

# Floodwall

volume 2, issue 5

spring 2022





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Front and back covers: details from *Red Truck*, photograph by Elena Uhlenkamp



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## Masthead

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## From the Editors

We can't wait for you to dive into another dynamic issue of *Floodwall*, the student-run, campus literary magazine at the University of North Dakota. We know that this academic year has been filled with many unexpected and unanticipated challenges. Even as we've been preparing this spring's issue, the winter snows have melted, the Grand Forks community has been hit by several unexpected "spring" blizzards, and the Red River has passed into major flood stage. For the Grand Forks community and our own UND family, this late-spring surge of weather has been a haunting reminder of the 1997 flood, when the Red River crested at well over 50 feet. The flood reached upwards of three miles inland—resulting in the evacuation of East Grand Forks, Minnesota, and most of the population of Grand Forks.

*Floodwall* takes its name from the wall and earthworks erected near the Red River after the 1997 flood, in order to protect the community from future natural disasters. After several fraught years of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and this late-in-the-semester threat of floods, all of us on the *Floodwall* team remain grateful to the writers, artists, photographers, and creators in our campus community who offer us shelter through their creative work. In these times, more than ever, our community needs art and creative expression to bring us together, to understand the ties that bind us, and to build something—side by side—that will inspire and shelter future members of our #UNDProud community.

And the work in this spring's issue of *Floodwall* does just that, while also lifting a mirror up to the world around us. A maniacal director imagines a harrowing reality TV show that mashes up corporate sponsorships and America's carceral state. A dialogue with a crow offers inspiration and hope. Chocolate oranges in tinfoil recall a moment of childhood joy, of unexpected luxury. A pianist calms the ravenous hearts

of the undead. The classic rom-com *You've Got Mail* and our favorite coffee orders receive fresh scrutiny—with a sharp-eyed appeal to always be yourself.

These are only a few of the pieces in this spring's issue. We're also thrilled to acknowledge the recipients of this year's UND creative writing scholarships—the John Little Fiction Scholarship, the Thomas McGrath Award in Poetry, and the Gladys Boen Scholarship—and to include some of the recipients' work in this issue.

Now, there's only more thing to say: step behind the 'wall, and enjoy the journey into this spring's fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Trust us—you'll love what's in store.



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## Contents

<b>masthead</b> .....	5
<b>from the editors</b> .....	6
<b>fiction</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Colorblind</b>   Valkyrie Bradford.....	13
<b>The Bridge</b>   Abigail Petersen.....	16
<b>The Bump</b>   Maiken Møller-Andersen .....	19
<b>Encore for a Swan Song</b>   Delaney Otto.....	20
<b>Fairy Godmother</b>   Madison Knoll.....	24
<b>The Perfect Fall</b>   Zachary Bigelow.....	35
<b>Interim Inmates</b>   Parker Stenseth .....	38
<b>The Firefly Trapper</b>   Jona L. Pedersen .....	48
<b>Photography Portfolio</b>   Madison Waldron.....	54
1. ....	55
2. ....	56
3. ....	57
4. ....	58
5. ....	59
<b>poetry</b> .....	<b>61</b>
<b>Carrots</b>   Charles Henry.....	62
<b>Stars Unobscured</b>   Delaney Otto .....	64
<b>After Pose</b>   Abigail Petersen .....	66
<b>partial confessions on a NOTEs app</b>   Jasmine Duran .....	68
<b>Two Poems</b>   Casey Fuller.....	70
<b>&gt;Remembering John Hauser</b>   Leah Hanley.....	76
<b>The Brides of Achilles</b>   Olivia Kost.....	78

<b>Two Poems</b>   Daria Cullen .....	80
<b>A Conversation with Crow</b>   Elena Uhlenkamp .....	84
<b>Butterflies</b>   Aubrey Roemmich.....	86
<b>Click</b>   Claire Arneson .....	89
<b>Grief</b>   Emilia Adkinson.....	90

<b>Digital Art Portfolio</b>   Hailey Narloch.....	92
<b>A Reminder of the Complexities of World Creation</b> .....	93
<b>Lysstar Aurora</b> .....	94
<b>Dreams of Syn</b> .....	95

**nonfiction..... 97**

<b>Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino.</b>   Maren Schettler .....	98
<b>Playtime: A Review</b>   Parker Stenseth .....	104
<b>The Spider God</b>   Nicholas Ramos.....	107
<b>Afraid of?</b>   Aubrey Roemmich .....	111

<b>Photography Portfolio</b>   Elena Uhlenkamp .....	115
<b>Crystal Leaves</b> .....	116
<b>Red Truck</b> .....	117

**creative writing scholarship winners ..... 119**

<b>The Street Dog's Dowry</b>   Karissa Wehri.....	120
<i>Winner, John Little Fiction Scholarship</i>	
<b>Lo. Lee. Ta.</b>   Aubrey Roemmich .....	134
<i>Runner-up, John Little Fiction Scholarship</i>	
<b>Acknowledgment</b>   Nerissa Dolney .....	142
<i>Winner, Thomas McGrath Award (Poetry)</i>	
<b>Living with Michael</b>   Casey Fuller.....	143
<i>Runner-up, Thomas McGrath Award (Poetry)</i>	
<b>The History of Hurry</b>   Maren Schettler .....	146
<i>Winner, Gladys Boen Scholarship</i>	
<b>Between</b>   Caitlin Scheresky.....	156
<i>Runner-up, Gladys Boen Scholarship</i>	

**Contributor Notes ..... 160**



***fiction***

## Colorblind

Valkyrie Bradford

Aila lived in a world of black and white.

