neighbors. Stomping, jumping, dropping heavy things that roll. Bass pounds through the vents. The ceiling is trembling. Little flecks of popcorn flaking drift down like snow. My nose crinkles up and I sneeze, reveling in the release that comes with it. The loss of dust that was building up in my airway. I reach a hand up—having to think hard to claim it as my own, ghostly pale and dimly lit as it is—and swipe at the watery snot streaming down to my upper lip.

They carry on this way for a long time. Long enough that I eventually return to a half-asleep state, feeling my thoughts slip out of my grasp like water as I do. I like it when this happens, when I lose control. Makes the anger feel less personal, the guilt less acute. Nothing sharp can pierce me here. So, I stay perfectly still and pray that it lasts.

The morning comes slowly. In layers. My blinds are never really open but they're cheap and do a shitty job of keeping light out. Lines of sun burn across my comforter, so of course I wake up sweaty. My least favorite way to wake up. Last night was my second favorite way to wake up, straight into another person's universe. (I won't admit it to myself, but my first favorite way would be not waking up at all.) Never mind, scratch that. That sounds dramatic and bitchy. I don't bitch or whine anymore. It never

worked well. Never changed anything.

The sun crawls across the sky. I track it by the dashes of light that stretch and bend across the lump of my body under the covers. I stay hot, but I don't feel like pulling the blankets down. Instead, I just feel the sheets start to cling to my skin. Fragments of the Before peck at my mental walls like hungry birds.

Hungry . . . I think I'm hungry. But it doesn't matter.

When I open my eyes again it's back to blackness in the room. My mouth is so dry that I force myself to press two feet into the nubby carpet floor and stand. I sway once, twice. Everything looks weird from this angle. I don't think I've been upright in a while. When the blood finally fills out the lower part of my body and my head adjusts, I shuffle across the room and out into the hallway.

There's a light on in the kitchen. I open a cupboard without noticing Her sitting there. Pull a glass down. Stare, eyes glazing over, at the chip in the rim. It's pretty sharp. I fill the glass at the sink and drink slowly. When I pull my mouth away, I taste hot iron. Funny, I didn't feel the rough edge cut me. The tiny wound clots almost instantly. This disappoints me.

When I turn around, I finally see Her. On a stool at the counter. Her hair is long like it used to be. Before she broke down in my arms and begged me to find the kitchen scissors. Before I snipped and shaved until her heart was pieced together again and the tears had stopped falling. I remember holding her, after. But all of that was Before. Before, Before! Not now. She's not sitting there, not really. That little halfway smile that creases into a dimple on the fullness of her left cheek. It's just in my head, which is pounding. The glass slips out of my hand, and it hits the tile and shatters. My knees give out and I sink to the floor.

I can't see her from here, real or not. Which I'm starting to question. Maybe the last week has been a bad dream, and I've just woken up. Or maybe She's real and I'm not. Maybe I was the one who the police found that night. Maybe I'm a phantom haunting Her home. It's not my house after all, not without Her here in it too. I reach for my face and slap my cheeks, alternating sides until they go all buzzy and warm. I can still taste blood in my mouth. I smell it too.

My knees.

There's something dark spreading across the white tiles. I think for a wild moment that my blood is black instead of red, and my head spins.

I'm outside before I remember standing, moving, opening the front door. I can't remember if I saw Her on my way out or not. All I know is that I can't go back in right now. Not for any reason. Even if it's just a hallucination, which it probably is, it's too fucking painful. It's a sick joke. She was right there, but I couldn't touch Her. Just like at the open casket with the cranky old aunts and uncles forming a long line to see what was left of Her. Just like at the front of the church with the stained glass and the holy water and shit. I can't breathe. My lungs pinch tight in my chest until I'm gasping for air.

It's hot out, and I'm sweating again. Slowly I become aware of my knees. They hurt so bad. Pain slices through the skin with every step I take.

I'm climbing a set of stairs. My brain pulses with the bass line from last night, the one that poured from the vent in the ceiling. The one that soothed me back into a state of unconsciousness.

I knock on the busted red door with a metal number 112. There's no music playing tonight. At least not that I can hear. No sound comes from the other side for one, two, fifteen panicked breaths. My knees have started to burn and ache now. I must look like a zombie apocalypse survivor. Or maybe one of the zombies themselves. I'm wearing only loose boxers and a tank top. A wife beater, or as She called it, a "wife pleaser". Less misogynistic that way. More gay. I think I have a tiny, demented smile on my face at the memory when the door finally opens.

"Oh my god."

It's a woman. She must be older than me, but not by much. She smells like vanilla and peppermint. Her braids are swept into a high bun. Her eyes are darting over my body, too wide and unblinking.

"Um," I start. My voice creaks with disuse. "I think..."

And then I'm swaying again. I'm falling until strong arms steady me against the threshold. Someone yells a name and footsteps come pounding from inside the apartment.

I close my eyes, just for a second, just to get my wits about me. I have to tell them that something is terribly wrong. That someone is supposed to be six feet underground, but they were just in the kitchen.

Well, really they're supposed to be above ground, alive, in bed with me.

I'm leaning up against something soft and cushy. My legs are half-numb from the waist down. I climb slowly, reluctantly into the conscious plane.

Soft voices bounce around above my head.

"Who do we even call though? Paramedics?"

"Well, we don't want to get the cops involved, do we? It's got to be the fire station or the hospital. Do they have specific numbers? I'll Google it."

"I don't know. Maybe she'll be alright in a few minutes."

"Kay, we can't pull every glass shard from her goddamn knees like they can. She might need stitches."

"Just give me a minute."

I feel someone tugging at the skin around my kneecaps. It doesn't hurt, it just feels like pressure. I peel my eyelids apart to find the mystery woman bent over me, poking around the wounds with a pair of tweezers. There's a soft gasp from above me.

"She's awake." I think it's a man speaking.

The woman whips her head up to meet my eyes. I try really hard to focus on her face. It's soft and round and she has eyes like black holes. I need to say something, anything.

"What song was that last night?" I murmur.

She just stares, jaw slack. The second person in the room crouches next to her now, and I see that it's a bearded guy with glasses. He frowns at me.

"Are you," he starts. "Do we know you?"

The woman turns to scowl at him.

"Now why would you ask her that? Does it matter?"

He looks sheepish immediately.

"No, but like, maybe someone sent her here."

"Dameon, what the hell?"

He moves to a cross-legged position on the floor.

"Fine, you talk to her then."

She sits back on her heels, right in front of me, so that I can't help but watch her mouth open, close, open again, mouthing silently around words she can't get out.

"Is someone," she clears her throat. "After you right now?"

I can't help it. I laugh, short and rough and with zero humor.

She looks confused.

"Just my dead girlfriend, I think," I grind out. "No violent people though, no living people, I mean."

The two people in front of me go stock still. I listen to their breaths

puff out unsteadily. Shit. I've spooked them. I need to change tactics.

"Ouch," I mumble.

The woman shakes her head a little like she's clearing it of thoughts.

"I'm sorry?"

"The song you guys were playing. There was a party. I could hear it from my bed."

The man turns to the woman and she looks back, incredulous. Then they both look at me. I try to smile encouragingly, but I think it comes out all wrong because what shades their faces now is something like pity.

"I mean," the man says. "We were playing lots of songs."

"Sorry about the noise," the woman adds quickly.

"Yeah, we'll keep it down next time."

"Next time!" I laugh out. My whole body is heavy. I think I'm gonna sink straight through the floor and back into my own apartment. No. I can't. I'm alone there, with Her.

"I think I need help."

Suddenly my eyes are full of tears, and it burns more than my knees. I can't cry now; I need to focus. But then the woman is reaching out and putting a hand on my shoulder and its weight breaks me into a million little pieces.

I'm sobbing in these people's house. I'm sobbing and clawing at my chest and bleeding all over their perfectly nice floor. The hand moves from my shoulder to my upper back and then I'm being pressed into someone's body. It's warm and I smell peppermint again. I think I'm losing my mind, I think it's dripping out of me drop by drop onto this nice woman's hoodie. It's dark and wet. It's a necessary loss, maybe.

It must be minutes later—I don't know how many—when a voice rumbles against my damp cheek.

"Dameon, go start the car."

I snifle. The door opens and closes with a slam. The doors in this building never shut nicely.

"Where are we going?" I ask in the most pitiful voice imaginable. I don't recognize it at all. I've never been this undone before in my life.

"Well," the woman answers gently, "I think we should go speak with a doctor about your legs. There's glass in them. Wanna tell me how that happened?"

"Dropped a glass. Fell."

She nods against the top of my head. My hair probably smells really

bad. All of me probably does. I can't make myself care right now. I'm too warm and empty.

"And your girlfriend?"

"Hallucination."

"Okay then, that's okay. We can fix this."

We. So easily I've become a part of a We.

"Are you an angel?" I ask, unthinking. She doesn't answer. "No, that's stupid. I'm not religious. You're my neighbor."

She's shaking slightly and I think I've said something wrong until I hear a soft release of breath and realize that she must be laughing. I've made her laugh.

"You're funny," she whispers. "A little fucked up right now, but funny."

I'm in a moving car. Streetlights flash past outside the window and I lose myself in the view of the city. The woman is back here with me, in the middle seat. She has one arm around my shoulders and one holding a washcloth to my right knee, which is bleeding more than the left I guess. It won't quit. The man, Dameon, is driving. Music is playing quietly from the speakers. It's a radio channel because a voice keeps interrupting the soft classical and mumbling about American public media and donations.

I'm not sure where they're taking me.

"What's your name, baby," the woman asks, right by my ear. I flinch without meaning to and she looks at me with concern. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine," I assure her. "My name is Lily."

"That's a beautiful name."

I never used to think so. Not until I heard it from the lips of a certain woman in the corner of a certain bar. Later from a taxi seat next to me, then in a dark bedroom, breathy and holy and innocent. Then it became beautiful. It meant flowers and sweet things and soft lips.

Now, it feels hollow in my mouth. I mutter it a few more times under my breath, testing this new situation. Everything has drained from it, it's just a shell. I curse Her for daring to say my name for the last time. How unfair, how rude. Tears want to start again but I'm all dried up.

"No, it's not," I mumble.

The engine hums serenely in harmony with whatever symphony is playing.

"It will be, again," the woman says, as if she knows. Maybe she is an

angel. My angel.

Dameon cranes his neck to look back at us and tells the woman that we're five minutes away. The streetlamps are closer together now, and buildings grow taller out the window. Somewhere downtown, I think.

The woman starts to hum along to the main line of the song. It's haunting and low. It makes me shiver. Then the song stretches up into the sky and winks from star to star. I feel the vibrations through the woman's arm and tilt my head into the crook of her neck. I close my eyes and pretend that breathing is as easy as this, as easy as the pulse that thrums against my forehead. I pretend that my knees aren't all broken up and my girlfriend isn't dead.

It feels a bit easier, every second. I think I'll spend the rest of my life pretending like this.

Clara Anderson-Cameron is a third-year English and French major. She enjoys writing and reading, although it becomes difficult during the semester. If she's not doing either of those things, she's probably listening to music or playing rugby with the UND women's team. Her goal is to work with words throughout her life, in any capacity.

Interior Monologue

Chad Erickstad

Interior Monologue of Chariot Driver from Exodus 14:23-25: Two Ways

1.

One wheel mired motionless, sunk in soft clay, the other splintered in twain, PILLAR OF FIRE climbing from earth to sky, menacing, tamp fear, cab crooked, cracked, bottomed, horses braying, rearing, writhing in snarled leather reins, eyes rolled back to white, high walls of water flanking and PILLAR OF FIRE menacing, tamp fear mighty maryannu, high walls of water flanking then seeping now flowing fast, rushing inward with chariot-flotsam, flailing bodies, Montu guide me, water crashing, bodies running, screaming, cascading, Pharaoh guide me, PILLAR OF FIRE flashing instantly to PILLAR OF CLOUD as water walls crumble in, roaring, deafening, jagged elm axle rapidly pinwheeling closer, Montu, closer, Pharaoh, closer, I AM FOREVER YOUR FAITHFUL SERVAN

2.

"What if we rock it?" the archer said.

The driver looked down at the broken chariot. This guy, he thought. "I don't think rocking it back and forth is going to help," he said. "This wheel is half-buried in mud, and that wheel," he said, pointing, "is com-

pletely shorn from the axle.”

“Couldn’t hurt to try,” the archer said.

Unbelievable, the driver thought. Pharaoh just had to bring everybody. Two thousand archers in the corps, and I get teamed with this guy. How many arrows did he waste shooting at that pillar of fire? Who does that? Did he think he was going to harm it? And now we’re stuck way back here while all the action, all the honor of battle, is way up there.

The archer half-heartedly pushed on the chariot’s cab; it didn’t budge an inch. “The horses have bolted anyway, so I guess why bother,” he said, leaning his bow against the cab. He adjusted his tunic, let out a sigh, then looked at the driver.

“What?” the driver said.

“What now? You’re the driver.”

“Was the driver! I have nothing to drive!”

The archer and driver paused, watching the pillar of fire dance across the horizon in front of them.

“I blame Pharaoh,” the archer finally murmured. “There, I said it.”

“Such insolence!” the driver barked. “Pharaoh is all! Remember Kadesh!”

“Ah, yes, the Battle of Kadesh,” the archer said, inflecting every word. “Here’s a riddle for you: how can you tell if Pharaoh was victorious at the Battle of Kadesh? Answer: You don’t have to, because Pharaoh will tell you all about it!”

“More insolence!” the driver yelled. “Enough!”

Another long, uncomfortable pause ensued as they watched the dancing pillar of fire.

“What should we do? These water walls are starting to cave in, if you haven’t noticed,” the archer said, pointing to his left. “And that fire thing just turned into clouds. I think something’s happening.”

Something’s been happening for a while, the driver thought. First the river of blood, then the vermin and the pestilence—it’s been a strange few months. And now I’m stuck in this unusual canyon with an imbecile and a broken chariot. I hate to think it, but this fool may have a point. Some of Pharaoh’s decisions during this strange time have seemed rather peculiar. For instance . . .

At that very instant, both the archer and the driver were crushed by the sudden reconstitution of the Red Sea.

Chad Erickstad is a senior majoring in English with a minor in communications.

Tainted Love

Lydia Schengrund

I. THE TEQUILA—MANIFESTATION, USE OF MAGIC WORDS, MANIPULATION

It burned. Everything burned. My tongue, my throat, my stomach. They burned.

I handed the shot glass back to the bartender, miffed and unamused.

Sweaty bodies swayed back and forth to the rhythmic thumping of the walls, and occasionally a head of bouncing hair, glittering with the light, unveiled between the shadows. As my friends murmured around me, my measly, hour-old fries gradually lost my attention, which was replaced by the woman's loose movements, enticing me to join, but I ignored my desires and pictured myself on the floor with her to ease my imagination instead. I wanted to talk to her. I needed to. She was everything I've desired without knowing her.

Her aura reeked like a sauna of a Korn concert, where every metal-head craved her; her short skirt bounced against her thick legs with each slight movement, and her multitude of long earrings dangled and dragged across her shoulders. They wrapped themselves within her hair, which should've been my job at that very moment. With each glint of light that passed over her eyes, my mind refused to break free from the shackles of the freckles spackled around her dilated pupils. Men were hyenas surrounding her, waiting for their next chance, and I attempted to fight the

animalistic urge to join them, but the chemicals flowing through my brain convinced me otherwise.

"What is your name?" I approached her with an outstretched hand. She took it.

"Marsh-a." The letters dragged, her voice like black coffee from 7/11 that pulled me through each dreadful day with a hint of honey that did not belong. The staleness offered an odd comfort that I refused to wash out.

The warmth of her hands embraced mine. Her red lipstick begged to be smeared all over me, yet the stale scent of liquor reeked off her, an opposition from her rosy perfume.

"Who are you?" I whispered into her ear among the blaring sounds.

She giggled. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't keep my eyes off of you," I confessed, "Where are you from? Do you go here?"

She softly placed her hands onto my arms and said into my ear, "Yes, I go to school here. I'm in entertainment and media."

Her expression played a warm welcome that tickled my brain, something I had not felt in years. She was the one for me—and only me.

"Ah, well I'm Ben—Benjamin. Ben, you can call me Ben. I'm in screenwriting here."

She grinned at my stammering as her loose eyes attempted to shut, and she stumbled around, tripping over her own feet, but dug her nails into my forearms to save herself. My skin tingled at the sight of her disheveled hair and crusted makeup. My mouth watered.

"Are you okay? Do you need to sit?" I asked.

"No," her words dragged again, "I'm fine."

She rested her head on my chest, and her bodyweight sunk us towards the floor, but the sparks within my appendages and my eyes and my brain told me to enjoy what was given.

II. THE WHISKEY—LOOKING WITHIN, CONTEMPLATION OF MANY POSSIBILITIES

"I love you; I love you; I love you." I kissed Alfred, held his head up to mine in the mirror to show him who was boss, and kissed him again.

The real master was displeased with my clammy hands matting his fur down, so he jumped from my arms to leave dirty paw marks carelessly on my stomach, a sign of his ignorance. Marsha would be here any mo-

ment for our date, so I scrambled to find a wipe, to fix my hair, and to re-tuck my shirt. Beads of sweat lined my upper lip. Alfred circled back around to run his silky fur across my leg and to push his head into my shaking hands.

“Wish me luck,” I said as I cleaned my shirt.

He stretched, staring at me.

Marsha’s car groaned to a stop outside my window, and I rushed downstairs before she could text me. The stale scent of a skunk’s ass pierced my nose as I stepped into the car, and she turned down the blaring music as my feet clanked a few unexpected bottles on the ground.

“Hand me one, why don’t you?” She opened her hand on the center console.

“What?” I asked.

“A drink. Hand me a drink.” That hint of honey disappeared and left behind the old, stale coffee.

She clutched the bottle I passed her but refused to take it.

“Take one yourself,” she demanded.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Jesus Christ.” She punched the gas out of the parking lot. “I wouldn’t be offering you one if I didn’t want you to have it.” The crystals hanging from her rearview mirror smashed into the windshield and rattled my eardrums.

I opened the drink silently, shaking worse than before, and took a sip as I side-eyed Marsha to please her, but she drove in silence, eyes locked on the road. Her silky hair reflected the soft night sky, and my hands twitched at the thought of touching it which was all I dreamt of in that moment. My heart pounded. The heavy bass rattled the car’s frame, but the worn speakers had reached their limits eons ago and produced a high, monotonous ringing, warping Hope Sandoval’s voice. Marsha’s drink was already halfway gone, yet I barely touched mine.

The bright moon chased the car and dimly lit the desolate fields of decaying weeds. The animals out there ran free, lawless and uncontrollable. I reached out to tap Marsha, to show her nature’s beauty, but her blank stare was a dead man’s.

I yearned to be out of this trap, to wander the untouched land, but Marsha’s soft touch against my arm soothed my racing mind. Finally, she turned down the music again.

“Did you want something?” she asked.

I placed my finger on the cold window. "Isn't it so pretty at night? Don't you want to be out there, running around?"

She grazed her thick metal rings down my forearm, tracing my veins, and curled her tiny fingers in between mine. The blood in my neck pounded, and my cheeks warmed, forcing me to close my eyes and succumb to this gentle moment.

"And what makes you say that?" she asked.

"I love the idea of being so free where we don't need to go to school and get a job. I mean, I'm sure it's not great out there either, but all these responsibilities we have – I hate them."

"I understand that. I'd love to be a bird, like a crow. They're so smart and like to have fun. It'd be like living life alone as a toddler, but you actually know how to take care of yourself."

"See? You get it."

Her intelligence hugged my brain, causing me to squeeze her hand tighter. I wanted to kiss her but suppressed the urge, nervous that she'd reject me, that I'd be a failure.

"Come up here," she said, "look at the stars."

She knocked me out of my delusion and had parked the car without my knowledge. Flat farm fields spanned across the earth, our location nowhere to be discovered. I climbed out and sat next to her.