Growing up in a divorced family, separation was everywhere. Choices were everywhere, and the consequences felt world-ending. So, she sorted them, clean and neat in her mind.

There were black and white things in the world. Black things were soft, comforting—though sometimes, they were lies. Her warm blanket fort, however dark, couldn't keep her ears from catching the arguments outside.

There were white things in the world, too real, and harsh, and present, but sometimes too real to be seen. The sun peeking through the window of her mom's house that first weekend at a new house with a new window facing the east, when it really set in that dad is gone, I live here now, they're not getting back together.

She grew up, though, and she had to change. She had to learn about the grays of the world.

The dual tones of the universe turned gray one day when she sat at her desk, looking at the board in her 5<sup>th</sup> grade history class:

### **Colonization.**

People fleeing, homes breaking, sickness spreading.... It was two colors, and that wasn't allowed. That wasn't how it worked. Friend or foe, good or bad, not this sick, twisted in-between.

But she had to learn some day.

However angry she was at her father for leaving, the searing white was always tinged with the black of knowing how much her mother drank, of that little urge of her own to run away.

The existence of gray was inconvenient, and it took her weeks to

put together her files again, to sort the world into its clean categories and shade-tabbed boxes.

She kept on living. She had to, after all. No one would live for her. The world was carefully sorted out, her desk always clean, even through the tumult of high school and the chaos of juggling two summer jobs to save for college.

And then, somehow, in *the first week* of university, a single person broke her beautiful, perfect system.

To call Kana “vibrantly colorful” would be an insult, in Aila’s opinion.

She was a watercolor of fireworks in the night sky, a perfect storm of pastels and neon, cool and warm and *everything* all together.

Black might be every color, but Kana was a whirling color wheel; the needle on every spot, hues layering higher and higher until it all became one, only for its billion shades to flurry out in a supernova, a force of raw, kaleidoscopic light. But this time, it felt so good, so safe, to let that vortex of color evacuate, being left with the lone, impossible emotions of every color, all far too complex to ever dream of a monochrome world again.

All of it, within those auric eyes, packed into every molecule of air around her. The ecstasy she brought was better than any drug, worth more than all the wealth in the world; it was fool’s gold in comparison.

No, nothing was worth her gaze, let alone her smile, her *laugh*—

Kana’s irises were an infinite chain of black and white holes that no one could escape, throwing her victims through a wormhole into a new world, an infinite dimension of vibrant emerald—and why would anyone try, when her every glance felt like heaven descending to free hell from the flame?

...or something like that, in Aila’s opinion.

She’d never seen anything like it, that girl in an apron in the school’s cafeteria. It was everything to her, everything worth having and living for. Her cold, monochrome nest was a pitiful prison to scoff at, as the world

felt alive in its own way then.

Kana's vibrant green hair was her favorite color now.

It was the color of their wedding rings three years later.

Sitting with those rings gleaming, fingers intertwined, and the sun setting her glorious streaks of joyous tears across the sky, bidding farewell, their dresses weren't white.

The world was too bright for one color. Paints and dyes still filled a room of their new house, the walls coated in Aila's new office, a studio of paint cans and canvas and too many brushes to count. They'd worn those painfully white dresses in and emerged the next day with hardly a sliver of silvery fabric to be seen amongst colors beyond words and love beyond colors.

**Valkyrie Bradford** is an English graduate student at UND, whose free time is spent with her dog Loki, cat Atalanta, or the animals she fosters for the local shelters. This piece was inspired by her avoidance of the romance genre, a friend's challenge that she couldn't do it, followed by the attempt at codifying the sensation of falling in love.

## The Bridge

Abigail Petersen

*Haley had no idea why she agreed to meet with him. She shook her head as she made her way down the abandoned street to their usual meeting spot, a little ledge set against a cement bridge. Zain never explained why he liked that place so much, but it was a walkable distance from her house and she liked how comfortable Zain looked when they were there. The thought of Zain's smile made her feel things she didn't like. She tried to shake the feeling and continued her way down the street, the brisk evening air clinging to her hoodie.*

*Zain was never one to invite girls to do anything. He spent most of his time with his boys and the crew, mostly comprised of young men and occasionally their families. But as the sun was setting outside his house, he felt the need to see her. He couldn't explain why and it honestly kind of pissed him off that he thought about her at all, but there she was, assaulting his psyche. When they first started hanging out, he kept his personal life pretty private, evading questions about his family or occupation. Even now, Haley knew very little about his life or him, but he found himself showing her other things about him. His favorite spot, for starters. A small cement square set into an overpass. He brought her there often. The view of the city was breathtaking, every time.*

"What's it like?" Haley asked and took another drag off Zain's joint. He kept his hand extended for her to take a second hit and gave her a look.