The stars were veiled by the distant city lights. She drank from a new bottle and handed me one. I inspected it, imagining the burning sensations trickling from my tongue to my throat, and Marsha watched until I took a sip, although my unfinished one sat alone in the car. I winced.

"Just ease up," she said, "enjoy life. Do you not like to drink?"

I grinned awkwardly, diverting my gaze to the dried grass beneath us, and contemplated a decent answer.

"It's not that I don't like to drink." I dug myself into a hole that reached Hell, "I'm just pretty busy. I got class tomorrow."

She smiled. "Don't we all?"

I shrugged.

We watched farm lights blink across the sunken horizon for a moment's peace; I had to escape.

"What do you like to do?" Marsha broke the brief silence.

"Um, write plays and listen to music."

"Who?"

"I don't know. The Killers." My armpits were damp, and I hugged

my legs; I needed to leave. The fields called my name.

"They're good, their songs are good. A little too recent for me, though. What do you usually write?"

For the first time, a girl sounded interested.

I looked up at the sky, shaking. "Umm—" another slip of the mind "—They're mostly for class. Like, assignments and stuff. Nothing in particular."

"That's cool. Not many guys do that sort of stuff, ya know? It's nice meeting someone that does." Her voice softened. It was almost too comforting.

I forced myself to face her, and her gaze traced my body. She pouted for an inexplicable reason, eyes wide and glossy, the liquor leaking from her pores, masked by that rosy perfume from the bar. She must have cared about me, she really did.

"You are so cute, you know that?" she said.

A phrase unknown to me.

Words refused to come out. Instead, I stared with my mouth open, like a gazelle shocked that it was attacked by a lion.

Marsha pierced her nails into my cheeks, and I mentally begged to be freed from my awkwardness, but she kissed me despite it.

III. THE WINE—LOVE AND LOYALTY, NURTURING, SMOTHERING BEHAVIOR

Elise's hot breath tickled my shoulder as I, and only I, typed our script. The classroom's flickering lights drove me to insanity.

"Did you make sure that Scene One had active voice?" she pestered.

"Yes," I groaned.

"Okay, well, Lucy had to screw that part up, so now it's more work for us, all because she's some sort of English major."

I looked back at her, expressionless, and sipped my coffee. "Okay."

She huffed and crossed her arms, but I ignored her annoyance and packed up my backpack to escape her unwanted authority. She trailed behind me as I left the classroom.

"What are you doing tonight?" she asked.

Her braided pigtailed encouraged me to yank them off her head, as if they needed to escape her too.

"I'm hanging out with my girlfriend."

The taps of her shoes rattled my brain; The thought of Marsha's face calmed it.

She excitedly gasped. "Who is your girlfriend? I didn't know you had one!"

"Marsha O'Connor."

"Oh, really?"

She stopped in her tracks to continue the conversation, but I fled the building.

I opened a beer to calm my nerves before Marsha arrived. Alfred placed his head under my fingers to be scratched, but I preferred to pace the apartment to organize the trinkets on my shelves and to collect dust bunnies. I lit a candle, and I aligned the spines of my textbooks. My white dresser had a scuff mark, so I removed it before Marsha could discover it. The Cranberries vinyl I bought her peaked around a corner, so I tossed it onto my bed before it slipped my mind.

She strutted into my apartment and flaunted her new tarot card deck; each card featured a crow amid trouble. We eagerly sat at my dining room table as she provided a reading, accompanied by a gift of wine for her birthday. Her tiny nose and blushing cheeks captivated me, as did the glints of her jewelry. Tiny freckles on her face moved from her animation over these cards, and I wanted to kiss each one.

"And this card shows the empress and her crow." Marsha pointed to an incomprehensible card. "Basically, it's saying that if we stick together and work through issues, we'll thrive together."

Her eyes lit up, and she leaned over the table to kiss me. The strawberry smell of her wine flooded my nostrils, sweet and seducing. Her red lipstick was finally mine, and only mine.

"I love you so much, Ben."

Another phrase unknown to me.

Showed her around my apartment for the hundredth time as she gestured to each room and painted a picture of our future—for the hundredth time. She dreamt of gray walls and two children playing together with a dog. She gently held my hand and hugged my waist, and my vision clouded with tears.

"I have never met anybody like you," she said as she picked up a screenplay, smeared in Elise's bacteria, from my desk, "What is this one about?" She sifted through the pages.

I giggled, embarrassed, and focused on the ground. "I don't know, it's about some Oedipus remake. It was for class."

She read through it, smiling.

I wanted to ask what she meant by her original comment, but I repressed the urge, but it arose in my throat again, and a little grunt escaped, and she raised an eyebrow.

"What'd you mean by 'you've never met anybody like me?'" A bomb exploded in my stomach.

Marsha squeezed her arms around me and laughed. "You are so smart and talented, Ben. Everybody else is, so . . . meh. They're bleak. They're nothing like you."

My face fell hot, and I repressed the urge to kiss her again. Her lips begged for it. They begged for me. I craved them. The wine scent pecked me instead.

"I guess," I said.

She rolled her eyes. "You're ridiculous. You know it's true."

I dodged her compliments and sat us on my bed, and the vinyl poked me.

"Oh, I almost forgot." I presented it to her. "Happy Birthday."

Her face fell. Another bomb exploded.

"This is a joke, right?" she asked.

"What?"

"Where's my actual gift?"

I scanned my room for an answer. "What do you mean?"

She laughed mockingly. "You think I like The Cranberries?"

Images flooded my vision of her excited about an upcoming Cranberries concert. My throat tightened. A ball was stuck. I could not breathe. I could not swallow. Did my mind deceive me?

"I-I'm sorry," I said, "I thought you liked them—"

She left my room. I followed her.

"Marsha, I'm sorry. Do you forgive me?" I begged. My thoughts melted together into one fuzzy clump.

She packed her bag in deafening silence. My ears rang.

"Can you at least tell me what I did wrong?"

The apartment was empty. The chair was empty. The wine bottle was empty. It was my fault, like always. My fault.

I turned to the outside for an answer. A lone rabbit trekked through the snow.

IV. THE BEER—AUTHORITARIANISM, RUTHLESSNESS

The walls were gray. The couches were gray. Marsha ordered the carpet to be torn out. The landlord approved. Marsha perched beneath the high, reframed windows; golden light shrouded her like she was an angel. For the first time, she wore a white blouse, opposing her typical deathly atmosphere, and I swore she would have been the most beautiful woman in any crowd.

I sat next to her like a phytologist consumed by a newly discovered flower as she read Vathek unassumingly, my brain pestering me to feel her delicate skin. She was mine, finally mine, and no other man had the authority to lay a finger on her.

“We should redo the kitchen,” she eventually said.

The kitchen grasped by a finger onto its original self: dilapidated, withered. The time I had spent in there held onto countless memories of stress, solitude, and serenity. It served me well, and the thought of it changing pained me, but what was loved must go. I almost wanted to argue against the idea, but she knew better.

“What do you wanna do with it?” I asked.

She studied the area.

“New furniture, walls, you know.” She did not take her eyes off the book once.

I nodded. “Yeah, I think it would look better redone.”

My stomach growled. Eggs. Eggs sounded good. I placed a pan on the stove and set down a few utensils. Marsha slammed Vathek shut. Her heavy footsteps stopped behind me.

“Are you serious right now?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.” I did not understand.

She scowled as she tossed the book onto the dining table and disappeared into the bedroom. My prize, I could not lose her. I followed her, apologizing, and she hovered in silence in the room, back turned.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated.

“It’s just fucking annoying when you’re inconsiderate of someone else’s peace.”

Tears threatened to fall. I could not displease her, my everything, she was so beautiful standing in my original room. My Marsha, only mine.

“I promise I didn’t mean to; I wasn’t thinking.”

She pointed to the door. “Get the fuck out.”

"No, Marsha, what's wrong?"

"I said, 'Get the fuck out.'" She played no expression.

The door slammed behind me as I left to sit on the couch. Marsha's blank stare cycled through my mind over, and over, and over. I glanced around the apartment, yet I could not process my surroundings, bewildered. I fell back on my screenplay for graduation, a dreaded project. As the words mystically appeared on the page without my functioning imagination, Marsha's anger haunted me. I paced around instead, tracing my footsteps from the dining room table to the couch, to the kitchen, to the bathroom. I picked up dust bunnies and cleaned scuff marks along the way. The floor was spotless. The carpet ran one way. I faced the bedroom door and whispered, "I love you."

Silence.

I poured myself a cup of coffee, opened a beer, and worked on the screenplay again. Lucille draws a gun.

A piece of hair floated onto my foot. I put it in the trash where it belonged. Alfred sniffed my toes.

I imagined breaking down the bedroom door, my hands twitching. No sounds, no words, nothing escaped that room. I quietly played music from our speaker and rubbed my forehead in frustration. I focused on the screenplay. Steve shoots Lucille.

My imagination was handicapped. I sat in a chair by the window to calm it. Snow floated down. Another lone rabbit.

The night sky swallowed the apartment, constricting the open space. Marsha appeared to kiss me goodnight, her breath stained by liquor and mine by coffee. I blushed, relieved.

V. THE VODKA—SUBMIT TO A HIGHER POWER, GATEKEEPING, EARN YOUR PLACE

The stale coffee cups piled up on the classroom desk as Elise's hot breath poured down my neck while we painstakingly edited our screenplay. I pulled my hair and broke my pencil's tip when Elise coughed on me. She apologized frantically, and her pigtails looked extra pullable, but I clenched a fist and said, "It's fine."

I tossed the coffee cups into the garbage, like how I cleaned up Marsha's smashed glass the night before as punishment for coming home late from class. Tonight, she texted me again, asking when I'd be home, but it escaped me when Elise dropped our papers.

The moon, high up in the sky, mockingly loomed over me, a tiny creature. A deer peered into the classroom, found nothing of interest, and ate the grass instead, something I'd rather be doing than this. Elise crawled around the floor to collect the papers, and I lifted my foot up an inch to step on her, but she caught me too quickly.

"You're not funny," she said, her voice grating.

"When did I say I was?"

She crouched on the floor with the papers hanging from her lanky arms. Her glasses hung crooked from her face, and I imagined myself crushing them to pieces.

"Have you been going to the gym?" More useless words poured from her mouth.

"I always go, why?"

"Oh. Are you sick?" she asked.

"No, why?"

"You look thinner than usual."

I grazed my protruding ribs. "Okay? I would never say that about you."

She scoffed and put our screenplay in her bag. "Whatever."

Music echoed down the building's hallway from my apartment. My body ached for my bed, but Marsha greeted me with a liquor-stained kiss and a hug from Alfred.

"Why didn't you answer me?" she asked.

I opened a beer and hunched over the dining room table, defeated. "I'm sorry, I forgot. Elise—"

"So, you're cheating on me, right?"

"No," I groaned.

"So, why didn't you answer?"

"Elise dropped our play all over the floor, and it distracted me."

The beer washed down like water.

She threw a bottle onto the ground. Alfred sprinted away. I dug my face into my hands, and my stale breath nudged for some food, or some toothpaste, but Marsha lingered in the kitchen waiting for an answer I had already given her.

"It's selfish . . . coming home this late, especially for not texting me. I would never do this to you and leave you worrying."

"You know I've been working on this project all semester, Marsha."

She laughed. My nerves ached. My brain ached. I clutched onto

another beer and rested my head on my arms.

“Don’t you realize how tired I am putting up with your selfish behavior? You lie to me about where you are, and you come home late from being with Elise all night, and you don’t—”

The words droned on, and I wandered into our bedroom, and Marsha trailed behind me like a rodent begging for food.

“—And all you do is spend your money on fucking coffee and shit for yourself and nothing on me—”

A teddy bear sitting on our bed from our arcade date smiled at me, needing a hug. I gently moved it to our desk.

“—Can you talk to me? It’s like we don’t have a relationship anymore.”

Beneath the bear was a necklace I bought for Marsha earlier that day. I hid it in my hand, my back turned to her, and closed my eyes. Her words shot me like a million wasp stings. Can you talk to me? Can you talk to me? I bit my lower lip. The chain heated up from my grip, and I dropped it back onto the bed and sat on the edge, hunched over my beer, and sipped on it.

“No matter what I say or do, you get upset,” I said.

“No, you don’t try in this relationship.”

She stormed out of the bedroom, and her wine glass hit the counter from the kitchen. I carefully placed the necklace back in the box and stuffed it in the closet.

When I entered the bathroom, she slammed the bedroom door and locked it. The mirror shook.

I picked at my blackheads in the mirror and noticed how my thinly stretched skin accentuated my cheekbones, highlighted by my paleness. I blamed it on the long winter, although this sort of skin tone never appeared.

The shower promised a moment of peace and clarity, as did the beer. I drank more. The coldness spread throughout my chest like two cold hands. I longed for Marsha’s loving touch all over me.

I took off my shirt, and my mountainous ribs greeted me. I sipped on my beer again. Elise was correct, I was thin from the gym. Maybe she wasn’t so dumb after all. I sipped on my beer again. The shower’s steam consumed me. The water burned my scalp.

The couch was my Marsha that night, my one and only.

VI. THE RUM—A CHANCE FOR UNION, COMPANIONSHIP, DEPENDENCE

Marsha left for the evening, told me to go fuck myself, but I still had to complete that screenplay with Elise, the last person I desired to talk to, while accompanied by those fucking flickering lights. I opened a beer and sipped on it, the only substance in my stomach after a long day, and typed. Elise lingered in the chair behind me, mute. Mute like a fucking helpless animal.

She breathed heavily, and Marsha's voice echoed in my mind. The beer weakened my limbs. My brain was mush. The words on the paper were not coherent. I could not comprehend what I was typing. Each letter jumbled together, formed new words, until I had no imagination left. Elise's breath traveled down my spine. I hit the keys harder. Elise sniffled.

"Do you want to fucking finish this?" I snapped.

Her eyes widened. "Uh, sure?"

She sat in my chair and typed, and typed, and typed, yet made little progress. Backspace there. Delete here. New sentence there. One letter per minute. I lacked the capacity to lean over her and demand what had to be written. My hands shook. My limbs were weightless. I wanted to pull her pigtails. They were so pullable. So yankable. She sat there, back turned, unassuming and pathetic.

"Just fucking type, Jesus Christ, it's not that hard."

"I don't know what to write!"

"Well, neither do fucking I!"

My throat stiffened, and Marsha was there, screaming, telling me how it was all my fault. Everything I did was wrong, stupid. But she was so beautiful, so dainty, she was right. She was always right. I cried. I choked on my tears and let out a little welp. Elise turned around.

"Holy shit, what's wrong?" she asked.

I hid my face between my hands, ashamed, but the tears did not stop, they could not. I needed to escape.

"I—I don't know."

She watched me cry for what I assumed to be hours, yet it was only seconds. Patiently she sat there, quiet, and when I stopped, she asked, "Are you okay?"

Her eyebrows furrowed.

"No, I'm fucking not, can't you tell?"

Softly, she said, "You can tell me what's wrong. I'm here to listen."

I pulled my hair, and Marsha's voice scratched at the back of my brain. The exit was right there.

"I don't know. It's just—I don't know. I've just been having issues in my relationship."

The ground captured my attention. It was too painful to look Elise in the eyes. How could I have let her see me like this?

"Marsha's always upset about something, and I don't know what to do," I continued, "I don't know what to do, ever. Every little thing, she's upset. I just don't know."

"That's not right," Elise said.

"I guess so. She's the best I've ever done. In fact, she's the only girlfriend I've ever had. She's so pretty, I can't lose her." I finished a beer and stuffed it in my bag.

"It's not about looks."

I shooed Elise away. "Whatever." I packed up my bag. "Just save the file, and we'll do the last of the edits next week. I should go home."

It was abnormal that she sat there and decided to listen, like she was obsessed. It warmed my heart, really, as if she wasn't so annoying after all. I stumbled home in the nipping air. The falling snow softly joined the ground, consuming the city's sounds.

A wall of must and liquor hit me as I entered the apartment. Marsha laid face down on the couch and did not react to my presence. I dug a few coffee cups out of my bag and placed them on the kitchen counter. Alfred greeted me. Peace and quiet.

VII. THE GIN—VICTORY, CONQUEST, VENGEANCE

Elise and I edited the last of our screenplay at my dining room table without Lucy. Marsha's absence for the night allowed for ease of discussion and imagination.

"What do you wanna listen to?" I asked Elise.

"Anything."

Modern rock pleased me.

Elise studied the apartment, scanning from afar each crevice, corner, and crack. I forgot to dispose of the alcohol bottles and empty coffee cups which left a lingering stench, but it was Elise and amusing her was not an option, nor was it ever.

"I see that Marsha likes her vodka," she mentioned.

"That's both of us," I said, "Why does it matter?"

"It was just an observation."

"Would you like something?" I asked as I poured myself a glass.

Elise shook her head and typed. I bobbed my head to the music and sipped on my drink, watching from behind her. The guitar scratched my brain in the right spots.

"God, Billy Corgan's voice is so good," I said.

She said nothing. Her pigtailed slid up and down her back as she started to bob her head to the music, too. She wore a white blouse, like Marsha, but it hugged her waist tighter. Her physique was tinier, lankier, more fragile, like a teensy mouse. I changed the music to Mazzy Star, Marsha's favorite. My drink washed down like water but burned like Marsha's words. I grabbed onto Elise's chair and swayed against it to the music.

"Can you stop?" She threw her hands into the air.

I laughed. "Do you wanna see the apartment? I can't write this shit anymore."

"Sure? Let's just get this done first."

"No, now."

The trap of my apartment tore me down.

I gestured to the kitchen. "We just redid this the other week. Everything is new." I turned to the living room. "We put in these white couches and chairs, and painted the walls gray – well, Marsha did. I just approved." Elise watched intently, amused. She followed me down the hall. "And this is our bathroom here, also redone, and our storage closet. And our bedroom's here. Small, I know, but everything's redone." The door was shut.

"Oh, how much did it cost?" she asked.

"I don't know, Marsha's parents paid for most of it."

Elise just listened. No comments, no backlash. Mazzy Star still played. I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall. The alcohol wrapped me in a warm, fuzzy blanket. I sighed.

"Do you wanna finish the play now? We're almost done." Snappy, she was. That little snappy girl.

"Wait, let me show you my room. Marsha designed it, I think you'll like it. It's girly."

She stood in the middle of my bedroom, staring at me, impatiently waiting to finish the play. I fucking hated those pigtailed. They were so fucking stupid. I wanted to pull them. I needed to. She was everything I hated without truly knowing her.

She was a teensy, malnourished mouse that squealed and shook

in her tiny white blouse and her tiny black leggings. Her black hair swallowed her flushed face like a void. Pale eyes sunk into her tiny head. I needed something new. Something refreshing. Exciting.

I kissed her with my stale breath. She kissed back, dry and crusty lips. Her tongue lacked direction. I kissed her fragile neck. A relief. A prize. Fuck. I heard Alfred jump from the kitchen table, followed by a creak and a moan. But I did not stop. Alfred could watch. Alfred didn't know any better. Elise's few seconds of comfort convinced me of something so superficial that withdrew me from Marsha. Was it really beauty? Or was it compassion and love?

An empty coffee cup bounced off the floor behind us, and Marsha stood in the doorway.

"Can you at least fucking clean up the kitchen for once?"

Lydia Schengrund is majoring in commercial aviation and UAS with a minor in atmospheric sciences. Although she originates from the beach, she does just fine in these North Dakota winters.

Lindsey Cochran: Retail Exorcist

Robert D. Moore, Jr.

Lindsey woke to the sound of screaming. She sighed and rolled over, trying to go back to sleep, but the sounds of abject terror kept filtering up from the floor below. Finally, she just got up. It had been a late shift, but this clearly wasn't going away on its own, so action was required. Someone better be getting murdered.

Taking time only to put on a tank top and pair of jeans, she left her apartment and tromped downstairs. There was a crowd gathered outside apartment 313. 313? She had never noticed that. Didn't they try to avoid the number 13 in buildings?

She shouldered her way through the crowd to reach the door and looked at the people standing there. They were just looking into the apartment. "Okay, does someone want to clue me in on what's going on? Some of us work and need sleep." The people turned to stare at her and then gestured inside.

Lindsey managed not to roll her eyes. A simple verbal response wouldn't do, huh? Oh well, retail work had to have some advantages to it, right? One of them being the ability not to show what you were thinking on your face, much less say it. Besides, these people looked terrified, so she turned and looked into the apartment.

Inside the apartment was a madhouse. Lamps, ashtrays, pretty much any small, loose items were sailing around the room. A haunting? Really?

She'd get no sleep as long as this was going on. Pursing her lips, Lindsey crossed the threshold into the apartment. The people at the door gave startled amazed gasps and reached out to stop her as she moved into the room. They didn't try very hard though and stopped altogether when a lamp came zipping across the room to slam into the doorframe, just missing Lindsey's head.

"Clean-up aisle 4," she grumbled under her breath. She moved to the center of the apartment's main room. She was the center of a whirlwind of loose items, so she stopped, still completely unfazed by the surrounding commotion. "Sir or madam, if you require an item on the top shelf, you should ask for assistance, please. It avoids nasty messes such as this, and possible injury to yourself or others."

Everything flying around her came to a stop. There was muttering from the hall behind her, but in the room, there was a feeling of stunned disbelief. "Do you require assistance in returning items to their proper locations? I'm here to assist you in any way I can." The tableau held a moment longer, then several fragile items came crashing to the floor at her feet. Lindsey sighed. "Were the products not to your liking? I could check if there are other selections—colors or sizes—in the stockroom?" She moved about the apartment, looking for something, while brushing aside the still floating items that were in her way.

In the kitchen, she found a broom with a dustpan and came back to the living room to sweep up the debris. "If you think this is bad, you should have been around for clean-up when a kid threw up in the bike aisle. Not in the middle of the way or something, mind you. Oh no, this kid was an overachiever at trying to hide things. It was all up under the bikes and racks. Ever try to get a mop under ten bikes and a metal rack that doesn't want to move? I thought I would never get it all cleaned up."

By the time she finished cleaning up the mess, the remaining objects were settling back to spaces throughout the room. Maybe not where and how they were supposed to be settled—most lamps were not meant to stand on their shades on the dining table for instance—but they were settling. Lindsey walked back to the kitchen and emptied the dustpan into the trash. When she turned around, a ghostly, nebulous figure confronted her. She could tell its lips moved, but there was no sound. She had the impression, though, that it was asking her what it needed to do?

Without missing a beat, Lindsey said, "What you're looking for isn't on this floor. You'll either need to go upstairs via the Stairway to Heaven,"

she pointed to the figure's right, "or downstairs by the Escalator to Hell," and she pointed to its left. She could see nothing there, of course, but what did it matter? "Personally, and my boss would kill me for telling you this, while it's easier to head downstairs, the merch there is cheap and prone to breaking regularly. It'll cost you more in the end." The figure just stood there for a bit, then turned and drifted away to the right. It rose into the air and slowly faded from view.

Lindsey stood there for a minute then turned and stalked back to the door. She elbowed her way through the gawking crowd. Could people not even get out of the way?

As she reached the back edge of the crowd, one lady, likely the apartment's living occupant, said, "Please, ma'am, that was amazing. What can we do to repay you?"

Lindsey paused for a moment, then started up the stairs. "Just keep it down. I have an early shift tomorrow."

Robert D. Moore, Jr., is the lab supervisor for the Department of Physics & Astrophysics, who likes taking classes to expand his horizons. He writes in his spare time, and likes crafting fun stories for others to enjoy.

Coming To

Maren Schettler

I don't get out much. I mean, I don't move—can't move—unless someone moves me.

That's okay. I have no need to do anything but lie back and let the doctors take care of the rest. The grey walls and ceiling would ordinarily, I suppose, feel clinical and prison-like, but they're a comfort to my eyes. Nothing flashy. I can rest my eyes and open them without a shock of color. My eyes are the only part of me I can move, and they sure get their steps in, following the nurses as they make small adjustments to the machines, to my bandages, to my limbs. I close my eyes. Not moving is a lot of work.

I discover new injuries everyday. It's a bit fun, actually. It's as if the staples and stitches and aches and pains are playing a game of hide and seek on and beneath my skin. This morning the hospital robe slid open on my left side as a nurse leaned to shift the pillows behind my head, and I found a centipede of staples tightly holding a laceration together along my hip. Hadn't felt 'em there. I suppose credit goes to the nurse for revealing their hiding place.

I didn't find the spinal fracture. The spinal fracture found me. I couldn't figure out why I was so uncomfortable—from what I remembered, it was just my head and pelvis that had taken the real hits. But the pillows were never quite in the right place. Sometime during the blur

of days in the ICU, I asked my mom to list my injuries. (I promptly forgot each one; the game of hide and seek continued long after as I painfully rediscovered every fracture, every day.) She listed, and I focused in as well as I could—spinal process fracture. That was a new one. At least the pain makes sense now.

I am in intermediate care. The room is smaller, but the walls and ceilings are still grey. Grey is my favorite neutral color, I think. It's soft and smooth, sharp and translucent. It clears and numbs my mind. When I get nauseous from trying to sit upright, or dizzy as the nurses roll me onto either side to buoy my limbs with pillows, the grey is there. My mom's eyes are grey too. I bet they have a tougher job than mine, despite the marathons mine lazily jog, tracking the nurses' activity and scanning my body up and down for missing injuries. But hers—hers are a mother's eyes, and I bet their grey has seen all my sharp edges and smoothed them over with vision blurred by tears.

Two PTs came in today. Said I can move from the bed now, with their help; and the bed's, and the grey's. Keep me steady, keep me safe. I did very little. The head of the bed whirred, inclining, and beeped when it regrettably stopped short of shrugging me upright. The PTs used the sheets beneath me to rotate my body and lower my legs off the edge of the bed. My mom caught my gaze; she offered an encouraging nod, and we shared a deep breath. She's a nurse, and I could tell she didn't like being on the other side of healthcare. Too much is left in the hands of those who care too little. The older PT spoke reassuringly, and she balled up and gripped the sheets as she slid me slowly from bed to wheelchair. With more mental effort than physical, I sat up, willing my back to support me. But my will was not enough, and I slouched into my elbows on the armrests. They were uncomfortably wide, and being tired already, I looked ahead at the grey and inhaled it, letting it balm my mind and wrap me up to keep me from collapsing.

My mom suggests wheeling me out of the room and into the hallway "for a change of scenery" and the grey ribbons around me wilt and fall to the tile floor. Out of the room? No, thank you. I have everything I need in here. My pulse quickens, but only so much as my body can handle. My heart beats down my will, and before I can process what's happening or put up a fight, my mom is behind my chair, pushing me towards the door.

The lights are brighter in the hallway, and with eyebrows scrunched

and eyes squinting, I'm paraded past nurses, doctors, and open doors to patients' rooms. The hall walls are grey too, but the fluorescent lights force my eyes into a squint, and air rushes by me all too fast. Unbidden pains find me and need no convincing to prod; to anyone else, the floor is smooth and well-worn, but I dread every crack in the tiles which give my fractures another reason to perform acupuncture underneath my skin. My mind wars, wondering how to distract myself without becoming exhausted. To look at the walls means watching the blurry, grey world spin around me and lose the only thing I can control—my vision. The picture frames on the walls, displaying generic photos of generic things, might be used as anchors, but they leave my field of vision before I can hold onto them. From them I glimpse blurs of green grass and wisps of clouds, an old couple laughing, a cup of coffee. The armrests go stiff beneath my hands which weakly grip the wheelchair. Its plastic and metal that scaffold my bones are real and solid. Clouds and laughter and coffee are foreign, faint feelings of a life trailing behind me. Nothing grounds me like pain, but pain leaves me wanting nothing more than to float out of the chair, weightless, and slip into the hospital bed, blanketed by unassuming grey.

It's a few seconds before I realize I've been wheeled back into my room, and I rest, sinking further into the hard leather of the armrests. The room's walls sigh in relief, as though worried that I might not have returned.

Don't worry, grey, I won't leave you yet.

I've been demoted to the med-surg unit. Had my legs been capable of kicking or my lungs of screaming, I would have fought to stay, dear grey. I stare hard at my walls and paint the exact shade on the back of my eyelids, shutting them while the nurse transports me through the hallways to the new room. I open them to a shrunken version of my previous room and quickly compare my memory's grey to these walls. This grey has faded. It feels transparent, thin, and weathered, like an old woman's skin. Grief shadows my face, and the transport nurse must notice my disappointment because she makes a comment about the downgrade of room being a sign of a well-paced recovery. Soon you'll be discharged to rehab, and then on your way home, she says. I nod.

My mom comes in, holding her purse, coat, hat, and, as always, a thermos of coffee. While you're in the wheelchair, she asks, do you want to take a look around the new unit? Why not, I respond. I have betrayed and

abandoned my beloved grey home, and this new room holds no comfort for me. I'm convinced I'll unravel the moment I pass through the door.

Instead, I look at the hallways I had shut my eyes to beforehand. My mind, having kept pace with my body's steady recovery, walks in step with my mom's gait. I notice things. Before, I had been capable only of absorbing the immediate stimuli. Now the pale walls don't spin as they had. An air-conditioned breeze flows past, and I'm reminded of what it used to feel like to run. I lock my gaze at a point on the wall, and as we pass, I brush my fingers against it and feel the tips vibrate until they numb. The paint is textured like our walls at home. Mesmerized, I almost don't see the framed picture approaching my hand as I'm guided along. Abruptly, I pull back and stare up at the image, and my mom pauses our stroll. A stock photograph, similar in style to the ones on the intermediate care floor, displays a landscape. At first there is only color: deep storm-grey and gold. The gold becomes blurs of swaying wheat lit up by the sun, which must be looking over the photographer's shoulder, out of frame. The rays contour heavy thunderheads that roll above the fields.

I stare as deep-purple bruises emerge through the storm clouds, and a thin scar scrapes across golden skin to form the horizon. My gaze travels every inch of the image, recalling the paths I've taken up and down my own body.

Should we make our way back, my mom asks, gently. She had moved from behind the wheelchair to kneel by my side, to see what I was seeing. I blink away tears I hadn't noticed as we turn back to my room. Before entering, I shut my eyes, desperate to keep the vibrance of the image from my corrupted short-term memory. I open again to the paled walls of my room, and long, finally, to return to normalcy.

Maren Schettler is a senior studying English, music, and political science. She loves the outdoors and enjoys camping and hiking with friends and family. While in school, there is no end to her frustration with the lack of leisure reading time. Her boxer dog Pacha is her favorite reading buddy.

poetry

Three Poems

Clara Anderson-Cameron

touch, or, beautiful people

it's the first real snowfall and I'm outside of the library, through the secret exit,

the side door.

there are people there with me, beautiful people next to me and we are rolling big wet piles of slush

and snow

and leaves

across the patch of grass that we expose in intersecting black lines to build a snowman the height of me,

and I'm tilting my face to the sky

and the flakes are kissing my cheeks and

Floodwall | Anderson-Cameron

I wonder if anything else will be allowed to touch me there, where fine lines under my eyes have appeared, jarring, in the mirror and I can't decide whether to

hate them

or love them with a fierce protectiveness because they're

mine

and I *earned* them.

see how I've smiled?

more so in recent months, thanks to these beautiful people in the snow and the one

with long red hair that's flecked with strands of gold is cold and the one

with soft eyes and strong shoulders pulls close to her and takes two icy hands between her own.

together they become a small painting in the dark,

I think I'm the artist with my gaze that freezes them where they're half concealed by the clouds of steam that expand after each exhale and I'm glad I can't quite see their eyes,

their lips,

the red of their noses,

the glint of their dark mouths when they say things,

quiet things,

Anderson-Cameron | *Floodwall*

insignificant things, I'm sure, but still, my eyes drop away

because it feels too intimate, too foreign, like listening in on a goodbye when you're in a different country, where tongues form different sounds,

beautiful,

sad,

longing sounds

and from my vantage point, I do feel worlds away because never have I invited such closeness never has someone drawn near to me only because I was cold and irresistible

and later when the one with soft eyes gestures me to her side so that we are standing there, three dim forms against the newborn snow, I feel

trapped,

(warm)

and cornered,

and I am too close to their beauty, too conspicuous, and I wonder how long they will tolerate me out here under the biting snow and when it hits my cheeks now

I feel it sting

and I wonder if anyone will ever touch me like that

and if I might let them.

residual

Where am I? Still in the yawning quiet after you told me.
The sharp cut of your teeth and the red of the flush
On your cheek. Moving forward because it's quieter
That way. Again and again, by my hand, we break apart
Then crash together in the silence that followed and if a tree
Fell between us I doubt we would've heard it, because
It was too loud, the stilted exchange of our wanting.
Separate, the same. Today I'm hungry, and I miss you.
I can't find a difference between the two. I haven't heard
Your voice in three years but I still feel it in the space
Between my eyes, and along the ridges of my spine,
And you exist there, still. So I do, too. So I settle back into
To the armed chair and the gray table in the sun
Where we were trying to learn French and where you told me,
In no uncertain terms, that you'd be taking up space inside
Of my body for the rest of my life. And I still can't understand it,
How all of that was contained in three words,
Dripping, dangerous, like poisoned syrup from your lips.

library magic

I think I was reborn here, in the stretch of
Books and corporate carpet with sidelong looks
From the boss who stalks past with his long
White eyebrows and the way your heart
Pounds beneath the skin that heats my palm.
Your pink mouth liquid in a way that
Catches my eye and I just wish someone
Would tell me why it's so hard to resist
Speaking when there's nothing much to say.
But the way you're looking at me now
Puts words into my mouth that I never
Imagined, your back against the oversized
Shelves where the books are heavy and full
Of beauty and art which makes sense to me
In a way it didn't before and the barest brush
Of your body on mine pulls out more of the fine
Words you've placed in my mouth, more of the
Love with which you've colored my insides.

All of this is brand new and almost too sore.
All of this is bright and soft and decidedly yours.

Clara Anderson-Cameron is a third-year English and French major. She enjoys writing and reading, although it becomes difficult during the semester. If she's not doing either of those things, she's probably listening to music or playing rugby with the UND women's team. Her goal is to work with words throughout her life, in any capacity.

Borrowed Time

Chloe Piekkola

I tuck myself amongst the pages of brittle books,
stuffing their words within nooks and crannies.

For I fear the only time I will have to create,
is when my bones are frail, and my lungs deflate.

I convince myself: this time, they will only be borrowed.

I'll use the last of my strength to scrawl all I
can but my fingers fall to dust along the page.

Only then, when my body gives out and
I collapse to the floor.

Death will knock at my door.

I'll plead with him not to take me: please,
these voices within me, need to be set free.

I resort to smearing ink on a page and hope
it leaves something to remember me by,

He takes ahold of my ankle.

My heart thumps against his shackles,
I ask him if he wants to make a deal.

His lips curl into a sneer, with a quickly
penned line, between hell and reality,

I take my first real breath of immortality.

Chloe Piekkola, a UND student majoring in communications, enjoys exploring various avenues of creativity. From diving into fiction stories to crafting poetry and tinkering with graphic design, she finds joy in expressing her creativity for others to see.

A Gold-Lined Barrel

Dani Ogawa

I've got a rusty hammer and chisel in my hands
trying to carve out the night my picture was permanently painted,
scraping a barrel lined with gold at a depth only I can reach.
the kind they'd pay hundreds to forge tokens of love
for wrapping bony fingers.
My eyes are pinched as my fingernails crack
to pick away a piece of you.
I might melt the flakes I chipped away and make a chime,
so when the wind passes it will remind me how you whispered
gorgeous.
I would sprinkle it in my coffee,
so I may drink it and fill my veins with the smell of your collar.
Maybe I'll dust it on my cheeks,
so when they complement my shine
I can tell myself it's because you kissed me there.
I could slice open my chest,
and stuff the scrapes of it into my lungs so when I breathe
I can remember when you were over *me*, breathing,
And when I'm bleeding out from where I cut myself open,
I can weave glowing string and sew myself back into one piece
and know that you are the one holding me together.

But

I swear I've been digging for years now,
And yet you're stuck in that barrel
in the back of that old house
in the middle of that field
in that one town I pass
on the highway going home at sunset.

Dani Ogawa is a creative writer and poet currently studying English at the University of North Dakota. She will graduate in the spring of 2024 with her bachelor's in English, in addition to a minor in communications and certificates in creative writing and writing, editing, & publishing. When she is not writing stories, you can find her nose in a book at a local coffee shop, listening to Taylor Swift, or teaching dance. Dani is from Grand Forks, ND.

A Different Type of Sickness

Tabitha Lee

Hiraeth . .

A Noun

A home sickness for a home to which you cannot return,

A home for which maybe never was there,

Can be nostalgic,

Can be yearning,

Can be the grief for the lost places of the past

Hiraeth . .

A feeling that I feel

The one I just learned the word to

I feel you most days

For a home that can't exist anymore, and will never exist again

For a place like others familial resting spots

Hiraeth . .

You carry so many other feelings along with you,

Nostalgia

Yearning

Grief

Jealousy

Frustration

Hiraeth . . .

What purpose do you have?
You haunt me in the night,
Make me question myself
Question my surroundings
Question love and happiness
Question . . . you

Hiraeth,

Why are you here?
Cuddling me like my drowsy lover?
Hiraeth, why?
Why do you have convincing whispers?
Why do you haunt me still?
I know that it's gone

Hiraeth . . .

The feeling,
It drove me to build a chosen family,
To find a home in people
But you, Hiraeth
Still haunt me,
And may always haunt me

Tabitha Lee is a student who has a deep love for most things. They enjoy writing, reading, and playing *Magic: The Gathering* during their free time.

Two Poems

Sevi Sapunar-Lahr

shards of memories

shards of memories. fragments of you.
are all i have left.

small snippets, flashbacks from a film.

can i tell you something?

yes, of course.

i started cutting

s

c

A

R

S

BEHAVE YOURSELF, DAMNIT!

you have everything in life. don't pretend you're struggling.

i remember the feeling of the

cold

hard

tile

bathroom floor.

1 hour . .

2 hours . .

3 hours . .

4 hours . .

5 hours . .

6 hours . .

7 hours . .

8 hours . .

you did this to yourself.

if you apologized for **MY crimes**

this

would

ALL

be

over.

you did this

t

o

yo

ur

SELF.

YOU DO EVERYTHING TO YOURSELF.

you will get what i am required by *law* to give you,

water

3 meals A DAY

but NO

laundry

or sleep

or a

r

e

a

s

o

n

to

want
to
stay
alive.

you can keep your tear-stained sheets,
your blood-stained sleeves,
your bruised heart,
the endless abyss you're falling down

t
h
e
broken finger
and the
sprained knee

and

a

l

t

h e

s

c

a

r

s

those days, locked in the ever-spiraling darkness of your mind, sitting in
the dark

consumed by the pain. the hurt. the betrayal.

back to the day it finally settles into the crevices and cracks of all that's
broken inside of you.

that you mean nothing to him anymore.

that he's left you, like everyone else before.

you're a small child again, crying as you watch her drive away, your sister
crying for you to come home.

i didn't choose this! i didn't choose to leave you!

but she'll blame you forever more.

you feel as small and as helpless as you did then.

he chose you once.
he wanted you once.
he loved you.
once.

and now he's gone, knowing the most painful way to leave, knowing how
to evoke that gut-wrenching soul-splitting pain,
and he uses it.

he pretends he never even knew you existed.
he pretends he never cared.
he pretends you're nothing.
and maybe you never meant anything to him.
but one day,
you believe him.