"What's what like?" He watched as her bloodshot eyes swept over him again. He wondered if she truly saw him. Or did she just see the idea of him as they made their way through his weed stash?

"Losing?" she chuckled and pushed his hand away, washing the ash down with a swig of Pink Whitney.

He rolled his eyes and wondered why he kept her around. She was pretty, with long hair that hit her waist and sapphire eyes that judged his every move. He thought back to what he was doing this morning; he knew she'd run the second trouble hit. For him, it was just another Tuesday.

"You want more or can I put this out?" The joint was giving him a headache. Or maybe it was her attitude. Either way, something had to change. He thought about cutting her off. It wouldn't be hard. With social media nowadays, he could disappear from the face of the planet at any moment. The longer this high hit, the more he contemplated it.

He looked over at Haley. Her piercing stare sliced through him, leaving him almost bare in front of her. He could never hide his emotions from her, which was one of the things that terrified him about her.

"You're overthinking again," Haley whispered and tipped her head back to see the stars. She began her usual grounding technique before the high took her back to the dark place it often dragged her to. Little dipper, big dipper, Pisces or is that Cancer? Shit, I can't remember. She shook her head and drank some water.

"Maybe you should think more. Is there anything going on in that little head of yours, princess?" He settled onto the cement behind him and packed his stuff. "I should get you back to your dad before he kills me."

Haley continued staring at the stars. She knew her dad wouldn't be home till Friday after he was done on his business trip. Or as she liked to call it, an excuse to fuck his intern. Her mom was probably rolling in her grave right now thinking about it. The worst part was, he always pretended that he wasn't, as if she didn't hear them sometimes.

Zain watched her clench her jaw and look up at the stars. He wondered what went on in her head. He knew her thoughts went a million miles per hour, but she'd never let on. He also knew she got real quiet whenever he talked about her dad or her going home. Maybe it was a mix of the mystery or the fact that she sometimes gave a shit about him

that he kept her around. Maybe this exchange between them was mutual. She got away from home, and he could be more vulnerable around her than any of his friends.

Zain thought back to the one time she was vulnerable around him. He held her as she shook under the bridge downtown, her mascara streaking down her face in waves. She never told him what happened, but he could guess by the torn clothes and bruises on her arms. He never liked her ex-boyfriend and hated him more after that night. His friends may be street rats to most, but they were taught how to treat a woman right by mothers who stuck around. Haley's ex-boyfriend moved a few days later—after falling down the stairs after a rough night at the bar. At least, that's what the police report says.

"You're the first guy who doesn't want anything from me." It came out as a whisper, almost inaudible over the traffic.

Zain fixed his eyes on her, scared to speak in case she needed to say more.

Her eyes slowly opened and looked at him. A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Thank you," was all she said as she made her way out of the nook of the bridge and down the street toward her house. Zain watched as she left, a cold breeze washed through where she was sitting and he shivered, missing her and that piercing gaze.

**Abigail Petersen** is a criminal justice and sociology major at UND. She enjoys writing fiction and poetry. She draws most of her inspiration from the world around her, music, and her pets.

## The Bump

Maiken Møller-Andersen

My grandmother blamed it on me being on the phone too much, my spine shaping badly because I had my head down. I do not think it is only the phone's fault, I did not have it glued to my hand like others.

Still, I pawned my phone, but the lump did not disappear. I began removing items that made me bend my head down in hopes of fixing my fucked-up bump. This included not using the lower shelves and some rather uncomfortable sleeping without a pillow to keep myself completely straight.

I had just booked my first chiropractic appointment to get it looked at. That night, though, I found myself staring at it in the mirror. Suspecting it had grown even larger. Taking a deep breath, I watched as the pulsating lump crept down my neck and spine, two eyes peering out and looking back at me.

**Maiken Møller-Andersen** is a graduate student at UND studying English. Born and raised in Norway, they loved the ocean as a child, growing more and more curious about what they could never see from the surface. Maiken took a huge interest in folklore and storytelling at a young age, and their favorite fairytale is King Valemon. They also really like scary stories, which is one of the inspirations for their flash fiction.

## Encore for a Swan Song

Delaney Otto

There was a man at the hospital, in the waiting area of the first floor, and he was playing the piano.

His shoulders swayed as the notes rang out, the vibrations of the strings hit by hammers launching each note into the open air, soundwaves carrying up and up towards the high ceiling. There was no sheet music sitting before him, nor any memorized melodies in his head. What flew forth was simply blind, almost instinctual, a small thing that usually hid in the back of the mind, now leaking out, growing stronger.