AND

your heart yearns for that love and unconditional care.
what i wish i had.
but know i will never again,
maybe never even did, have.

you thought you moved on, healed even. but then a stitch rips out from
your patched up heart.
and you've regressed. not back to the beginning.
but sometimes it feels like it.
the walls are caving in, you feel crushed, suffocated.

i will never forget what you did to me.
i will never forget what you are.
but
s

o

m

e

t
i
m
e
s

forgetting would be so much easier.
(survivable even.)

sometimes i worry

sometimes i worry.

worry that i'll forget.

forget everything i once knew about you.

sometimes i worry that i've already forgotten.

and i want that back.

i cling so hard.

i don't want to let go.

i can't believe i don't remember everything anymore.

i don't want to forget.

just like you forgot me.

one day, it will all be gone.

i only got 9 years of you.

and i'll never get more.

but i might forget.

everything.

one day.

and that's terrifying.

Sevi Sapunar-Lahr is a freshman majoring in Norwegian. If she wasn't determined to live in Norway someday, she would've majored in English and run her own bookstore. Writing and reading have always been a passion in her life. Writing has been very beneficial and therapeutic. And she wishes to share that.

Body

Rachael Erickson

Most days it's exhausting living in this body.
In this skin, with these bones, and a heavy heart.
My days drag on as my body drags me through the mud and pins me up
against cold walls in dark rooms.
Where my thoughts conjure up ways to keep me spinning in circles.
I'm tired of its inconsistencies and failures.
I'm tired of being tired, and lacking energy for reasons I have yet to un-
derstand.
It's broken and I'm reaching out, asking to be fixed.
Does anyone know the cure for the unknown look-alike cancer called anx-
iety?

Rachael Erickson is a senior majoring in communications with a minor in leadership. In her free time, she loves being outside, whether that's hiking or going on walks with friends. She enjoys being involved in her campus ministry Chi Alpha, leading and discipling women in their faith. Her passion for writing lies in writing poetry pieces about mental health in hopes that others will feel less isolated in their journeys.

Two Poems

Jameson Kay Olson Buckau

ABBA

and I'm going over the speed limit and nothing matters
and everything matters because ABBA is playing
and I'm thinking about everything that's ever happened in my entire life
and I can breathe for the first time in weeks
and nothing matters because I'll die someday
and all of this grief and anxiety and happiness turns out to be pointless

but maybe the point isn't permanence

maybe the point is those vibrant smiles
maybe those desperate, despondent, desolate tears fell for the experience
maybe the experience of existing is the point
maybe each experience is a blade carving against wood
maybe there's a beautiful design coming to fruition
maybe not

Grandma Betty

my earliest memory of dancing is with my grandma betty in her kitchen.
she'd put on the radio, usually to a christian station, and twirl
me around, singing about the lord's love. and i don't believe
in any religion now, but i still believe i felt a higher
power in that house. those four walls provided me more
safety than my parents ever did. and i don't know
if god is real, if jesus existed, if those
gates are real or pearlescent but i do
know that my heart never felt more
full than spinning around with
my grandma, cooking french
toast, and laughing
before i had
any idea
how
low
life was
going to take
me. and sometimes
when i'm alone in my
safe, quiet apartment, i'll
turn on music and close my eyes
and i'll twirl and spin and sway and
dance just like grandma did with me. and
i had a different name then and gender and
religion and home and life. but somehow i'm still
dancing with my grandma betty in her kitchen and feeling
like somehow there's some greater power out there holding fast
and its breath to make sure that i make it to the next day again
and again and i think i met that higher power in my grandma's kitchen.

Jameson Kay Olson Buckau (2002) is a graduate teaching assistant and master's student in the English Department. He did his undergrad at Black Hills State University in South Dakota. He has lived in many places across North America and enjoys traveling, which inspires a lot of his writing. He's queer and trans, has a dog named Bailey, and has a deep love for queer and gender studies in literature as well as the unending fight for all people's liberation under the powers of colonialism and white supremacy.

Out of That Darkness More Darkness Has Come

Casey Fuller

While making a walkthrough of the college housing area, campus police noticed a young man sitting outside on the wet ground. When they asked the student if he was okay, he said: *Yeah, just a little dehydrated.* Upon further questioning the student stated he ingested hallucinogenic mushrooms earlier in the evening but his body has never reacted like this before. *Like what?* the officers asked. *Like my hands are cotton, like the world is going to end.* The officers attempted to move the student to a warmer, dryer environment but the student said he didn't think he could move. This created a concern for the student's health and well-being and led to the officer's request for a medical aid unit. Medics soon arrived via fire engine 89 and checked the individual's blood pressure, shone a light into his eyes, and asked him--day of week, place, president--a battery of standard questions. The check concluded the student was very high on hallucinogenic mushrooms indeed. After a brief consultation the medics agreed the student would be fine and should go back to his residence. The medics told the officers. The officers were relieved

about less paperwork and escorted the student back to his dorm. The student walked to his room and went right to bed with little aid. The officers explained the situation to the roommate, who opened the door, and asked if he would keep an eye on the student through the night. *Yes, of course*, the roommate agreed, who had seen the three emerge out of the darkness from a window he was sitting in front of. *Of course, yes*, the roommate said to himself as he closed the door, repeating his words. Sitting back down on the sofa, retracing the steps of where his friend could have gone. Who he might have been with, where he last saw him, where he scored the shrooms. Directing his gaze back to the window, he began to believe the story he started to tell himself.

Casey Fuller is just a regular old PhD student at the University of North Dakota. He's from Olympia, Washington.

The Story about the Witch's Familiars

Maiken Møller-Andersen

On this particular night, the witch fell,
Scorched body drowning in her own blood.
The Hunter was one to tell,
But still unable to predict a flood.

Crimson fell upon his streets,
Familiars of the witch seeking to avenge.
The superstitious were no longer the elites.
The sweet forest animals were out for revenge.

An owl took his hands,
Its feathers splattered over the stone; there he stands.
A blood covered magpie devouring him in flame,
Weeping for its mother before its neck was broken, some claim.
A fox so sly, stole his medallion,
Gutted by hunters, this act of what they rationalized as justice, a false talion.
A rabbit trapped his voice,
A paw was left behind, an interesting choice.
A cat drove his worshippers away,
Bad luck omen, keeping them at bay.
A crow stealing his eyes,

Floodwall | **Møller-Andersen**

Placing it by where the witch's body lies, the black bird slowly dies.

The familiars fell for her the same way she had fallen for them.

They used the killer's vision for the ritual to be complete.

The Hunter's eyes melting into the witch's blood.

Now that she was awake once more, she had a hunger for some human meat.

The people were warned by loud thunder.

When she awoke, she rained fury on the town.

And out of their bones, she made a pretty crown.

Now they say, the witch still lives.

And after reviving the familiars, she happily gives,

The knowledge to younger witches, far and wide.

For mess with one's familiars, you need to expect a dangerous tide.

Born in Oslo, **Maiken Møller-Andersen** is an English master's student from Norway. They grew up around the forests and lakes in a small city named Jessheim. They have always been fond of creating stories through writing. Having grown up on fairy tales and ghost stories, their writing is heavily inspired by those sleepless nights and curiosity about what might reside in the abandoned house just up the street from their childhood home.

Two Poems

Chad Erickstad

Land of Improbable Dreams

I race
to the land
of improbable
dreams:

a gaunt and
ragged old
man there
deems

me ready
and willing
to take tall
dives

into its
pristine waters

and whetted
knives;

but as I
stare into
his haunted
eyes

my stomach
turns and my
will to stay
dies.

Caffeine and Me

mornings
we do
the hustle

we do
the jitterbug
evenings &
bunny hops
at noon

alone
I don't
the zombie

I don't
& I don't
& I crave
she comes
back soon

Chad Erickstad is a senior majoring in English with a minor in communications.

The Reaper

Korbyan Chavez

I.

Mom holds back tears while having to
Wake the kids with awful news.
How do you explain to a child
Why the backyard is empty?

II.

Carpet covered in red splats, where he was
Blown back by the force of the bullet.
They will never be able to set foot in their
Childhood home ever again.

III.

The bottle is empty. Her mouth
Foams. The beat of her heart slows
And eventually stops.
Mind, body, family: these, Addiction destroys.

IV.

A crack in the mirror, then it
Shatters, their old reflection no more.

They were toxic anyway,
I think to myself.

V.
The Reaper follows me, his bony finger
Tickling my spine.
A reminder.
I know.

VI.
I begin to smile at The Reaper every time he
Shows his bony face, mocking me
And my past.
I was afraid of you before.
But now, I intend to enjoy what remains
Until it's time, when you end it.
Until it's time, when you beckon me to leave.
Until it's time,
When I'm returned to them.

Korbyan Chavez is an accounting major who also likes to dabble in writing every now and again. She dreams of having a corgi named Ein and maybe even a second corgi named Heracles. She tends to write darker themes by the way, but at least she has a goal of having corgis.

A Cheers to Goodbyes

Drake Carnes

Cheers to goodbye
To the goodbye we don't like to say,
The ones we try to hold off.
The ones with people we don't want to lose,
We just hope to be better off.
So cheers to goodbyes.

Cheers to goodbye
To the goodbyes we know we need,
The ones we plan ahead.
The ones that everyone agrees,
Will help to sleep better in bed.
So cheers to goodbyes.

Cheers to goodbye
To the goodbyes we didn't have a say in.
To the ones someone else tells.
To the ones that hit you so hard,
It rings out like bells.
So cheers to goodbyes.

Cheers to goodbye
To the goodbyes we never got.
To one day you're talking,
Then the next is just silence.
It makes your life seem lacking.
So cheers to goodbyes.

Drake Carnes is a twenty-seven year old English and education major here at UND and an aspiring author. He has been writing short stories and poetry on and off for over ten years, and has taken a greater focus on his writings for the last two. He hopes to become a more consistently published author as he focuses on a fantasy novel.

Two Poems

Brenden Kimpe

An Upward Trend

Across the classroom with short, cropped hair and warm brown eyes.
Stolen glances are not so sly, something flutters.
Gliding down a path meant for walking.
Stifled laughter with mouthfuls of cheeseburgers.
Late nights, early mornings, returning home with a smile.

The ultimate summer trip: camping, visiting the zoo, sharing love.
A sweaty tire change in the mid-July heat, totally worth it.
Traipsing along the beach, searching like ravens for precious stones.
Scratching mosquito bites with sticky marshmallow fingers.
Drunk upon fruity liqueur and tipsy from love.

Crisp autumn air flows over our goose bumped skin.
A quick stop at the gas station; treats and drinks galore.
Settling down in a half-full theater, whispering into the air.
A late-night drive home, settling in, cozy and warm.
Drifting off with full arms, how sweet life is.

Scrabble

A silent scrabble game chokes me, we are not
thinking of words to play on the board anymore.
I felt so embarrassed. Too lost in my dreams to see
reality directly in front of me, waving its hands.
Time is the best healer and the most skillful assassin.
My throat is slit and sewn shut twice a week.
It's a surprise every time, even if I anticipate it.
I was sculpted and crushed by your hands.
Hands that I bit as they fed me everything I needed.
A bandage cannot cover those faded markings.
An apology cannot fix those missed opportunities.

Brenden Kimpe is a senior double majoring in English and secondary education. He enjoys colorful sunsets, reading until his eyes burn, and napping with his cat, Marceline.

the jester

Jay Cummings

the jester enters the court of the king
exclaiming "which song will you have me sing?"
the king sits and thinks, "this fool and their tone"
and he noticed they showed up alone.
the king says "play me something that shows your best ability"
hoping to save some of their civility.

the jester then puts on their show
singing a song the king does not know.
however the notes do come out foul
and singing like a mules howl.
yet the jester continues to play
unaware to the mess in the entryway.

on they sing about the praises of the king
proclaiming that the king is their favorite thing.
only to realize when the show is done
that it wasn't the king's favor they won
instead is a fate inside the gallows.
"oh how shitty the king, how can he be this shallow?"
only the answer would not soon come
"why couldn't he have stopped what i had become?"
because their head is now in a basket
the village idiot lowered into their casket.

Cummings | *Floodwall*

the true answer, that they failed to see
was no matter who the jester may be
they will always fail and fall far behind
because they must know who to be ahead of time.

Jay Cummings is a psychology major at UND. They have been writing in their off-time since high school, and enjoy writing poems and novellas.

To a Cabin in the Woods

Jacob Stanley

Let us run, run away
far from the prisons of glass and endless tarmac
to a cabin in the woods.

From here where the sky is endless gray
and we divide each other with gridded track,
let us run, run away.

When you can't go on, and it strikes your mood,
we will escape to a grove of oak and spruce and sumac,
where we will find a cabin in the woods.

As we toil at our desks for one more pay,
the turtles keep dying and the streams turn black.
Let us run, run away.

To where the grass is green and all is good,
where the songbirds sing and the ducks go quack
at a cabin in the woods.

Shackled by our problems, we are our own prey.
Hide, avoid, ignore, they will find us anyway.
Let us run, run away
to a cabin in the woods.

Jacob Stanley is a junior mathematics major at UND. While his career goals are in the STEM field, Jacob also takes an interest in more creative endeavors, and is the treasurer for UND's Writing Club. He typically enjoys writing fiction stories with fantasy elements but dabbles in poetry, such as with his publication in this spring's issue of *Floodwall*. Outside of writing, Jacob enjoys cooking, playing games, and spending time with friends.

A Sonnet for Alaska

Jonathan Sladko

Dustings of snow on the high mountaintop
The wind blows gracefully through golden leaves
The smell of winter blows in on the breeze
A familiar feeling as snowflakes drop
Fire blazes in cast iron wood stoves
The wood is stacked neatly under the deck
The hockey players practice their crosscheck
And the sea ice returns to ocean coves.
Winter has come to Alaska again
The long and dark and very cold nights
Seem to seep and creep through the window pane
The only reprieve is the northern lights
Auroral dances betray the arcane
And warm the spirits gripped by winter's might.

Jonathan Sladko is a writer, poet, and photographer from Alaska seeking adventure in the Lower 48. He is currently double majoring in commercial aviation and English at the University of North Dakota. He hopes to publish his novel before he graduates.

Observe, Feel, Reflect

Alexis Crane

While you walk around campus
Observe.

Observe the guy walking by himself to class,
Hands in his pockets, air pods in his ears
Listening to the song his boyfriend played for him with his guitar.
His cheeks flush, not from the cold, but from the memory of that night.

Observe the girl with headphones partially on, walking to the library with
her two friends,
Listening to the song that reminds her of home,
And listening to the conversation at the same time.
Wanting to participate, but not knowing what to say. All she can think
about is
How she feels so excited to see her family for the first time in months this
weekend.

Observe the professor on the phone,
Walking to his car, talking with his wife.
Reassuring her about the appointment that afternoon
That the doctor will bring better news this time
That even if not, he vowed in sickness and health.

Observe the freshman,
Walking with their head held high, even though they don't feel the
confidence.
A single earbud in their left ear, needing the reassurance the music brings.
Mind racing with everything that needs to get done and worries of
everything and nothing all at once,
They're hoping to feel more comfortable with where they are,
With who they are,
But it's hard to feel confident when feeling so alone.

You can observe all this but don't forget to observe yourself.
Observe where you are sitting right now.
Maybe it's one of the brown leather chairs at the Starbucks in the Union,
Or in the study room on the third floor of the Chester Fritz Library by the
elevator,
Or in your friend's dorm room sprawled out on their rug.

Why did you choose this spot?
Comfort? Convenience? Need?
Maybe you're about to do the homework assignment you've been
pushing off all week,
Or you're sitting on your bed waiting for your parents to get to town to
visit you,
Or you're outside soaking in the sun and enjoying the first sixty degree
day of the year.

Observe who surrounds you.
Family? Friends? Strangers?
Observe those perceiving you.
What do they see?
Who do they see?

Alexis Crane is currently a sophomore majoring in social work. She is minoring in psychology, with a focus on substance use and misuse, with a certificate in Spanish. Her goal is to work in child welfare or as a school social worker. Alexis likes to write poetry in her free time to put difficult subjects and feelings into words, hoping that she can reach those who can relate, to reassure them that they are not alone.

***art &
photography***

Three Paintings

Casey Fuller

Artist's Statement

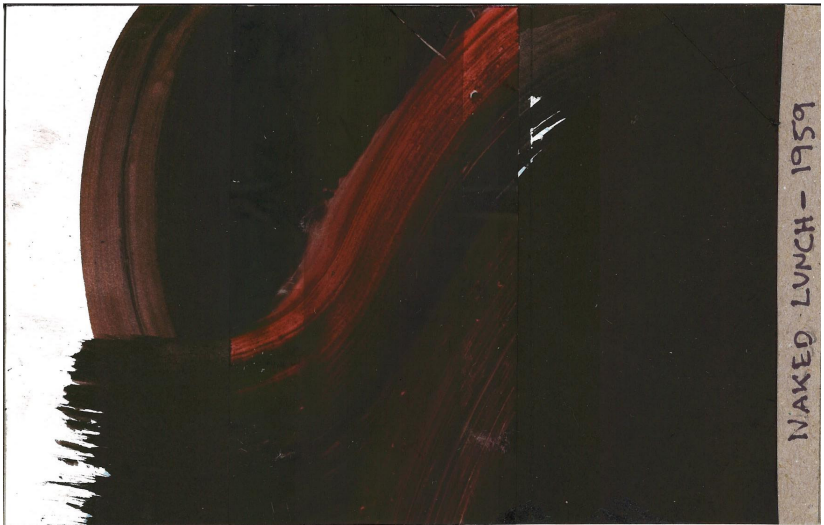
I love words. Words are totally amazing. Words allude, cordon off, cordon in, exfoliate, and blossom. And words are just so strange. The meaning in words can change over, their footprints marking you with their history. And yet, one conclusion I've come to as an English PhD student at the University of North Dakota, as a person who lives and breathes and teaches words every day, is that words can't express all of my feelings. It's a sad notion for me—one that I've tried to deny.

So, as an English PhD student who is far enough along in his studies to spend his time studying books for a comprehensive exam, along with my notes and timelines and essays, I decided to create a postcard-sized painting for each book in my comprehensive exam. These postcard paintings are a sample. Each painting is 3 inches by 5 inches and uses watercolor, ink, or watercolor and ink together. Each painting, also, takes its title (publication year included) from the book it's inspired by. They're all on paper.

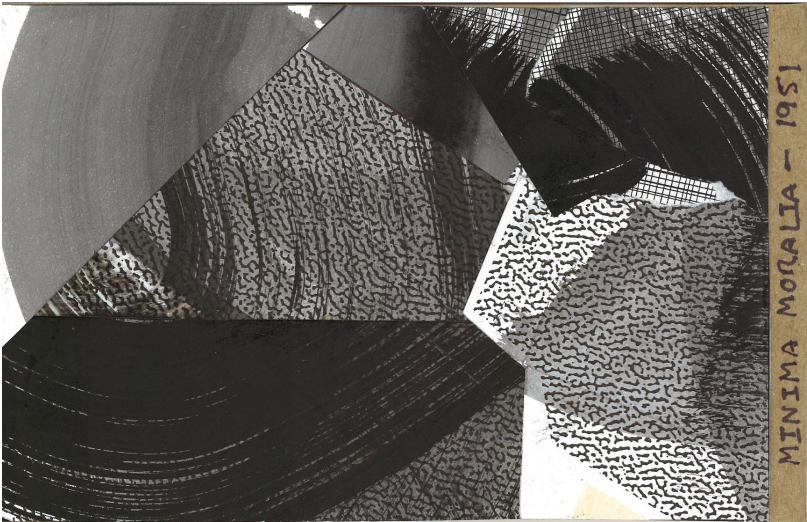
The composition of these small paintings attempts to deploy the technique used by Helen Frankenthaler, where the frame of the painting

is brought to the painting after the painting is complete; that is, the painting is meant to be free, explore, roam around a bit in a mess, and the frame is brought in as a way to focus the mess in a way where the composition best resonates. Ultimately, my hope is that these paintings say something about each of the texts that I can't quite say with words.

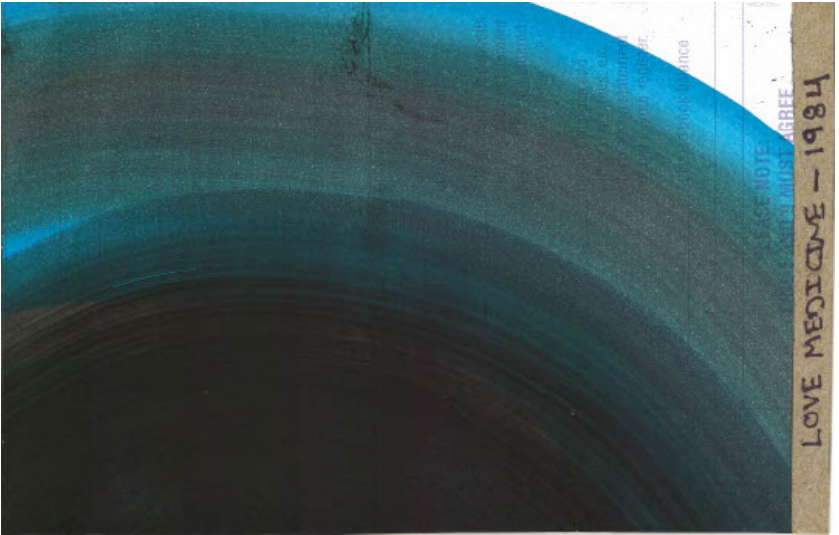
Naked Lunch



Minima Moralia



Love Medicine



Casey Fuller is just a regular old PhD student at the University of North Dakota. He's from Olympia, Washington.

Two Photographs

Chad Erickstad

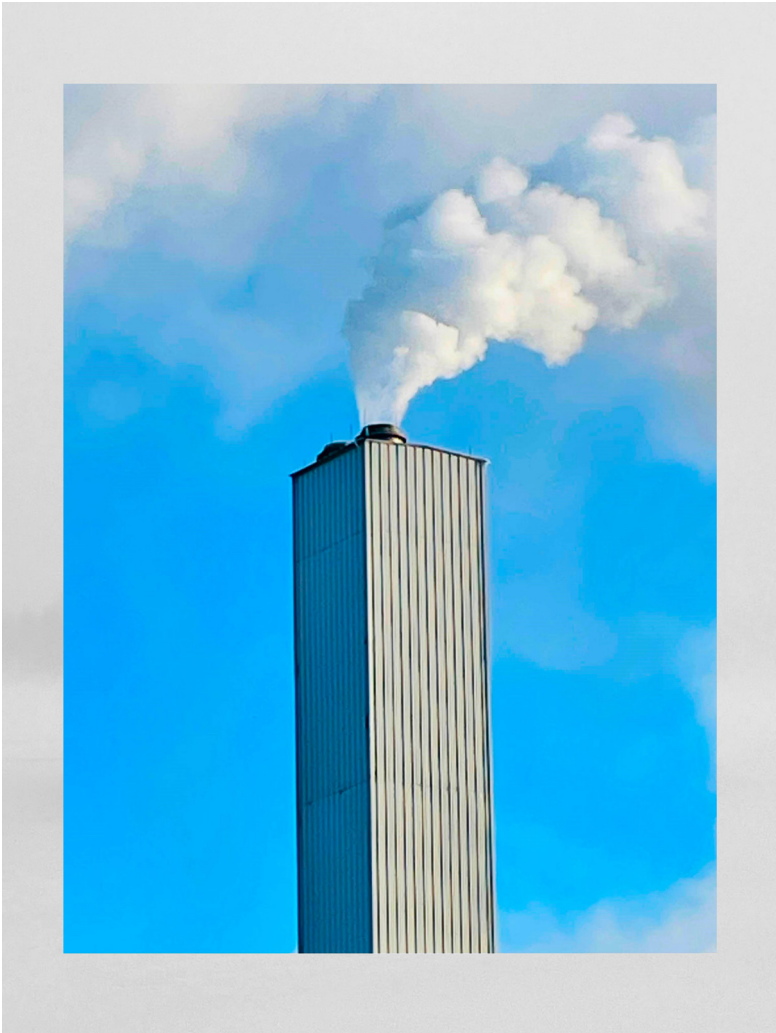
Photographer's Statement

The world we experience is constantly evolving; yet many of our experiences are universal through time. I use photography to capture these universal moments as well as the ones unique to our moment in history. I find nature to be a fertile subject, often at its most brutal or its most serene. I am also interested in ways we have shaped nature and architecture to function for our modern needs and meet our current definition of "aesthetically pleasing."

Tree-Lined



Solus



Chad Erickstad is a senior majoring in English with a minor in communications.

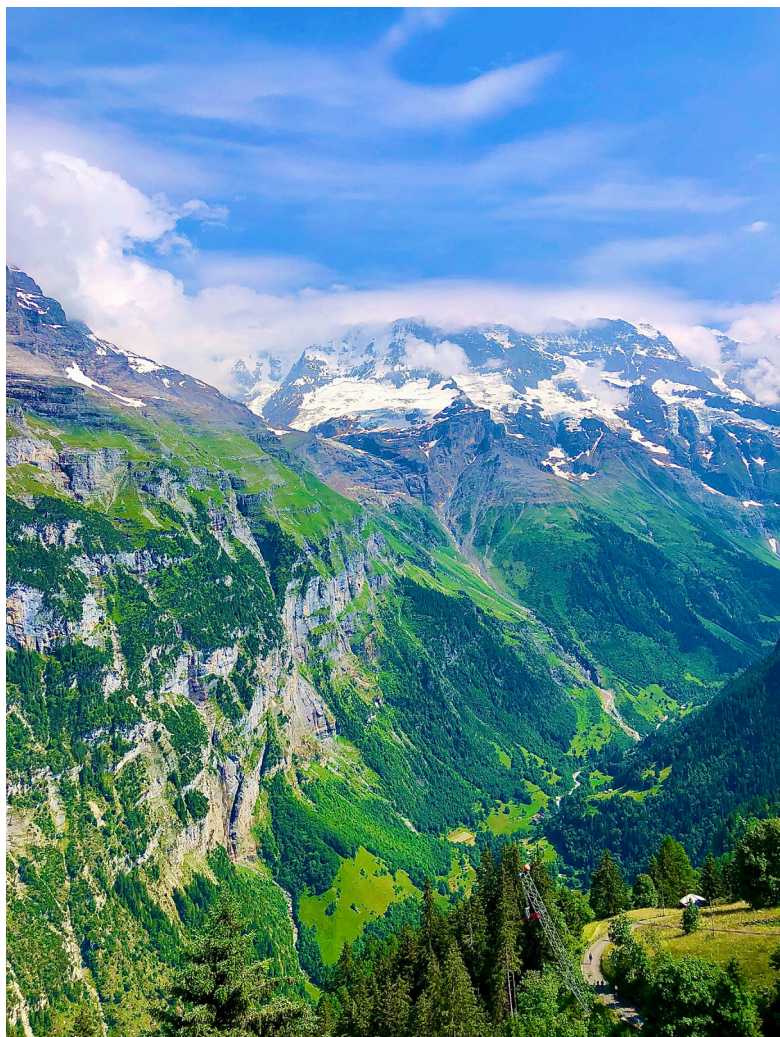
Two Photographs

Jonathan Sladko

Photographer's Statement

I love traveling, and I hope to make it an integral part of my life by getting a job as a commercial pilot in the future. I also love capturing the beauty of the world as I see it while traveling: full of vibrant colors, awe-inspiring scenery, and diverse cultures. I hope my photography is able to capture the world as I see it, so that I may share it with you.

Bernese Oberland



Teddy Roosevelt National Park



Jonathan Sladko is a writer, poet, and photographer from Alaska seeking adventure in the Lower 48. He is currently double majoring in commercial aviation and English at the University of North Dakota. He hopes to publish his novel before he graduates.

Four Paintings

Nicholas Baldwin

Artist's Statement

I question conventional boundaries through a series of action and reaction, a safari between permanence and transience, interrogating whether paper is shaped forever. Pulp painting promises a negotiation of form while carrying abstraction. My intention is to evoke that magic certitude borne of a dedicated approach.

Having caught some idea, I broaden it with weird fibers, give the thing depth, complete a cycle of reasoning by returning to the starting point in a way a sculptor might imagine the pose of a figure hidden in a lump of stone. By marrying feeling and intellect, I find a facility of control. This is what artist's work and child's play have in common: at their fullest they're experiences of being lost in the present.

When the pieces are dried and removed from the blotter, I'm amazed. Courting, as it were, the paper. Did I really assist in some small way this object d'art come to be? Floating on the cushioning bosom of tradition, the whimsy of tangential improvisation, how is it I have been present for such creation? How?

Papermaking is a goopy chaos of an alchemical process. It is a mess. I know what I said; I don't know what you heard.

Dominoes



Imitating



Marbled Frog Wood Cut



Summer School



Nicholas Baldwin is a PhD student in the English Department at the University of North Dakota. He was born and raised in New York.

nonfiction

Molcajete

Charles Henry

I remember the black bowls at the Mexican restaurant. They were pocked. Rough dark plastic. Knock-offs with no pestle. One of the endless tacky things to buy in the early 90s. The things millennials are so fond of now, as they near 40. I thought they were cut from lava, but, then again, I was young enough that I still believed in the magic which would be killed sometime later before moving out of my parents' two-story farmhouse and into a one-bedroom flip for a person I thought was the answer to an unrealized and unearned displaced anger masquerading as love. Chi-Chi's, the brand you sometimes see in dilapidated Kmart's, with flickering lights somewhere in the back accentuating the coffee-and-cigarette-stained colored floors like the teeth of a mid-twenty-something before the fear of cancer was compounded with the proliferation whitening strips. It used to be a chain, Chi-Chi's. Across from it, a decade after we saw those black bowls, my older brother worked in the Spencer Gifts, a store that if not for sex toys and a thriving nationwide then-illegal weed network would've had that same flickering yellow light as those dilapidated stores. He would boast that "if you were cool" the bartenders at Chi-Chi's wouldn't card. That place died in 2003. Chi-Chi's, that is, not Kmart or Spencer's. All that's left of those black bowls lives in a memory of my parents' home.

My Dad must've worked hard back then. I don't have a lot of memories of

him doing much other than coming home, showering, and then sitting in front of the TV before and after dinner. I do remember eating at the table with him some mornings and most nights. I do remember the time that he walked into my first-grade classroom after school one day to correct Mrs. McLain's insistence that my inability to pronounce s's and t's stemmed from a general lack of trying or from a personal attack on the teacher herself. She had a tough-love approach, but my dad was just tough. A week later I was in Mrs. William's class. She played the piano for us, sometimes.

The thing about rust is that it never stops coming after it starts. Rain, water, a spec of unprotected metal is all you need. Then there's just never getting back to what was, especially when you add salt to the problem. It rains a lot in the valley where I'm from. It's almost ironic that water creates dust, but the best thing you can do is to cut it out and replace it. Most people don't. They just let time creep up until it's all just rust and there's nothing to do but let it rot.

My mother used to make *Salsa Con Queso* in those bowls. More correctly, she cut a block of Velveeta in to chunks and crushed it down into a jar of Pace with a wooden spoon, then melted it for seven minutes on high. After the cheese substitute dissolved into the salsa, she ladled it out into four black pocked bowls, the remainder going to my father. We had it once a week. On Sundays, we watched *seaQuest DSV* and *Earth 2* to mark the special occasion of the *Salsa Con Queso*. I was afraid of *Earth 2*. It was a show about finding a new Earth after we ruin this one, but the new Earth is already inhabited. I promised myself, at 9 or 10 years old, that when I grew up I would eat *Salsa Con Queso*, and fruit roll-ups, every night of the week.

As one of those aging millennials, I don't eat queso every night, and I don't think I've had a fruit snack since I moved away from that new dollar store built at Market and 4th, when I lived in the valley. I used to walk over to it with five dollars, some of it in change. I'd buy a pack of fruit rollups or a pack of Marb Lights. Or other things that reminded me of better times. Whatever I could afford to help get me through the day. I suppose many people there did the same. We were just the kids of rust belt retirees. 55-year-old Walmart greeters, hoping that their pension from the mill would get un-fucked so they'd finally be able to start living.

Charles Henry is a second-year PhD student in the English Department. He's from the Ohio valley originally, but moved out to the University of North Dakota in the Fall of 2020. In his graduate work, he is interested in secular and composition theory, but in his writing he is very interested in the generative and craft qualities of creative nonfiction and poetry.

I Remember Walking

Chad Erickstad

I remember walking home as a six-year-old along the side of a narrow, icy highway. Well, *almost* home. For miles I walked, alone in the midst of a frigid North Dakota winter.

I missed the bus. Well, I missed the *second* bus. At the end of every school day I got on a bus at Minnie H Elementary (named after a steamboat that operated on the weedy local lake from 1883 to 1908) and rode it to the high school, where I transferred to a second bus that took me to my home located approximately five miles from the edge of town. I did this as a first grader.

I was confused as I walked along the long line of buses idling bumper to bumper outside the front of the high school. The buses were waiting for children, waiting to bring them to their homes. The buses grumbled as clouds of exhaust drifted up between them, as games of tic-tac-toe were etched into the insides of their frosty windows by tiny fingers. I remember not seeing the second bus, the one with the big black 12 (or 34 or 17 or 26). I didn't know what to do.

I remember that this happened in 1976. A small child managing a bus transfer without assistance was a nonissue then. Children had freer rein, less supervision in 1976. Young children roamed the town as strays or in packs.

1976 was the United States' bicentennial year, 200 years old. I was told this was very important. Many television commercials used this anniversary as a way to stir patriotic fervor to sell products. I remember the Fourth of July celebration at my grandparents' house on the lake. I was allowed to stay up later than usual. Grownups were drinking and smoking and laughing. I watched kaleidoscopic fireworks burst open like expanding universes across the dusk-darkened sky from a boat in the middle of a bay. I watched golden embers float down from the sky. I heard the sizzle as they touched the lake and were extinguished.

I was the oldest of two boys. My parents were very young. My mother was barely out of high school, still 18 years old when I was born. I remember doing the math to see if I was conceived while she was still in high school. She had graduated before this, but just barely. It never occurred to my green parents that I would ever miss my bus. I had not been prepared for such an event.

My father worked as an electrician for my mother's father's electrical business in 1976. Later, he would own a separate electrical business alongside my mother's sister's husband. He was at work every weekday until early evening. My mother worked nights as an aid at a nursing home in 1976. Many more women were entering the workforce. Later, she would become an RN and work for decades at the town's only hospital, working days and nights at two-week intervals during the early part of her career.

My mother was at home the day I missed the second bus, waiting.

I remember seeing Bill. He had also missed the second bus. Bill was older. He was Black and he had an intellectual disability. I don't remember thinking he was different. He was Bill, and he rode my bus, and he also missed it that day. I asked him what he intended to do. I don't remember using those exact words. I don't remember how I worded the question. I don't even remember asking the question. I infer that I asked the question because I remember what Bill told me. He told me he was going to walk home.

I don't remember Bill after that.

I do remember talking to Bill and walking carefully along the highway, but nothing between. Cars that passed on my left side slowed down and veered widely, giving me space, a fine spray of slush spattering from each tire. Heads floating above headrests turned to look back at me as

they passed.

I remember that. And I remember a guy in a pickup truck stopping, asking if I wanted a ride, talking to me through the rolled-down passenger window from behind the steering wheel. This occurred just past the airport, which is located approximately two miles from town, three miles from my home. I don't remember what he looked like, what the pickup truck looked like. I don't remember turning him down, but I did, because I remember where he stopped to talk to me, just past the airport, and I remember walking along the highway farther past the airport and just past Scott Senger's house.

I remember Scott Senger. He played goalie on the hockey team, and he blinked a lot. He also occasionally blinked hard, in a kind of spasm. He was an aggressive blinker. Scott Senger was two years younger than me, my little brother's age. Scott Senger's house was the last in a line of six or eight houses that skirted the far side of the highway. I couldn't have known Scott Senger then, he would have only been four years old. Actually, I never knew Scott Senger. I just remember him. He played goalie, he blinked a lot, and he lived in a house that was past the spot where I didn't get into a pickup truck when I was six years old.

Another vehicle stopped to offer me a ride after the pickup truck. This happened just past Scott Senger's house. There was a family in the vehicle. There were two older kids, maybe three, in the vehicle. I think this made me more comfortable, more willing to get in. But I don't quite remember. I don't remember what the family looked like or what the vehicle looked like either, but I remember getting in and that it was warm and that there was a family: a dad, a mom, and some kids, older than me. The dad was driving, and I got in the backseat with the kids. I think there were two kids, but I don't quite remember.

I don't remember telling the dad where to drive, the final mile-and-a-half between where I got in the vehicle and home, but I do remember arriving home. The garage door was open. I walked into the garage through the open garage door and entered the house.

I remember Mom being loud. Not in a bad way, in a relieved way. Mom talked loudly to someone, the other mom or the dad. I don't remember which, maybe both. And I remember that Mom was much louder than she, he, or they were.

I don't remember anything after that.

*

My mother remembers that day differently.

My mother remembers waiting for her seven-year-old to arrive home from school on a mild autumn day. For some time she waited, feeling shaken, then irate, then helpless.

My mother watched from the kitchen window as the school bus passed her house without stopping, the bus that should have dropped off her oldest child. She was confused. She called Prairie View Elementary, the school her oldest child attended in the second grade, the school she moved her oldest child to after first grade to be closer to a day care he could walk to, when needed, after school. She remembers talking to Lyle Hoff, the school district's transportation director, after the bus passed her house without stopping.

My mother remembers Lyle Hoff. He was the father of Jeff Hoff, whom she also remembers. Jeff Hoff was a year younger than her oldest child. She watched Jeff Hoff play hockey with her oldest child. Jeff Hoff was short and solid and physical on the ice. During his senior year in high school, her oldest child played on the team's first line and Jeff Hoff played on the team's second.

My mother yelled at Lyle Hoff the day the school bus passed her house without stopping, without dropping off her oldest child.

My mother was told by Lyle Hoff that the buses were delayed that day at Prairie View. That was why her oldest child missed the second bus. The first bus ran late, causing him to miss the second bus. My mother felt panic. She was afraid to leave the house.

My mother remembers that this happened in 1977. A small child managing a bus transfer without assistance was a nonissue then. Children had freer rein, less supervision in 1977. Young children roamed the town as strays or in packs.

1977 was the year *Star Wars* was released into theaters. Many television commercials used the movie's action sequences to stir fervor in children, provoking them to beg for action figures and toys molded to resemble the movie's characters, vehicles, and accessories. My mother went to the movie at the downtown theater with my father and her two small children. She stayed up later than usual. She saw people devouring popcorn by fistfuls and sucking on sodas from long straws. She heard the jibber-jabbering thrum of children and adolescents in the lobby before the movie. She bought *Star Wars* action figures and toys for her sons'

birthdays and Christmases for several more years following that night.

My mother doesn't remember if she tried calling my father after the school bus passed her house without stopping. She remembers talking to Lyle Hoff and she remembers when her missing child arrived home. She doesn't remember anything between. A vehicle slowly turned into the driveway and crawled up the gravel slope to the garage. Seconds later her missing child entered the house.

My mother remembers the relief she felt. She wished the family had come into the house with her oldest son so she could have thanked them.

My mother doesn't remember anything after that.

I remember talking to my mother about this incident, many years later. We were amused by the differences in our memories of that day, how my memory of the icy highway and frosty bus windows contrasts with her memory of the mild weather: "I remember there were leaves on the ground," she told me. "I don't remember being worried about the cold."