His audience watched, all gone slack and still. Some were close to him, so dangerously close; if they took a few more steps and stretched out their hands they could touch him, could silence this haunting sound, this melody that drew such emotions they couldn't name into their bodies. But they didn't come any closer. They just watched him, watched the blur of his fingers on the white and black keys. Others stood further away, not wanting a single step to interrupt the moment. They just listened, held in place by their ears. The organic mechanisms in their ears went to work, sending messages to their tired, aching brains. They hadn't heard such sounds in a while—it was almost a foreign noise. But memories leaked in—at least, the obscured, smudged inclinations of memories. All stood, all leaned forward, a standing ovation before the song was even finished.

The man didn't care that their eyes were on him, undisturbed by their silence. At first, he was eyeing them all carefully, but as the notes grew more comfortable on his fingers, like a child that could finally ride a bike once the snow was clear and gradually remembered how to work the pedals, he grew more confident in himself. His body relaxed, moving

with the song he crafted on the spot, a seemingly unending thing. He poured all of himself into it. It was a farewell tour for an old musician, a grandchild singing at their grandparent's funeral, an open-hearted, honest, aching swan song.

He didn't notice his own tears until his fingers splashed in the puddles left on the keys. But they did not slip, and he did not open his eyes. He kept playing, and let his audience watch. His audience remained at their points, dotted along the floor of the waiting area, but no one was waiting. Everyone was sucked in, mesmerized, hypnotized, held still. In this moment, it was just the sound echoing through the open space, ricocheting off columns and chairs and tables, resonating. The only thing to accompany it were the stifled snuffles and hiccups of the man playing, and even that seemed to be part of it, entwined in the music as a form of accompaniment, meant to be there.

As the music soared to its finale, the man broke out into a sob, his shoulders shaking, his throat aching. His fingers found their final notes and he let them ride the soundwaves until they died.

He lifted his now sore hands. He set them in his lap, his head bowed, and listened.

There was nothing at first, just that old silence of a freshly finished piece, the small span of time between the final note and the first clap. He knew no clapping would come. Yet, when he heard the first steps behind him, his body, worn out and limp, still tensed. When the hand touched his shoulder, his body again stiffened, begging him to go. He had always battled with stage fright. But then there was a forehead, damp and clammy, against the back of his neck. The weight of an audience member's head sat there, and the hand on his shoulder squeezed weakly. Other hands joined this one, and those who weren't close enough to shuffle forward bowed their heads with his. He sat there, tears still falling, eyes stinging, throat a raw fire of grief and sorrow and, at the pit of it, wonder and relief.

After a time, perhaps as long as the song had been, the hands fell, and the audience backed away. The man straightened, looking around at the eyes that still lay on him. He rose, stiff and limp at the same time,

to his feet. He slung his bag over his shoulder and took back the folded up note he had set on the piano for his companions to find.

A few audience members, including one who had set their head upon his neck, escorted him out of the hospital, into the old music store nearby, waited as he picked out a few instruments, and stopped their journey when he passed the scrapped-together gates of his home. He looked at them and they looked back, before all bowed their heads and parted ways.

His companions flung themselves at him when he entered, one waving around a scrapped note he had thrown in the trash with tears in her eyes. They questioned the instruments, inspected him for bites, and kept asking the same questions: why and where and how? He sat them down and told them what happened, watching their eyes light up with disbelief, hope, and doubt. He set down the instruments he'd found, the ones that were the least damaged by weather and abandonment, and broached the idea of teaching them each to play one. The most cynical of the group laughed at the idea, but the one who'd found the scrapped note immediately reached for the trumpet in front of her.

Back in the hospital, the audience looked at one another, unsure of what to do. For the first time in a long time the remnants of their brains found some semblance of clarity, something near human thought, and it stirred a sort of animal fear in their hearts. One audience member, the one who'd placed their forehead at the man's back, walked towards the piano, one shambling step after the other, and placed a withered, rotten finger on a white key that sat close to the center of the piano. It was an old instinct, muscle memory, that ran through their body from when they were a child, sitting beside their piano teacher so long ago. They, like many students, learned of middle C when they began; it was the starting point, the first step in navigating the piano and all it could do. Once you could lift your fingers and place them lightly on the keys without much thought, and find your right thumb on middle C, you were on your way.

They, with a shake in their wrist that traveled up to their shoulder, pressed down, and a solid note echoed through the hospital. The audience members watched, all of their fingers radiating a phantom

sensation, an almost empathetic feeling, like they could imagine themselves pressing down on that one white key.

This would be a new starting point for them all.

**Delaney Otto** is a third-year student at UND with a major in communications and a minor in English. She's a fan of horror, fantasy, magical realism, and happy endings. Aside from writing, music and art are also very important to her, and she has a firm belief that anyone can create if they have the desire to do so.

## Fairy Godmother

Madison Knoll

### “The Fairy”

The trees bent and twisted away. The flora shriveled like dried berries. Creatures scuttled away as the drying grass tried to ignite their tails. A crow trilled, a long musical sound, and landed at the feet of a child. The child themselves stood on a brittle tree branch, their iridescent eyes wide and scanning the forest floor.