It was an enjoyable conversation, a good way to catch up on things. We laughed a lot, as I remember. I wonder how she remembers it.

Chad Erickstad is a senior majoring in English with a minor in communications.

Escaping the Iron Maiden

Drake Carnes

Did you ever have a person that you just could not stand and almost hated, purely based off their reputation and how those around you perceived them? That's how I saw myself and genuinely couldn't see anything else. I was this strange figure that could never fit in and hated who I was, based solely on what others and those around me enjoyed saying very vocally.

Growing up, I considered the way my family behaved and saw things to be "The Normal." It wasn't until much later that I became all too aware that the way my mother raised us was far from "The Normal" for most people. While most were taking family trips to Disneyland every few years, mine was taking regular excursions to metal and punk concerts and festivals throughout the year, like the time we saw the Ramones or saw Linkin Park at Warped Tour. Most people had respectful interactions or conversations with their parents, our conversations with our mother went more like; "Hey, can I go out with a few friends to Target?"

"Yeah, but if I get a call from the cops, I'm ignoring it."

"Fuck off, we're not doing anything that you would."

That way of life and that way of being raised made sense to me, and it was all I knew until I started to get older and neared middle school. It's said that middle school is where the most change in one's life starts, and mine started to change a lot in ways that most wouldn't see that early in life. I started to see my life and my family's way of life to be weird and "The

Abnormal”, as those around me began to point it out to me.

As sixth grade came to a close, and I began to enter middle school, things were changing around me with those that I had been sharing a class with for the last four years. It was as if someone had come around and found the giant switch that flipped everyone’s opinion on me around, from “he’s alright,” to “he sucks and needs to know we hate him”. Out of what I perceived as nowhere, I was a social pariah and needed to be left on the fringes of the social hierarchy that was quickly being established within my middle school. The idea of me having a crush on someone became something to mess with others about and would garner a disgusted outrage from any girl that was insinuated to be the target of some perceived affection. I became the target of round rubber rockets at dodgeball in PE class, regardless of if I was still in or out. I had several hiding spots, my favorite being the small space beneath the staircase in the back of the gymnasium. This space that looked like a void in the world became my own personal void, where I could just be and exist rather than trying and failing to put up a façade to those around me. Where this space once felt cramped and tight when trying to hide from my chasers, I soon grew to find a solace and comfort within the cramped space that few, if any spaces gave. It had become a place where I could be left alone to read in peace instead of my book being taken from me, forcing me to give chase to several people just to get it back.

This drained me more every day.

Among the things my classmates would do and say to me was the enthusiastic revelation that I was weird. I was a strange person with an even stranger family, and nobody cared about the stuff we did and how nobody did that stuff. It became a regular reminder that I would always be this weird kid, no matter where I was to go, I wouldn’t fit in. No, I couldn’t fit in, and I couldn’t see a way to even try, because I was so innately weird and strange and the way I was raised had everything to do with that. All I had left were my books, and my rides home on the bus listening to Blink-182 *Greatest Hits* album, replaying songs like “Adam’s Song” and “Down” over and over again.

A few months into seventh grade, I had begun to go home every day with words echoing in my head as I would board myself up into my bedroom and wonder what happened. That room would become an almost emotional iron maiden as it enveloped me in a hard shell that would protect me from anything on the outside. But I would learn too late that

it was filled with sharpened spikes to destroy me completely. That room holds many memories that I still can recall very vividly; some good, others not. I remember excitedly reading the recently published *The Battle of the Labyrinth* by Rick Riordan or *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman, I just as well remember discovering the crimson river that I could make flow down my arms and would break open that dam many times over the next few years.

When you get really good at hiding physically you can quickly transfer that knowledge to hiding emotionally. That is if those around you even want to see it or even see you as you are. This was the case with my father. He never saw me as me but saw me as what he wanted me to be. He seemed infuriated that I was never that. This would lead to the next chapter of an otherwise already rather tragic story as I started eighth grade.

When you're hated by your own flesh and blood for what you are and told you shouldn't be that, it leads you to do things you wouldn't otherwise. I was desperate to have someone want me, so I began to change myself to be a sport loving athlete that my father wanted his son to be. This would cause me to join the football team of my middle school, begrudgingly, as I fought with myself to be the son I had convinced myself I should've been. It becomes very easy to make small mistakes when you never actually cared about what you were doing in the first place. When you break a bone and are rather young and relatively new to broken bones and major injuries, they will prescribe you painkillers to take, which is the true start of this next chapter.

I started to take painkillers for my foot as I recuperated from this broken bone, and I began to notice something. While creating physical harm to myself proved a great way to distract from the emotional draining and pain of where I was, that was starting to wear off as I grew a higher tolerance for pain. I then learned that if you take enough painkillers in quick enough succession, everything goes numb as you suddenly just barely exist. I could make my mind go empty and all thoughts and memories associated with any treatment from that day would disappear and my body wouldn't feel anything. I took more and more, and eventually days without them began to feel groggy and I didn't like feeling anything so taking the painkillers kept that up without feeling like shit without them. I had become addicted and let myself be hollow and emotionless all by the age of thirteen. This addiction would lead me to one of my most vivid memories within that iron maiden room, and one of the lowest points that

many don't reach until their late twenties and early thirties.

My memories leading up to it are fuzzy and incomplete, almost like the actual moment has claimed all the ram for that day. Flashes of words being pelted at me like stones, words like *Dumbass*, *Fuckhead*, and *Dipshit*. A quiet bus ride home staring out the window curled up on my bench alone, not even listening to music. Opening the front door, to see only the path down the hall and into my bedroom like being in a video game where they won't let you move around and go anywhere besides the plot point. The moment I sit on my bed everything is suddenly clear like watching a video tape that was smudged and suddenly hitting a clean part of the tape. The bottle in my hand. Open. With a sea of pills in it, as I tilt my head back like I would copy later when I discover shots as the pills tumble down like rain falling on my tongue as I fall back down on the bed in a lulled sleep.

You know those dreamless sleeps where you're almost aware that you're sleeping but all you're in is dark and you are unable to move or breathe? That's what I was in. It would've been the best sleep I had if I wasn't trying to have a different result. I would eventually wake up to a yelling voice several hours later, as my eyes flutter open to see the empty bottle in my bed beside my head and pillow with my father saying something about food and not being a bum. Sitting up and rubbing the recently developed throbbing headache away, as the reality of my failure (my thought at time) settled in. This pattern and cycle would continue for several months with several more attempts at rectifying what I saw as a failure. I kept trying until I met a very specific person.

To this day I don't know her name, and I'm pretty sure I never will. I'm okay with that now, but she came into my life like a whirlwind blowing everything around and out of place and left just as quickly. In 2013, I was going to the Vans Warped Tour with my mother and sisters like we did every year which had become one of the few things I ever looked forward to anymore at this point of my life. I was excited to see Goldfinger and Reel Big Fish later in the night as they were the headliners for their respective stages, but the entire day was filled with bands I had been wanting to see like Big D and the Kids Table and Bowling for Soup, and bands that I would first find out about at this show like Ice Nine Kills and Beebs and her Money Makers. Early in the day I was in the crowd waiting for New Years Day to come out to their stage and I had maneuvered myself up near the front as I bumped into a girl with curly brown hair that ran down

to the small of her back. She turned around as I instantly began to profusely apologize to her. She just looked me up and down for a second and smiled and pointed down. "That's an awesome shirt."

She said, her finger directing to the skull logo that had become known as the fiend from the band Misfits on my shirt, that had become a go-to to wear to concerts. That opened a moment as we started to talk while waiting for the band to come out. All we talked about was music for a moment. Which bands we were excited to see, which ones we hadn't heard of but wanted to check out and who we wanted to see most of the headliners. Her blue eyes sparkled like a sun-soaked ocean, filled with more excitement with each band name she listed off, and began to talk about bands that weren't even at the Warped Tour that year, but she still wanted to see. Just as New Years Day came out, we had agreed to go to each other's choices for bands and we did just that.

I took her to Ice Nine Kills and Anarbor, and she took me to Motion City Soundtrack and Crown the Empire. All the while we just talked and got to know one another between sets. Halfway through the day I realized I wasn't putting on a façade anymore, and hadn't been for all this time, but was being genuinely me without having to alter myself in some way and she didn't walk away. If anything, she kept wanting to know more and hear about my life and all the stuff I had done with my family up to that point, I loved hearing about her love for music and concerts but limited chances to go to any. She spoke with such a passion that couldn't be faked and it was easy to get lost in that passion and want to give that energy right back to her. We talked like this until in the mosh pit for Goldfinger at the end of the night, as the bodies bounced around us and we threw ourselves back into them suddenly a surge of movement came up behind us and split us apart with a sea of people between us and I never got the chance to look for her as the venue was shutting down for the night. My brain no longer felt trapped within itself. I had slipped out of the iron maiden and hadn't even realized it till the day was over when we were back at the hotel room with my father. That night I looked in the mirror of the hotel bathroom and saw someone I hadn't seen in five years. It took me a moment to recognize them.

They had grown and their hair was longer and framing their face, but the face was the biggest change. It had looked happy again for the first time in an even longer time, I knew I wanted to see that more, and I knew that was me. It was the truest and most genuine version of myself I

had seen in those five years, and it was one of the most welcoming sights I had seen in such a long time. I had found someone who liked the weirdness and the abnormal parts of me and my family and I wanted to be the person who did again. I knew that the addiction was the last thing helping me with that.

This day I would become tired of it all: the failures, the attempts, the lack of pain, and I was ready to be done with it all. I found myself standing over a toilet as I poured the last of painkillers down and watched as the pills swirled around and sank away from my life. I had nearly destroyed my life, and stalled it for many years regardless, based on things that others saw or thought while they never even truly knew me. I reached a point where I truly no longer cared what others saw in me or my life. Yes, I can say that I am weird, and my upbringing was not "The Normal," and I love my strangeness and I wouldn't want it any other way.

***creative writing
scholarship winners***

Three Poems

Maren Schettler

Winner of the 2024 Gladys Boen Scholarship

7am breakfast

Three women—college students—
Met that morning before dawn.
One of the friends had a kitchen
Just large enough for the three of them.
The other housemates were still sleeping,
But that didn't keep the three from making
Blueberry lemon waffles.
They chatted softly at first.
With quiet smiles and hushed steps,
They filed in and began what each was good at.
One cleaned as one mixed as one made coffee.
They enjoyed the sounds of cupboards closing
And of clinks and clicks of utensils,
As each part did its work.
There was no rush,
But they finished soon enough.
Light streamed in through the kitchen door and

Stretched to warm the women's feet
Under the kitchen table.
They sat close in the nook,
Each silently grateful for the others—
Thankful for this simple morning
Set aside for simple joy.

You must whisper this poem

Hope, grief, and other necessary things
Have little bearing
To the one without hands free to serve
Without eyes that really see
Without tears that tell the truth:
I can't do this on my own.

Ego

Every creator has a bit of an ego.

All just a little pretentious, saying we've created something no one created before or has ever been capable of the unique genius housed in our delicate skulls.

Because we're unique. Which we are.

But I am not naive enough to believe that I could create something no one has ever dreamed of.

You can call me a cynic or a fool, I don't mind.

I suppose I believe that we are all uniquely created for a specific purpose, perhaps one that only I can carry out, God as my strength.

But to *do* or *be* or *create* something no one has before?

That I believe has only happened once, when there was nothing, and in the glorious splendor of a few words, there was everything.

And when it happened, the Creator's creation screwed everything up so badly—

and he even offered a way for things to be new again, at his own cost—

and yet he's the one who gets screwed in the process:

He doesn't get credit for his work.

But for a creation so beautiful, and intimately known, he can't help but love them.

It's only his nature.

For me to assert my creative genius as a mark of my own authority in this world is pure comic—a worm has the same right to claim such a thing next to me, but who would believe him?

When we create, we use *his* materials and *his* motifs.

We use land and seas and air to create worlds,

or maybe skies and galaxies and clouds, even if we name them different things.

We use humans and animals and hybrids and mutants—things the world has never seen—

But, with the DNA he created and wrote into existence.

We write symphonies with his molecules and sound waves and essence of beauty.

All we do is plagiarize.

We sure create some beautiful things with His materials . . .

It makes sense if we are some of those materials . . .

If I resign myself to that, it takes the pressure off.

We sure create some beautiful things.

This is me, citing my sources.

Maren Schettler is a senior studying English, music, and political science. She loves the outdoors and enjoys camping and hiking with friends and family. While in school, there is no end to her frustration with the lack of leisure reading time. Her boxer dog Pacha is her favorite reading buddy.

어 리 다

Veronika Linstrom

*Winner of the 2024 Thomas McGrath Award in Poetry
Runner-up, 2024 Gladys Boen Scholarship*

she says eat up as if it's the simplest thing in the world and it really is but you can't seem to understand that you've never understood it not in the easy way that she does because by god all you do is stare at your fettuccine like a fucking freak who thinks the light graze of your gaze is enough nutrients for one day even when the hopeless look in her eyes tells you it's not and logically you know that but logic doesn't work for you it's never worked for you even when it's plain and simple because you feel too much and overthink stupid shit like that broken faucet that can't stop leaking you can't stop thinking but they're not even smart thoughts they're just junk all junk and holy fuck can you stop staring at your noodles like that like they're some figure from your nightmares coming to haunt you and just eat the DAMN food she made for you without crying about it why the HELL are you crying she slaved over this for you and here you are dirtying it with your tears your STUPID GODDAMN CRYBABY tears that can't ever stop because your faucet is broken and YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO FIX IT god why can't you just fucking eat like YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO she's just trying to keep you alive and yeah SHE DOESN'T LOVE YOU but at least she's feeding you at least she's keeping you around why can't you SUCK IT UP and eat already

A note about the title:

어 리 다 (pronounced eo-ri-da) is a Korean verb that can refer to the gathering or welling up of tears in one's eyes, or one being filled with energy or emotion.

Veronika Linstrom is an undergraduate student at UND pursuing a bachelor's degree in English. After they graduate, Veronika hopes to pursue their passion for writing and become an author. In their free time, Veronika can be found scribbling down ideas for their next piece or with their nose in a good book.

Two Poems

Jasmine Patera

Runner-up, 2024 Thomas McGrath Award

Aglaura & Cidippe Warn Their Captive Sister

Pacing, wounded wolf—
 howl at the one outside the cage.

Rivers of blood and tears wasted
to sate the monster Eros.

Decorate your fur with pretty things;
flowers, ribbons covering

countless scars. Bite back;
 The food he feeds is tainted.

Starve if you must.

Son of Abraham

He presses the knife to pale flesh;
ignores my cries like the bleating ram.
If I must die, why this?

Why his stony face? No tears?
The man I called father puts me to the altar
Bound; not one comforting lie

Angel, deliver me—
I can scarcely believe
the cruelty of it all!

I scream as the blade draws
the first bead of blood, before
the angel grabs his hand away.

God hath provided the sacrifice
but as the heavens feast on smoke
the presence of Him is unknown to me.

I avoid his eyes as he guides me home.
I now know—the shepherd may love the lamb,
but only until he is hungry.

Jasmine Patera is from Mandan, North Dakota. She enjoys writing poetry and can often be found with her nose stuck in a book. She is inspired by the works of Emily Dickinson and Mary Oliver. Jasmine is pursuing a degree in English with a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing at the University of North Dakota, where she is also a member of the Writing Club. She hopes to one day pursuing a career in editing as a member of a publishing house.

The Imbalance That Saved Tatsuki

Cadence Gray

Winner of the 2024 John Little Scholarship

Winter's end brought the promise of spring and the gift of life to the Yakashita family.

The countryside was free of snow, soon to be decorated with florets and lightened with the gay music of birds. The weather was fickle, yet perfectly inviting for a new baby. As flowers prepared to bloom, they awaited their turn to shine amidst the lush green countryside. Vibrant hydrangeas, delicate chrysanthemums, and fragrant plum blossoms would soon join the lively display of roses, peonies, and tulips. Amidst the sea of color, pink carnations, marigolds, camellias, and hibiscus flowers would catch the eye, each vying for attention among the many dazzling blooms.

Born on a vibrant Wednesday morning to Kayoko and Tomohiro Yakashita, Tatsuki Yakashita came into the world accompanied by the sweet song of the bush warbler. In that moment, a warm golden light seemed to embrace the house, as if welcoming her arrival. She exuded radiant beauty with her striking dragon-like eyes and soft wisps of dark hair on her head. Many would say that she was the most beautiful child that they'd ever seen, but her beauty went unnoticed by those whose eyes mattered the most.

If not for her chronically ill sister, perhaps Tatsuki's parents would have treated her like their daughter, too.

She was minuscule in her parents' eyes, and that was what shoved

her down the path of wrongdoing. She was desperate for any form of attention. She watched her sister get showered with affection, only to be shoved aside like she didn't matter.

Could you imagine what that does to a kid?

Nanami, Tatsuki's older sister, was always the promising one. Their parents yearned for wealth and to live in splendor. With a gift as precious as Nanami, they were certain they'd get what they wanted in no time.

Tatsuki was never a candidate for them. She was too *Tatsuki*—too *herself*, and when the realization set upon her as a teen, it buried her deeper beneath the heated sand of insecurities. Nanami was perfect. She'd been guaranteed a husband before she was born, and their parents' main focus was nursing her to health before she had to be sent off for marriage.

The Yakashitas pre-devoted thirteen years to Nanami before she was born, yet they dared to bring another child into the world? They prayed at Nanami's bedside every night, begging God to lift the curse he had bestowed upon their darling child. She was their savior. Their claim to riches and fame.

They cried out, "If not Nanami, then who?" because certainly Tatsuki wasn't their ticket to success. She didn't have a suitor. No one begged for her hand like they did Nanami's. They didn't need her, and they certainly didn't have the patience for another body in their home, so when Tatsuki was old enough to begin school, she was sent to Nagoya, forced to live with her alcoholic uncle, who was never home if his eyes were open.

Tatsuki was perched on the windowsill, plucking at the threads of her skirt and wishing for freshly squeezed orange juice. To her, orange juice was more than a simple drink; it was a feeling that she hadn't experienced in a while. It was like finally finding the perfect flowers to fill up vases with—something that seemed impossible until it wasn't.

From her spot, Tatsuki could see the silhouette of buildings in the distance. She knew they were different from the ones on her side of town—luxurious apartments with marble flooring and big windows that allowed sunlight to pour through them. They probably had their own washing machines and dryers, and Tatsuki would have bet that each apartment had a gold chandelier.

The shabby apartment that she sat in couldn't have been more dif-

ferent: water dripping from old pipes, furniture drenched in shadows, and cobwebs stretching across every corner of each room. There was a lack of color in the apartment. The yellow walls of her bedroom were water-stained from leaks, and her bedding was a dingy brown instead of its original purple.

For once, Tatsuki wanted to venture to the other side of the city. She wasn't greedy, and she wouldn't have gone overboard. She'd have basked in the glory of sleeping in a clean, quiet space for once. She wanted to sleep in a real bed again, one that had a real bedframe, not one supported with cinderblocks and wooden pallets. She would appreciate every second of it if she had the opportunity, and she would wash it down with a nice glass of orange juice.

The sound of voices filled the air and shaped the city outside of her window. Tatsuki scooted closer to the edge, curiously minding the business of the wind. Voices yelling at one another, music playing on speakers, and cars honking their horns as they drove by all blended together into an urban symphony that spoke louder than words ever could. Tatsuki listened carefully to these sounds, as if trying to decipher what secrets they held within them. Nature too had its own voice—vines snaking up walls, flowers blooming against concrete barriers—bringing life where there once was none.

Finally, amidst all these noises, came a gentle hum—sweet and innocent like freshly squeezed orange juice spilling over lips—promising hope for days yet to come even when everything else felt lost. It was the most calming music ever, something Tatsuki wasn't used to.

Her uncle was a hard-rocker who played heavy metal. If not drunk on the couch, he could be found hunkered over his laptop with drool spilling over his keyboard, blasting Seikima-II.

"It's Blossom Dearie!" a voice called. "And you're going to be late for school."

Tatsuki rushed from the window and straightened her skirt. She pulled her rucksack over her shoulders and skipped out of the apartment. Again, like always, her nosy neighbor was the one to remind her to head out for school. She was the one to tell Tatsuki to stop once she reached the ground floor to brush the cat hair from her uniform.

Her name was Joyce Perry, and she was an international student at Nagoya University of the Arts. Tatsuki was infatuated with her and want-

ed to be just like her. She was beautiful, tall, and slender, and everyone seemed to love her—including Tatsuki.

“What did I say about messing with stray cats, Suki?”

“You said don’t do it,” Tatsuki muttered.

“No,” Joyce said, shaking her head. “I said be careful. Everyone and everything deserves love, some just from afar.”

Tatsuki’s mind moved a mile a minute, even faster than her eyes, which tried to take in everything around her at once.

There was a new boutique with bright lights surrounding its door, daring people to take a peek inside. Two high school girls sashayed in with their bags secure on their arms, and an older woman followed suit soon after.

It’s busy, Tatsuki concluded.

The bag lady wasn’t carrying as many bags as usual, and her step was unbalanced.

She got hurt . . .

A woman with a briefcase was holding the hand of a small boy with an oak-leather rucksack twice his size, scurrying across the street with her eyes glued to her watch. The clicking of her heels as she got further away was muted by horns honking and cars passing, shaking Tatsuki from her short-lived reverie.

She felt out of place in the bustling metropolis. Born in a rural part of Kyoto Prefecture and briefly raised in a villa surrounded by a lake and garden, Tatsuki felt significantly different here in Nagoya. It was not a place for a little girl like Tatsuki to be all alone. Maybe other kids would have been able to make it to school and back home safely, but everyone knew that there was only a matter of time before Tatsuki fell into the arms of peril.

She was far too fascinated with the little things around her to pay attention to the bigger things.

Tatsuki stood at the intersection, her eyes fixed on the traffic light. She was eager to cross the road, but it seemed like an eternity as she waited for the signal to change. Glancing at her watch, she furrowed her brows as it ticked three times.

Tick, tick, tick.

But still, the light remained stubbornly green. No transition to yellow, no flash of red, just a never-ending green.

It is a pretty color, though.

Tatsuki blinked, looking down at her rain boots. It reminded her of the green on her socks. The same socks with the bright, funky pattern that were hidden beneath her shiny boots. She was not supposed to wear her funky socks to school, but her mother was not around to remind her. Not even Joyce could remind her, as she was barely accustomed to general rules in Japan, let alone Tatsuki's school sock requirement.

So, Tatsuki wore the socks to school and prepared to receive her second strike.

She huffed and kicked her foot out, annoyed that she'd forgotten to wear her white socks again. If the light hadn't finally changed and she wasn't signalled to cross, she would have turned around and gone home. She didn't want to go to school anymore. Not when she'd screwed up *again*.

Tatsuki had been embarrassing herself at school a lot that month. She had already been yelled at for wearing the wrong socks twice. The second time, she wasn't allowed to attend any of her classes until she had on the proper socks. So, she had to walk back home to change socks, and her classmates laughed at her.

It didn't end there. Since she missed most of her classes, she was singled out the next day. She had to stand in front of the class and answer a plethora of questions spat at her by her classmates—mostly math problems—that they knew she couldn't answer. She managed to troop through most of them, not caring if she were right or wrong, but the last question brought forth an insecurity that had yet to fully reach the surface.

The question was, "What color do you associate with yourself?"

It was a weird question to ask in a math class, Tatsuki thought. She had a feeling she was being made fun of simply for existing, and she didn't want to answer it. She didn't really know how, and she was ashamed. She could come up with a color for everyone she knew. Her mother was a deep navy blue, like the depths of an ocean—cold and uninviting. She never felt any warmth or love from her mother, only bitterness and resentment that hung in the air like a fog.

Nanami had been sickly since birth, always struggling against something unseen but very real. Tatsuki often thought of her sister as a pale shade of green, one that blended into the background without making much noise or fuss. The same way her sister lived in their home when she

was still there—quiet and out of sight as much as possible so not to cause too much trouble.

And then there was her father. He was bright red, just like his temper, which could flare up at any moment without warning. He would yell and scream until everyone around him cowered away from him, afraid to be on the receiving end of his wrath again. But despite all this, Tatsuki still loved him deeply, even though he wasn't always able to show it back in return due to his own inner demons that plagued him day after day.

He was the first man she ever gave the benefit of the doubt.

As it came time for Tatsuki to share the color that she felt best represented herself, she hesitated before finally uttering "gray." Her words were met with confusion from those around her, as they had all chosen vibrant and lively colors. But Tatsuki couldn't bring herself to explain her choice. To them, gray may have seemed dull and lifeless, but to Tatsuki, it held a deeper meaning. It symbolized how she viewed herself—existing without leaving a trace of color in the world, yet still present in every situation, big or small.

She couldn't help but long for a touch of pink, a symbol of love and acceptance from her family. Perhaps then she would be able to find her true colors. But they never offered it, leaving her feeling invisible and unnoticed. Despite shining brightly everywhere else, her own home—the one she was shunned from—was the one place she wanted to truly matter.

Ah, but home is a place I cannot be, she sighed before smiling. Not right now, at least.

As a child, she held on to the hope of being welcomed back home. But as she grew older, she came to understand the difference between dreaming as a child and as an adult. While adults dream of things that are achievable, children often wish for the impossible.

Tatsuki shook her head, trying her best to rid herself of all thoughts. No more colors, and no more sulking over bad days. Whether she was about to walk headfirst into embarrassment or not, Tatsuki just wanted to get the day over with. With a newfound sense of confidence and excitement, she skipped happily down the street, determined to have a better day than the last.

As she got closer to her school building, Tatsuki smiled and showed off her new and carefully styled hair. Her bangs were perfectly curled, with

two blue clips holding them in place. She felt so pretty, and she longed for her parents to see her like that. As soon as school was over, she would visit them. She decided with a squeal.

Her excitement increased as she saw two cats curled up together on the other side of the road. Quickening her pace, Tatsuki squatted down and kissed the back of her teeth as she gently petted the pretty black feline. The cat purred contentedly, encouraging Tatsuki to take it home with her. But she knew she couldn't, so she bid the cat goodbye and headed towards her school. The wind picked up, blowing petals into the air and creating a beautiful dance as they twirled towards the nearby building.

Lost in her thoughts and the wind's performance of Swan Lake, Tatsuki suddenly remembered that she was supposed to be going to school. She broke into a sprint, kicking up water from the puddles as she ran. Finally arriving at the gates, she turned to look back at the cats, hoping they would still be there when school was

It was going to be a good day. She was going to be forgiven for her socks, and she wasn't going to be poked at in front of her classmates.

Tatsuki followed Mr. Hagashi back to the empty classroom, giggling softly as he ducked beneath the door frame to enter. Her smile immediately faltered as she remembered that she had just gotten scolded and was in trouble. She sighed and sat on the floor ahead of him, folding her legs beside her and straightening her skirt.

The air blew against her skin, sending chills down her spine. The sound of her classmates playing outside tickled her ears. She wished to be out there with them, running around, giggling, passing around sweet treats that they'd snuck in, and telling silly stories. She wondered what she'd done so badly that made not only her family but her peers at school do away with her presence. She couldn't tell if she was born to be disliked or if she'd unintentionally done something to make them feel that way about her—but she constantly thought about it.

Mr. Hagashi finally sat down and looked at Tatsuki, noticing the way her eyes immediately jumped from his.

She was nervous in his presence, finding herself interested in everything but him. Suddenly, the loose strands on her skirt were fascinating, and the coils of her bangs were the most suitable for glasses, so she used them to cover her eyes.

Mr. Hagashi had always been Tatsuki's favorite teacher. He was joyful

and easygoing, and she believed he had the beauty of a prince. He stood out from the rest of the teachers. Despite the fact that they were a mix of men and women who were either short and stocky or tall and thin, hardly any of them reached his height, and none of the men had enough bulk to beat Mr. Hagashi in an arm-wrestling match, either.

His visage was extremely distinct, dominated by his mother's western genes. It made the school's younger girls shriek with delight, which flattered him, to say the least. He was polite, but cocky. His attractiveness blinded young and old ladies, and he enjoyed the attention.

Until he noticed Tatsuki, that is.

He did not like how she didn't pay attention to him or anyone else. She was quiet, almost too quiet, and she constantly seemed to get herself into trouble.

However, Tatsuki did notice him. She noticed him, and she noticed how everyone else seemed to have at least one person they could smile at, except for her. She did not want to make it a habit of being caught staring at another with a look of loath, so she diverted her attention elsewhere every time.

"You know, Tatsuki, white socks are the rule, and this is the third time that I've had to remind you." Mr. Hagashi lectured softly.

Tatsuki sat crisscrossed on the floor before him, her uniform crisp and pristine. Her hair was wrapped in two braids, and her face was crumb-free. The only abnormality came from her bold socks, with a purple-colored paisley print standing out.

"However, I'll overlook it because they're quite lovely. You should wear these just for me because paisley print is my favorite."

"Okay..." Her voice was hushed, and her thoughts were hazy. She was perplexed. How could she wear them solely for him if she couldn't wear them to school? Why would she do that anyway? It didn't seem normal—besides, they were just socks. Nothing special.

"Take your legs out from under you," he politely said. "And please hand over your foot."

Tatsuki carefully uncurled her legs and stretched her left leg, quivering slightly when the man took her foot. Her father struck her in the face with such force that she bled the last time she broke a rule. She expected Mr. Hagashi to smack her for wearing the wrong socks, but she was taken aback by his gentle actions. She couldn't believe it. Was this the same

man who had yelled at her just moments ago, in front of her classmates, for wearing the wrong socks? She couldn't help but feel confused and a little frightened by his sudden change in demeanor. But as he continued to carefully adjust her socks, she couldn't deny the unexpected kindness in his actions.

He gingerly pulled the violet fabric from her skin and lightly caressed her foot before replacing it with a pristine white sock. He gestured for her next foot, then grabbed her hand and pulled her to his lap after repeating his previous action.

Tatsuki did not feel comfortable in the unwelcoming seat. She did not know much, but she could feel that his actions were not right. She tried to free herself from his hold, muttering "Stop" before his soft words halted her movements.

"Come on, Suka," said the teacher. "I'm doing it because I care about you." He smiled, well aware of the girl's plight at home. She was clearly ignored. Her hair was sustained and her clothes were neat, but her mind was on the verge of destruction, and it emanated from her parents' abandonment.

The very parents that were alive and present.

"You do?" she asked.

"Of course I do. Do you hear the pretty little nickname that I gave you, Suka? I don't award nicknames to just anyone, you know."

"S-so, I'm special?"

"You are, indeed, a very unique girl. I think about you all day when I get home. Do you love me too?" he asked as his hands trailed to the front of her blouse, peeling the buttons open.

She did not know if she loved him because she did not know what it felt like, but he said he loved her, and she believed in fairness. So, she nodded.

"And when two people love each other, they touch each other. Have you ever seen your mommy and daddy touch each other?"

"Y-yes . . ." Tatsuki replied. "And they touch Nanami too, but never me."

"That isn't right, my angel. If they don't love you, it's up to me to do so." He kissed her hair and inhaled the bubblegum aroma that arose from it. "You have to give me permission. If you don't unwrap your arms, you may never feel love. Suka, I want to adore you."

His words were sweet like caramel and had just the right amount of

sugar to lure a gullible girl. Tatsuki was stuck in his goop of lies, but she was young and impressionable, with no leading figure in her life to warn her of the strange man who came bearing candy. She stretched her arms and let her shirt fall to the floor, believing every word that came out of his mouth.

His hands were soft as they roamed her shoulders, leaving spurs of goosebumps behind. He was gentle, his actions matching his words and giving Tatsuki no reason to doubt him.

She never experienced something so soft, and she never felt so loved.

Is this how Mom and Dad treat Nanami when I'm not home? Is this love? Is it true that love is touch?

Like how Dad touches Mom and Nanami but does not touch me . . . Then, Mr. Hagashi really loves me!

A sudden gasp erupted in the room, sending Tatsuki to the floor. Mr. Hagashi stood to his feet and fixed his shirt before shifting on one foot, his eyes darting over to Tatsuki for the shortest second. He had been caught in a bad position, and the only way out of it was to run. Tatsuki watched as he scampered through the door, shoving the school's counselor out of the way. Tears welled in her eyes once he disappeared, taking with him the love he'd promised her. And for the nth-teenth time, she was all on her own.

She was so close to experiencing love for the first time.

"Tatsuki, are you okay?" Mrs. Kagiya asked, crouching in front of her with her shirt in her hand. "What did he do?"

"He loved me," she spat. "And now he is gone."

"Oh, Tatsuki, that is *not* love."

"It is!" Tatsuki shook her head. "And now he is gone!"

Within a few seconds, Tatsuki was gone too. Her feet had carried her out of the door and after Mr. Hagashi. The only things she left behind were her discarded floral socks and tiny droplets of tears.

That was the last day Tatsuki was seen in Nagoya, and for the rest of her youth, she would be desperately searching for something she wouldn't be able to pinpoint once received—because she didn't know what it was.

Love.

Cadence Gray is a sophomore studying criminal justice and a dedicated writer. Her love for writing has been a lifelong passion, and she is excited to continue exploring this passion through her studies and personal projects. In her free time, Cadence can be found curled up with her cat, a cozy mug of tea, and a good book. Constantly seeking new writing opportunities and challenges, she aspires to make a positive impact through her words and storytelling.

Salem

Caitlin Scheresky

Runner-up, 2024 John Little Fiction Scholarship

Mercy watched her breath form clouds as she rubbed her hands together in the prison cell. Water trickled down the dank walls, pooling onto the floor where it could but coat the already freezing victims of the claustrophobic dungeon. The bottom of Mercy's skirts soaked through and clung to her skin, only further intensifying the freeze. The sound of rats squeaking and women moaning in pain echoed throughout the tiny cell. She was running out of time, rotting away slowly in this prison, and she knew she wasn't the only one. Her body ached as pus and thick red blood leaked from her calf and shivers overtook her body. Despite the biting cold of the room, Mercy's leg was hot to the touch. Infection was imminent, if not already present. Iron rattled as a woman's legs gave out across from Mercy, the chains around her wrists solely supporting her frail, malnourished frame. Mercy could count the woman's ribs even through the loose clothing hanging from her. They were all dying in here of hypothermia, disease, or another man-made hell.

Mercy's mind wandered to years ago, before the trials, before she saw how time fought through her father's bones and face. She was young then, so young, a child of the small Salem Village and her father's little twin. Their unruly dark hair and matching eyes were a source of pride for Mercy, knowing the playful glint in his eyes as they played was thanks to her. Illness had long come for her mother, a beautiful woman of only

twenty years, when Mercy was just a babe. The cough, the fevers, ravaged her mother's frail body, still weak from childbirth. When her soul had finally left her earthly body, the villagers whispered that it had been a mercy that she had died. It had been just Mercy and her father for all her life, their family extending only when Mercy discovered a beautiful dog, all chestnut and bold youth, chained to the fence of an abandoned house. When she brought him home, the son her father never had, Mercy spent night after night nursing the wounds on his neck and paws, sharing bits of her dinner. Mercy knew that her father didn't approve of the new addition at first, but "hound" quickly changed to "boy," and then finally to "Juda."

If only Button were here. Mercy's little black cat would at least remove the threat of disease by killing the rats running about the women. Although, with how desperate the women in the prison were, Mercy could hardly guarantee Button's safety, much less with her leg in its current state. A young girl of only four years sniffled in between wails for her mother, her cries echoing off of the walls and between Mercy's ears despite the lack of empty space. She remembered watching the pair be pulled off of the streets, tears cutting through the grime on the woman's face as she fought to reach her daughter. Mercy remembered standing next to her father then, his hand on the back of her neck reassuringly. The girl fought, too, against the man holding her, struggling free from the bewildered man's grasp and falling at Mercy's feet. Bright crimson blood shot from the girl's nose as her head bounced against the dirt path, and Mercy had to bite her lip and squeeze her hands into fists to keep from reaching out to her, to pull her to Mercy's chest and pet her hair, wipe away blood and keep her safe. Mercy, too, remembered watching as the woman was pulled from the dungeons months later, all bones. Her daughter's screams for her mother stormed up from the dark staircase behind her and landed right in her mother's ears. She begged for mercy, for her daughter. The crack of her neck echoed in the silent streets moments later.

There was nothing Button could do to free Mercy now. It had been a week since she had seen her kitten, in the winter forest. She could still see the two of them together, still barely imagine the warmth of the fire against her skin. Mercy licked her cracked and peeling lips, tasting the remnants of dried blood. She held onto that taste, the sour burn chasing across her lips like liquid fire. If she tried hard enough, she could pretend, trick her mind into thinking her hands were mere inches from the wild flames.

*

The fire had crackled, casting a red glow onto Mercy. Heat and smoke weaved its way through Mercy's clothes and Button's shiny fur, surely clinging to both. The small clearing Mercy and Button had found in the forest was perfect; it was both far away from Salem Village to avoid any spies but close enough to come and go without arousing any suspicions, and deep into the nearby forest to lose any followers. No one would find them. The thin pendant around Mercy's neck, a thin silver cross, glinted with the light of the fire and swayed softly against her collarbones as she prepared. Mercy could hear the pendant click and clash against her skin, against her father's smile and warm hands, against the sharp caw of the crows she used to feed all those years ago.

Mercy's face stiffened and relaxed, but remained void as she pulled a small bundle out of the pocket in her skirts, the thyme, mint, and lavender swirling together with the smoke in an unholy dance. The tips of her fingers burned as the flames bit at her hands, reaching out and absorbing the bundle of herbs. The fire cracked and grew before sighing in violent pleasure. Button sat across from her on the opposite side of the fire, her black tail mirroring the wisps of smoke. As Mercy lifted her arms and began the whisper, both her and Button's eyes turned bright white, power surging from each other and blending into the flames as they grew to kiss the trees above the pair. Wind circled around them, crows screaming and desperately flying away from their perches in the trees as they danced and swayed with Mercy and the fire. Mercy's pendant began to float just above her collarbones and pulled toward the fire. She wrapped her fingers around the cross, closing her eyes before ripping it from her neck and throwing it into the flames. The fire devoured the metal with a starving need, the cross melting against the coals. Warmth enveloped Mercy and she continued the spell, feeling Button's power flowing through her as it combined with her own. And then Mercy heard the dogs.

Mercy's favorite place to hide was at the abandoned house she found Juda: once a beautiful house reaching two stories high and coated in a deep red shade, now only a shell, the exoskeleton of a family torn apart by the plague. Along the house stood beautiful, lush trees casting shade down over the house when the sun was positioned just so. Mercy quickly found herself spending hours under those trees, absorbing the same en-

ergy as the green life around her, watching the time pass with the clouds. When spring took its full form, Mercy began to see the makings of crows' nests at the very peaks of the trees, in between the knots of the trunk and branches. The crows were loud, their young much louder, to which their parents fought to reclaim order. Mercy watched the life unfold into the brisk spring nights, lulled into several slumbers by the sharp caws between family members, only to be woken up by the same families as they joined her on the ground, softly pecking and cawing at her peculiarly. Mercy always enjoyed rubbing their feathers as they curiously circled her before settling around her.

A few weeks after finding Juda, Mercy returned to the house with the much healthier dog in tow. After finding her place under the trees, Mercy pulled a small piece of bread from her skirts. Juda, already curled up into a ball, lifted his head curiously at the food. As Mercy began to spread the crumbs for the crows, Juda prickled. She rubbed his head in an effort to keep him calm, eventually soothing him into an uneasy sleep. After a few minutes of Juda's light snoring, the murder joined her beneath the tree. A smile crawled lightly across Mercy's face as the youngest of the family, a crow she had affectionately named Cecilia, hopped closer to Mercy, pecking the bits of bread into her mouth. Mercy reached out her free hand slowly as to not frighten her young friend with a sudden move.