“Did you find her, Vel?”

The crow chirped, its black eyes reflecting the child. The child grinned and hopped off the branch to the burnt grass below. They held their arm out and the crow settled itself there.

“Let’s go, Vel!”

The cottage was in ruins: some of the stones were missing, many were broken; webbed cracks lined the windows; the wooden door was on its last hinge and was broken in the corners. The grass surrounding the cottage was brown and dead, the trees surrounding the little clearing overbearing and leafless.

The child walked past all of the destruction and knocked roughly on the door. The wood groaned under the force, but it stayed. The crow clucked and the child stuck their tongue out.

“Oh quiet, Vel. It wasn’t *that* hard.”

A soft shuffle, then squeak of the floorboards alerted them. “She’s here!” the child whispered to the crow, eyes wide and bright.

The door creaked open slowly. The child’s smile faltered. An old woman stood before them, hunched shoulders and the lavender aura

dwarfing her. Her white hair was pixie-like and shot up in odd directions. Her eyes were a dull green.

Unlike the pictures they had seen, this woman was worn. Her wings reflected as much. They looked like they were shredded, and the feathers had dulled to a washed-out gray instead of the vibrant black they once were.

"How can I help you, child?" Her voice was brittle, raspy.

"I want you to be my teacher!" the child shouted, bowing their head low. They lifted their head to see her motionless.

"...I think you've made a mistake. I am no teacher. The Academy has the finest professors for young fairies like you."

"No! You're the only one that can help me!"

The lavender color surrounding the woman darkened into plum. The child stared in wonder. A sigh passed through the woman, and she shuffled further into the cottage.

The child stood there.

The woman headed towards the kitchen and called over her shoulder: "Come in for some tea. We'll need some refreshments before we talk about this further."

The plum had softened to lavender, and the child's shoulders relaxed. The woman stood at the counter. She picked up the teapot, her wrinkled hands clasped firmly around the handle. She poured tea into the chipped teacup, then poured some into a sturdier teacup. She handed the second one to the child, who took it with a slight bow of the head and sat down on the stool next to her. The woman settled herself into the chair next to the stove and sipped the tea. The child sipped theirs as well.

"Why are you here, child? It's not often that I have visitors. Especially young ones like you."

The child took another scalding sip of the tea, then set the cup on the floor. The floorboards were old and starting to rot.

They straightened and faced the woman. "The Academy won't accept me. They say my magic is too dangerous. But when I heard the

stories about you, I knew I had to come find you. You're the only one that can understand me!"

The woman set her teacup down on the rotting floor. She folded her hands in her lap and said softly, "That may be so, but I will only cause misfortune for you. It's best that you try the Academy again. They are more equipped than I to help you."

The air seemed to still around the child, the blue surrounding them darkening to almost black. The woman looked over in alarm.

"I can't go back." Their voice cracked. "They don't want me there. No one does! This is the only place I can go!"

She rested a hand on the child's shoulder. Her wings spread out, the dull gray feathers changing into an abyss-black. Her wings covered them, sheltering them from the decay and the Academy. The child visibly relaxed, their black aura returning to its natural cerulean.

"They're beautiful." Their voice was barely a whisper. The woman smiled and sat down beside them. Her wings stayed in place. The child watched as her appearance slowly changed as well: the deep wrinkles in her skin softened; the veins weren't as prominent; her pixie hair became white and brown with an ombre effect.

She looked just like the pictures they had seen before searching for her.

She smiled, laugh-lines scrunching her eyes and mouth. "Are you feeling better, child?" Her voice was still raspy and rough.

They nodded, their eyes bright. "How—?"

She looked around her, her eyes widening slightly at her wings. "It seems that my magic was affecting me as well, not just the house."

"What do you mean?"

"My magic is...unique. It reacts with my emotions. For years, it's been tearing apart this forest and house. I never realized that it had affected me this much as well." She looked at the child. "It seems that your magic behaves similarly as well. If that's the case..."

The child bounced up, their iridescent eyes alight. "Does that mean you will teach me?!"

The woman held up a hand. "Please be calm. I haven't said

anything like that. For me to consider teaching you anything requires a test on your part.”

“What? A test?” Their shoulders slumped.

She nodded. “I suppose it’s not quite a ‘test,’ per se, but it’s important that I tell you these tales.”

“Like the Fairy Tales?”

“Yes. However, the tales they teach the children now is not what truly happened. They twisted the stories to fit their needs. You need to hear the truth of them before I teach you anything. So please, listen carefully.”

## Cinderella

I remember the first time I saw the child. She was born prematurely, her blonde hair matted, her voice trilling. Her mother, fatigued but bursting with life, had asked me to watch over her daughter should anything happen to her. So, after her death, I watched over her child, Ella, for many years. The girl was painted in so many vibrant colors, just like her mother; her smile shown yellow, her anger a dull pink, her sadness a faint blue. But after her father remarried, the yellow dimmed and the blue grew darker until it overtook her. She was forced into slaving after her stepmother and stepsisters, or else be destitute.

There was little that I could do for her, lest I broke the rules that governs our world and the mortal realm. I could not intervene in her life, no matter how much I wanted to.

I wish I had broken every rule.

The only solace Ella found in that house was the youngest daughter. She pitied Ella, and soon their relationship transformed into something akin to familial love. The daughter would do what she could for Ella, stealing extra rations and scraps of fabric to fix her clothing. She was the only blessing that marriage had given Ella.

There was one night, a month after the child turned sixteen years old. An invitation was sent to the family. The royal family was holding a ball in the prince’s honor, the underlying purpose to find him a bride.

The prince was a lovely mortal: he was so full of life and ambition. He wanted to travel the world, and he reminded me so much of my dear girl. She would have given everything to leave that dreadful house and live freely.

Of course, the stepmother banned Ella from attending, and even had her daughters ruin the poor child's gown. She was in tears, the blue slowly engulfing her. I could no longer stand by and watch that wretched woman destroy her. So, I helped her. I gave her what she would need to attend the ball: a beautiful gown, a carriage, her animal companions as chauffeurs so they could accompany her. I gave her until midnight to enjoy herself, to experience something new and thrilling. She was ecstatic, the blue gone and replaced by a shining yellow. She was truly happy for the first time in years.

I stayed at the manor, waiting and waiting for her to return. The stepmother and daughters returned, and I hid. The wretch dragged Ella in after her. She threw the child down and ripped every last gift I gave her to shreds. She laid there, trembling, taking every hit and venomous word that woman slapped her with.

She refused to cry. I cried for her.

After that, the woman kept Ella confined to her bedroom—now a prison. I could no longer intervene, as my master had learned of what I had done and forbade me from any further contact. He forced me to watch as that sadness darkened to an almost pitch black, swallowing her until she could no longer take it.

Her sister was the one that found her that night. I will never forget the scream that tore through that house, though it is hard to remember if it was hers or mine.

She was the only one to prepare and attend the funeral, the only one to try and seek justice for the girl.

*That's what you get for meddling, my master hissed. Your heart will be the death of any mortal that crosses your path.*

## Zinnia

After Ella's death, I was given a second chance. I was only to be a guardian—watch over the babe, but never to intervene, lest I injure us both. This seemed more like a punishment.

But that's what I did, for years. I was tasked with watching over a young girl, a fairy named Zinnia. She was a part of a tribe of fairies that left for the mortal realm. They were kind people, and very curious about the mortals. This child was no different. A bright, vibrant purple enveloped her, tinged with a hint of green. Her joy was contagious, her smiles bringing light everywhere she went. My broken heart was slowly mended as I watched over her; she was supposed to be the hope this world needed.

As she grew, she slowly learned the cruelties of the world. When she was ten years, a mortal boy had stumbled upon her hidden grove. She was wary at first, as she was taught to be distrustful of strange beings, but his innocence and bright smile relaxed us both, and they fell into an easy friendship.

Years passed. The children grew into tentative teenagers. Love was blossoming between them, and my heart swelled at the thought of Zinnia achieving her happily ever after. Of course, that did not last long.

They were stargazing and picking out their favorite constellations. I was retired in a tree, content, knowing that he would protect dear Zinnia at all costs. Until I heard that blood-curdling scream. The smell of blood filled my nose and I flew instantly to her side. The boy was gone, and so were her wings.

Black and a forest green enveloped her as she cried, her face contorted into absolute despair. I reached for her, to comfort her, but an electric shock passed through my body and I jolted away. Even in her time of need, I was punished for caring.

That black and green cloud followed her as she grew older, colder. She decided that if she was damned for what she was, she would punish those that would wish for her downfall. She cloaked herself in black, hoping to strike fear into anyone that crossed her path. My heart broke

all over again as I watched this young woman, this child, try to protect herself in the only way she knew how.

I've no idea how much time passed. I only knew that I could never leave her side.

Word reached the tribe that a new king was crowned, and he was already expecting his first child. When I heard that news, my stomach churned. It was the boy. He stole Zinnia's wings so he could become king. That had to be it. Why else would he commit such a heinous act on a beloved friend?

Zinnia must have known, too. Her smile, cold and dark as it may have been, disappeared and she bided her time until the birth. When the day came and everyone received an invitation, save for her, she plotted. I tried to send her a sign that what she was planning would be the death of her, that it would end tragically for all involved. She ignored it. The day of the Christening, she cursed the babe, Aurora. On the eve of the child's sixteenth birthday, she would prick her finger and fall into an eternal sleep. I cried, knowing how this would end.

Zinnia watched over the child as she grew. I believe she hoped to see the child's downfall, to see firsthand that boy's—no, that monster's—downfall. But her heart softened, at some point. I think when the babe smiled at her, and only her, did a light break through that black cloud. And as the child aged, from babe to young girl, that cloud dissipated, inch by inch, and it was returning to its vibrant purple.