Juda moved quicker than Mercy could stop him, pouncing onto the young crow and gnashing his teeth into her frail, growing body. Mercy could only stare at where her dog stood, where his jaw and teeth clamped shut mere inches from her fingertips still outstretched. Copper and salt filled the air as Cecilia's oily black feathers became slick with her deep red blood, dripping between Juda's teeth and down his neck to settle in a puddle below. Mercy's face contorted into an empty horror as she heard her beloved murder cry for their lost child before diving down to attack her killer. Sharp claws attacked Juda's face and body, and Mercy watched in mute terror as Juda's yelps became louder, as his blood joined Cecilia's. A particularly vengeful attack peeled Juda's left eye open like a grape, fluid pouring out down his snout and into the blood below. And just as soon as they were there, the crows had gone, as had the body of Cecilia. Mercy regained control of her body to the sound of Juda's blistering cries, and she quickly jumped of the ground to reach him. Mercy's father had been enraged when she carried the yelping dog into their home, promising to

keep Juda indoors until he had healed. But Mercy hadn't stayed inside, and where she went, the murder followed.

It started with a thin black feather on her doorstep. Mercy had already known that the birds had visited her, but Mercy's father had barred her from visiting the abandoned house after the accident. Then it was a single black body, a mangled, bloody corpse on her windowsill. Cecilia, now rotting and coated in a layer of flies and maggots, stared back at Mercy with empty eyes. For weeks her father would find the birds' feathers outside their home. He angrily swept them up, and he found Mercy a cat to protect her from the birds, who she quickly named Button. Mercy hid the body of Cecilia in nearby trees every time it reappeared on the sill, but the murder would return the body to her each day.

On the final day she saw the crows, she went outside to walk around town with Button. Mercy opened the door to exit her house, only to find her lawn completely black. Dead crows covered the land in front of her, all contorted in painful positions. Wings broken and thin, airy bones breaking through skin and feathers, blood soaking onto the ground. On that day, Mercy's father gave her a silver cross to wear as protection. Mercy knew this was revenge, revenge against her inaction, her inability to protect the sweet innocence of Cecilia. Salem Village buzzed for weeks of the incident, of the wretched smell, of the poor young girl that was Mercy. It hadn't mattered, because the crows never returned, and Mercy never again spoke.

The sharp scratch of a key clicking into the lock and the creak of the cell door opening tore Mercy out of her thoughts. They could be here for anyone in the cramped room, filled to the brim with exhausted, sick, starving women and children. The lack of space for most of them to sit down, much less relieve themselves sanitarily, caused the room to reek like feces and rot. The women had to eat something, of course, and the rats were known to bite. A small part of Mercy wanted to pretend she hadn't known so well of that fact, her stomach churning just slightly. Instead, she focused on the glow of the men's torches as they gained on her place in the forest and the all too familiar sound of her father's voice as he led them to her.

A rough hand on Mercy's arm dragged her out of the cellar, and she looked emptily back at the women she was leaving behind. Only time would tell how long they'd be in there, fighting for survival. There was no mercy in Salem Village, and there hadn't been in a long while. Mercy

limped through the dungeons, each step sending a fiery agony through her leg, and yet she stayed silent. Her feet skinned the stone from one stair to the next, each step akin to that of dragging the women and children she left behind by her ankles. Tripping on her way up the stone staircase, her captor, a man likely in his thirties but aged by the burden of sentencing innocent people to their deaths, grunted before pulling her up faster, likely to leave a bruise on her arm. He pushed open a heavy oak door, pulling her into blinding light. The door slammed behind her and Mercy fell to her knees at the lack of support from the man. She finally left the dungeons of Salem Village, but as her eyes adjusted and focused onto a tree at the base of a hill in the near distance, she knew she hadn't truly escaped.

Mercy saw the resentment build in her father's eyes after the day the crows fell. She saw it in the way his fists clenched and jaw tightened at the sight of Juda's scarred eye. She saw it in the way he avoided her, the way he wouldn't allow Juda near her anymore. She saw it in the rage that plagued his face when he discovered her reading through her mother's journals before ripping them out of her hands and throwing them into the fire that warmed their house. She saw it in the deep lines worn into his face, eyes sunken into his skull, an undead walking. Mercy knew the village blamed her too—they held their sympathies for her and her father, for their poor Juda, but what gossips they were at church.

How easy it had been, with the whole of her small world against her, to seek out her mother's grave in the burying place. Despite the separation she felt from her mother, the comfort of a love that could not be stolen from her pulled her to her gravestone. Mercy had found her mother's journals, her world of healing spells and protection charms long ago. Mercy had hoped that she would inherit the same. As Mercy and Button watched, though, a crow landed on the peak of her mother's gravestone. It made no noise, wings silent as death. Instead, a blistering screech came from the gravestone itself as invisible hands etched claw marks into the stone. Mercy held Button to her chest, squeezing her eyes shut at the noise.

As soon as the noise had started, though, it was gone, having only been heard by the girl and her cat.

The pair looked up, skin prickling, and gasped at the sight of the

crow, now only a skeleton, perched dead on the stone. The wind shifted, pushing the bones into the ground at their feet, dissolving into a pile of ash at contact. Mercy stared in horror at the ash as it blew with the wind into her hair and Button's fur. It wasn't until she looked at her cat that she realized what the moment had done. Button's eyes glowed amber-yellow, and the cross at her neck burned her skin. Mercy looked back at the gravestone, placing a palm to the newly carved words at the place where the claw marks had been, where the crow, her mother's familiar, had landed.

"Show them Mercy."

Mercy's footsteps were light as air as she ran through the thick of trees. Her earthen skirts ripped as fabric caught onto stray branches, but she forced herself to run faster. Behind her, a stampede chased her further into the trees, flaming torches illuminating their path. The deep, ferocious snarling of dogs sent a shiver down Mercy's spine, but she couldn't stop. Only a few more minutes and her curse would've come to fruition, but there was no time for that now. Her only goal was to escape. Branches snapping loudly under her enemies' feet and their collective screams—"Kill the witch!" and "Get her!"—snapped her out of her anger and back into her mind's racing plan for survival.

Two dogs, a few cats, several women. All dead at the hands of the insanity that plagued Salem Village. Mercy knew her chances of escaping were slim, but she had to try. She had already been fighting for the lives of her and Button in Salem Village, especially after those animals had been accused of witchcraft and killed. Even being seen with her cat would've been enough to accuse her of committing witchcraft, so Mercy and Button had resorted to living near the forest, away from the majority of the people of Salem Village. Without Button, she had no chance of garnering the power to cast her curse on the village.

So many of her friends, innocent lives, dead. The people of Salem Village deserved persecution, and the victims of Salem Village's hysteria deserved to rest. Stomp, crunch, yelling. Mercy's ears began to ring, and her eyes flicked to Button. One of them deserved their freedom, at least.

And as the snap-snap of the dogs' jaws became louder, Mercy moved slightly slower, watching her Button escape into the forest. Snap, snap, snap. Sharp pain assaulted Mercy's leg and blackness nearly enveloped her vision as a dog with a scarred face and one missing eye tore into her calf, pulling Mercy to the ground. The other dogs quickly caught up

and circled her, barking in her face and deafening her, followed suit by the villagers. Blood poured from Mercy's wound as the dog's jaws clamped down harder.

The last thing in her vision, before she passed out, was the view of her familiar running through a burning forest, golden eyes glowing.

Noise assaulted Mercy as the people of Salem Village screamed profanities at her through the streets. Had the man not been accompanying her, she silently mused, they'd probably stone her to death. It wouldn't be beyond them by any means, these people killing in the name of the Lord. Dust met her lips as a villager pushed her from behind and she slammed against the ground. Mercy's eyes blurred and her head spun, but she made no sound. The man somewhat gently grabbed her left elbow and pulled her to her feet, directing her through the mob to Proctor's Ledge.

She had known this was coming. She knew the risks, and yet she couldn't have seen herself doing anything else. They hadn't been doing anything wrong, the women and witches of Salem. Those girls had warped the outspokenness and intelligence of the women they accused and sentenced so many to a painful, traumatic death. Those they accused of witchcraft, whether accurate or not, sentenced not only the accused but the whole of Salem Village to a slow, torturous death.

Mercy heard her father behind her before she saw him. His infuriated, violent screams at her for daring to defile his wife's gravestone reached the ears of Salem Village with ease. Before Mercy could explain, could put her hands up in forgiveness for a crime she hadn't committed, her father's rough, cupped palm crashed against her cheek. Mercy's ears rang as she hit the ground. Her head shook, eyes glazed black and opaque, before returning her vision to her father. He screamed, called her the devil, but Mercy couldn't hear him. It was as though she didn't exist in her own head anymore.

Instead, she stared at the message on the gravestone, eyes blank but solid in understanding.

Blood poured from the ear her father had hit, her eardrum completely burst. Sharp pain shot from her scalp as her father grasped her by the hair and pulled her through the burying place, through Salem Village and all of its eyes, into their house, greeted only by Juda's sharp bark and

glaring, black eyes. Only three weeks later, on the eve of the full moon, did Mercy finally make her escape into the forest.

Mercy was stopped in front of the tree she had seen before on a raised wooden platform, forced to stand on her bad leg as the villagers continued to assault her. The man quickly stood at a distance from Mercy, as though he expected just what Mercy did. A rock slammed into her cheek and again into the knee on her bad leg, sending her to the ground, bleeding and bruised. She was right, she laughed to herself as she spat blood and tooth fragments onto the dry ground. They would stone her. She stood to her feet once more, fighting her body's urge to curse them with a spell strong enough to kill them all. She would do this, and she would be free, and the rest of Salem Village would be cleansed. Button would assure this, wherever he was.

The man that had brought her to the tree spoke to the mob, but Mercy couldn't hear him or the screaming of the angry crowd. He was likely describing her crimes of witchcraft, painting her as a villain to bring themselves peace for what they had done. Her hands were tied behind her back, fingernails digging crescent moons into her palms. The man finally looked back at her, and another approached in a black robe with a rope in hand. She stared forward as the second man wrapped the noose around her neck, scratching her face and neck and leaving her skin raw. He then tied the rope tight, but not restricting her breathing. They wanted a show, after all, and anything too quick wouldn't be rewarding enough for the blood-hungry villagers.

Beyond the crowd, Mercy's eyes found a familiar golden pair of eyes and smoky tail. A satisfied smirk grew onto her face. At the sight of this, the villagers screamed louder. A laugh escaped Mercy's body, then completely overtook her frame. Mercy curled down into herself as she laughed, choking slightly as the rope remained stagnant and temporarily closed her windpipe. She coughed, then smiled, and then her laugh, maybe bordering a cackle, began again. This was the peak of her symphony, the madness and hysteria that the village associated with those guilty of witchcraft, now expelled back at them tenfold in an unholy encore. Fire burned in Mercy's eyes now, though the villagers were too blinded by their lust for her neck to notice.

Mercy's eyes shot over to a man standing in the back of the ravenous crowd, the years visible on his face like vicious tally marks. His harsh eyes

were sunken and set, dark eyebrows furrowed in a poisonous anger with hints of sadness betraying him. She smiled at him, all canines and spit, tilting her head to the side as she watched the man pull his dog into a sitting position. She continued to laugh as the first man quickly glanced at the violent mob, then Mercy, and finally at the man in the robe. The man nodded. Beads of sweat formed at the crown of his head, and he quickly pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead while the man in the robe approached Mercy.

Blood dripped down Mercy's palms, through her fingers and onto the wooden platform as she dug her stubbed, bitten nails deeper into her hands.

Confused, reluctant, and fearful faces peppered the crowd, although most still shouted for her painful demise. Why was she laughing? Why did she seem to enjoy, to excite at the thought of her death? Maybe realization graced the minds of those select few, but Mercy didn't know, nor did she care. She continued to laugh as the man in the robe placed a cloth bag over her head. The darkness brought heat, heightened her senses.

What did these people know of honor, of the unyielding love of God? Nothing. They knew the dark poison, the infestation of fickle mortality and fear. She merely pitied them for being so dull. Mercy laughed harder, inhaling sharply and pulling the cloth into her mouth. It dried her already parched mouth, and Mercy's heart stopped. A life of childish giggles, warm hugs, and playful barks flashed behind her eyelids. A life where her mother survived, where her father's soul hadn't shattered with her.

But just as quickly as her heart had stopped, it had restarted, a gasp of air filling her lungs before sharp laughter shot out again, blood coughing up in bubbles against the cloth as she tore her throat raw. She continued to laugh as they pushed her off the platform, her laughter dying with her as her neck snapped. In the distance, the first of the buildings began to go up in flames.

There was no God in Salem Village.

Caitlin Scheresky is a junior at UND majoring in English and pursuing certificates in creative writing and writing, editing, and publishing. She is the managing editor of *Floodwall*, UND's student-run campus lit mag, and the president of The F Word, UND's feminist organization. She loves sugary lattes, her cat Meelo, and rewatching *Avatar the Last Airbender* and *Legend of Korra*.

contributor notes

Clara Anderson-Cameron is a third-year English and French major. She enjoys writing and reading, although it becomes difficult during the semester. If she's not doing either of those things, she's probably listening to music or playing rugby with the UND women's team. Her goal is to work with words throughout her life, in any capacity.

Nicholas Baldwin is a PhD student in the English Department at the University of North Dakota. He was born and raised in New York.

Jameson Kay Olson Buckau (2002) is a graduate teaching assistant and master's student in the English Department. He did his undergrad at Black Hills State University in South Dakota. He has lived in many places across North America and enjoys traveling, which inspires a lot of his writing. He's queer and trans, has a dog named Bailey, and has a deep love for queer and gender studies in literature as well the unending fight for all people's liberation under the powers of colonialism and white supremacy.

Drake Carnes is a twenty-seven year old English and education major here at UND and an aspiring author. He has been writing short stories and poetry on and off for over ten years, and has taken a greater focus on his writings for the last two. He hopes to become a more consistently

published author as he focuses on a fantasy novel.

Korbyan Chavez is an accounting major who also likes to dabble in writing every now and again. She dreams of having a corgi named Ein and maybe even a second corgi named Heracles. She tends to write darker themes by the way, but at least she has a goal of having corgis.

Alexis Crane is currently a sophomore majoring in social work. She is minoring in psychology, with a focus on substance use and misuse, with a certificate in Spanish. Her goal is to work in child welfare or as a school social worker. Alexis likes to write poetry in her free time to put difficult subjects and feelings into words, hoping that she can reach those who can relate, to reassure them that they are not alone.

Jay Cummings is a psychology major at UND. They have been writing in their off-time since high school, and enjoy writing poems and novellas.

Rachael Erickson is a senior majoring in communications with a minor in leadership. In her free time, she loves being outside, whether that's hiking or going on walks with friends. She enjoys being involved in her campus ministry Chi Alpha, leading and discipling women in their faith. Her passion for writing lies in writing poetry pieces about mental health in hopes that others will feel less isolated in their journeys.

Chad Erickstad is a senior majoring in English with a minor in communications.

Casey Fuller is just a regular old PhD student at the University of North Dakota. He's from Olympia, Washington.

Cadence Gray is a sophomore studying criminal justice and a dedicated writer. Her love for writing has been a lifelong passion, and she is excited to continue exploring this passion through her studies and personal projects. In her free time, Cadence can be found curled up with her cat, a cozy mug of tea, and a good book. Constantly seeking new writing opportunities and challenges, she aspires to make a positive impact through her words and storytelling.

Charles Henry is a second-year PhD student in the English Department. He's from the Ohio valley originally, but moved out to the University of North Dakota in the Fall of 2020. In his graduate work, he is interested in secular and composition theory, but in his writing he is very interested in the generative and craft qualities of creative nonfiction and poetry.

Brenden Kimpe is a senior double majoring in English and secondary education. He enjoys colorful sunsets, reading until his eyes burn, and napping with his cat, Marceline.

Tabitha Lee is a student who has a deep love for most things. They enjoy writing, reading, and playing *Magic: The Gathering* during their free time.

Veronika Linstrom is an undergraduate student at UND pursuing a bachelor's degree in English. After they graduate, Veronika hopes to pursue their passion for writing and become an author. In their free time, Veronika can be found scribbling down ideas for their next piece or with their nose in a good book.

Born in Oslo, **Maiken Møller-Andersen** is an English master's student from Norway. They grew up around the forests and lakes in a small city named Jessheim. They have always been fond of creating stories through writing. Having grown up on fairy tales and ghost stories, their writing is heavily inspired by those sleepless nights and curiosity about what might reside in the abandoned house just up the street from their childhood home.

Robert D. Moore, Jr., is the lab supervisor for the Department of Physics & Astrophysics, who likes taking classes to expand his horizons. He writes in his spare time, and likes crafting fun stories for others to enjoy.

Dani Ogawa is a creative writer and poet currently studying English at the University of North Dakota. She will graduate in the spring of 2024 with her bachelor's in English, in addition to a minor in communications and certificates in creative writing and writing, editing, & publishing. When she is not writing stories, you can find her nose in a book at a local coffee shop, listening to Taylor Swift, or teaching dance. Dani is from Grand Forks, ND.

Jasmine Patera is from Mandan, North Dakota. She enjoys writing poetry and can often be found with her nose stuck in a book. She is inspired by the works of Emily Dickinson and Mary Oliver. Jasmine is pursuing a degree in English with a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing at the University of North Dakota, where she is also a member of the Writing Club. She hopes to one day pursuing a career in editing as a member of a publishing house.

Chloe Piekola, a UND student majoring in communications, enjoys exploring various avenues of creativity. From diving into fiction stories to crafting poetry and tinkering with graphic design, she finds joy in expressing her creativity for others to see.

Sevi Sapunar-Lahr is a freshman majoring in Norwegian. If she wasn't determined to live in Norway someday, she would've majored in English and run her own bookstore. Writing and reading have always been a passion in her life. Writing has been very beneficial and therapeutic. And she wishes to share that.

Lydia Schengrund is majoring in commercial aviation and UAS with a minor in atmospheric sciences. Although she originates from the beach, she does just fine in these North Dakota winters.

Caitlin Scheresky is a junior at UND majoring in English and pursuing certificates in creative writing and writing, editing, and publishing. She is the managing editor of *Floodwall*, UND's student-run campus lit mag, and the president of The F Word, UND's feminist organization. She loves sugary lattes, her cat Meelo, and rewatching *Avatar the Last Airbender* and *Legend of Korra*.

Maren Schettler is a senior studying English, music, and political science. She loves the outdoors and enjoys camping and hiking with friends and family. While in school, there is no end to her frustration with the lack of leisure reading time. Her boxer dog Pacha is her favorite reading buddy.

Jonathan Sladko is a writer, poet, and photographer from Alaska seeking adventure in the Lower 48. He is currently double majoring in commercial

aviation and English at the University of North Dakota. He hopes to publish his novel before he graduates.

Jacob Stanley is a junior mathematics major at UND. While his career goals are in the STEM field, Jacob also takes an interest in more creative endeavors, and is the treasurer for UND's Writing Club. He typically enjoys writing fiction stories with fantasy elements but dabbles in poetry, such as with his publication in this spring's issue of *Floodwall*. Outside of writing, Jacob enjoys cooking, playing games, and spending time with friends.

Floodwall

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Chad Erickstad

Casey Fuller

Cadence Gray

Charles Henry

Brenden Kimpe

Tabitha Lee

Veronika Linstrom

Maiken Møller-Andersen

Robert D. Moore, Jr.

Dani Ogawa

Jasmine Patera

Chloe Piekkola

Sevi Sapunar-Lahr

Lydia Schengrund

Caitlin Scheresky

Maren Schettler

Jonathan Sladko

Jacob Stanley