I felt herself shatter when she could not prevent the girl from pricking her finger. She tried everything to wake the girl—convincing the prince to end the spell, true love's kiss, and when that failed, and when the king ordered for Zinnia's death, she wept by the girl's side. When the knights came to steal her to the guillotine, she kissed the girl's forehead, then willingly let the guards shove her into handcuffs and take her away.

It was when Zinnia's head was on the chopping block that we saw the girl, frazzled and tear-stained, run through the crowd, screaming for Zinnia. When she saw the child, Zinnia's black cloud disappeared. Her purple, her colors, were gone, but she was content. She smiled for the girl, a true smile I hadn't seen in years, before the guillotine dropped.

The girl was inconsolable.

### Godmother

"I left my home after that. They were right. I only brought death wherever I went. It's why I live here now, in this rotting cottage. It's why everything around me dies, why my own body is decaying. If I mentor you, you will suffer just as I have and I refuse to do that to you."

They looked at the woman, *the Fairy Godmother*, and said, "But it wasn't your fault. You wanted to help them. You didn't want any of that to happen. You did what you could for them, and honestly, that sounds more like a true Fairy Godmother than any of the others. You were there for the humans and you truly cared for them. You were probably like a mother to them."

The Fairy Godmother smiled and she aged once again. The wrinkles came back, her hair lost its color, her feathers dulled. She retracted her wings, and the cottage was in full view in all of its brokenness.

"I do not know about that," she said softly. She seemed to hunch more than before. "They suffered from my actions. They should have survived; Ella was supposed to leave that wretched house and live freely, like she always wanted. Zinnia was going to change everything—she had such high hopes, and so much love. If I had not been there with my vile magic, they both would have survived. *They all should have survived—*"

She stopped herself, her eyes glassy. The child placed their hand over hers. She took a deep breath, then continued. "I'm sorry. I do not know what came over me. Please, excuse me. I think it is time that I retire for the night. I think it is best if you leave, and do not return. There is nothing good for you here."

The child focused on the Fairy Godmother. They blurted, "Can I come back tomorrow?"

She glared at them. "Child, did you not hear me?"

They puffed their chest. "I don't care if you teach me or not. You're the only one that's cared about what happens to me. Can I please come

back?”

A long silence stretched between them. They eyed each other, the child's tiny wings fluttering every so often. Eventually, she heaved a sigh.

“Do as you wish. You will not listen to me anyway.”

The child brightened and threw their arms around her. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

The Fairy Godmother's body stiffened, but after a moment, she returned the hug. “Of course, child. Just be safe. Please.”

### The Letters

After the child left, I went to the fireplace and knelt on the cold floorboards. I brushed my hand against the bricks until one moved slightly under my palm. I pulled the brick out, and two letters—pristine despite their age—fell. I picked them up, my hands trembling. I struggled to my feet, then sat down at my desk. I carefully opened the envelopes, taking care not to crinkle or tear the rich parchment. The curling script of Ella's and rigid script of Zinnia's letters were so familiar. Even a slight glance at the letters forced emotions to rush through me.

A heavy sob reverberated in my chest as my hands trembled fiercely. I forced myself to read the words:

*Dear Godmother,*

*Thank you so much for everything that you did for me. You gifted me a night of pure bliss; I met the most amazing people, and I will be forever thankful for that. I know you couldn't do much for me, and I saw the pain that it caused you. I'm sorry I worried you so much, and I'm so sorry for the pain that I am going to cause you now. I can't live in this house anymore, but I don't see a way out. This is the only way. I am so, so sorry. Please know that I have always loved you, and I always will.*

*Your goddaughter,*

*Ella*

Tears settled on the parchment, and when I waved my hand, the

stains disappeared. I gently set aside Ella's letter, then took a deep breath. I unfolded the second letter, my heart pounding painfully in my chest. The tears were already gathering, and I had to steady myself. I took a deep breath.

*Dearest Godmother,*

*We have never met, but I know you, dear Godmother. You were there, watching over me since I was born. I could always feel a warm presence, one that made me feel safe. Thank you for that. I truly believe that if you were not there in my darkest years, I would not have survived this long. Thank you so much for all that you did for me. I know how the laws are. Please, do not blame yourself for my death. I know that it is imminent, and it is my choice to go along. I wish I did not have to leave Aurora and you, but I think it's time for all this hatred to end. Know this: even without your physical presence, knowing that you were watching over me and caring for me all these years was comforting. Thank you for your love.*

*Zinnia*

The tears spilled down, and I covered my mouth to stifle the sobs. How could they care about me so much? All I did was bring them misery and was the catalyst for their deaths. If they had never been exposed to my magic, they would still be alive—

I bit into my lip. The child's words played through my mind. Is this what they would have wanted me to do? Read their letters and continue blaming myself? They said they loved me, that I was a safe place for them. That even if I could not do anything, they still felt a kind of peace. They were such vibrant, genuine women. It was not in their nature to lie, especially to an invisible entity.

I folded their letters gently and slid them back into the envelopes. Those women were so—are so precious to me. Even being the Fairy of Death, they felt peace around me. They loved me, just as I loved them. I just never realized it. I smoothed the letters into place, then shut the drawer gently.

Ella, Zinnia...

Please know, I have always, and will always love you both. Give me strength to guide this child into a happier life, like what we had always deserved.

**Madison Knoll** is a second-year English masters graduate student. She plans on pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing in the future while working on her current project, which is also inspired by fairy tales.

## The Perfect Fall

Zachary Bigelow

It's a crisp autumn day, one of those days which only comes around once or twice a year. The temperature is perfect, the trees turning every shade of fall one could imagine, and birds are outside, singing lovely tunes about flying south for the upcoming winter. The leaves are floating along with the light breeze, colorful, and without a care in the world. As if they're saying, "Life's a great journey, and we are all here for one ride." There wasn't a cloud in sight. These are the perfect kinds of autumn days, the ones where it seems nothing bad could ever happen. And yet, it was on one such day my son had died.

It isn't something I had expected, nor even something I had ever planned on having to expect. The last time I expected something was when I had found out I was pregnant with my baby, and on that very same day I had started planning out the rest of our lives together.

He would grow up to be an athletic young man but wouldn't play football because it's too dangerous. He would play something like soccer or baseball, so that he could keep his brain from becoming mush because of concussions. He would make varsity in whichever sport he chose, that wasn't football, and I would go to every single game regardless of my schedule.

He would grow up to be smart, book smart, and follow in his father's steps to become a world-famous scientist. He would cure a huge disease plaguing the world, like cancer or Alzheimer's. Large shoes to fill I'm sure, but he has his father's determination.

Lastly, his greatest trait by far, was that he would love unconditionally, as I always have, and as his grandmother and grandfather always had. He would wear his heart on his sleeve and be

open and honest. He would inevitably get hurt because of it. He would forget love exists for a while, thinking people are only out to use him, and might even turn to alcohol as his father did. But this wouldn't last for longer than a few years because he'd know in his heart that drinking won't ease the pain, it'll just numb it. And as with all painkillers, when the drug leaves the system, all that's left is an empty feeling and a pain worse than before.

I had this all planned out the moment I knew I was having a baby boy. Granted, I also knew one day he would get too old for his mom and leave me. It wouldn't be a sad goodbye because he was just going to a college a few hours away, but the idea of my baby not living at home by my side would destroy me. I would cry for the first few weeks and call him every day. He would get annoyed and start making excuses as to why he couldn't answer the phone, but I would know he is hurting too, he is just too stubborn to admit to his mother he misses me.

Eventually, many years down the road, I would be sick, and he would need to take care of me. I would constantly insist on being independent, but he would shush me and make me take my pills. His wife would also help, and the grandkids too, and life would be perfect. I would die happy and with a smile on my face, spending my last few moments with the perfect son, and his equally perfect family. I would tell him how proud I am of him, and he would just smile because he isn't allowed to refute any of the compliments I give him.

He would deliver a great speech at my funeral and be strong for everyone else in the family. He would go around and ask all the friends close to us if they were okay, and if they needed anything. He would tear himself apart before he let anyone cry for me, but if they did cry, he would be the shoulder they could cry on. Secretly though, in the comfort of his own home and with his wife, he would silently cry for me and regret the years in college when he wouldn't answer my call. I would naturally forgive him, as I too had done the same thing in college.

All these thought-out plans were blown away by the same breeze blowing around the leaves on this perfect autumn day. Of course, Death would pick the perfect day to take away the perfect son, as nothing else

would have been acceptable. It's almost as if He's apologizing, that He understands how much pain this would cause me, but has to take my son away despite all of it. I don't argue, I just silently ask Death to watch over my son, as I failed to do in my life.

It has only been a few hours, but my husband is already passed out drunk in his study. It surprises me to see him this way; he'd been clean for ten years. "Special occasion" is the excuse he'll most likely use. I put a blanket around him and plant a kiss on his forehead before continuing my journey through a now very empty house.

I keep walking and end up in my son's room. I lay in his now forever-empty bed, smelling the sheets and trying to remember all the plans I had made when I learned of my pregnancy and when he was born. In the moment I first held him, I didn't think there was any way I could love someone as much as I loved him. I loved him so much it hurt, and I promised I would be by his side should he ever need me. I told him there was nothing in the world he could do that would take my love away, then he started crying for the first time right there in my arms.

Even now, as I stare at his posters and trophies, laying on his sheets and smelling his terrible cologne, I love him just as much as I did when I first saw him. True love, it would seem, is not something found between strangers who met at a bar one day after hours. True love is not what fairy tales make it out to be. It's not a feeling that takes over two people entirely and they must be together because of fate. True love is a parent's love for their child, and is only realized after one or the other is gone forever.

**Zachary Bigelow** is a biology major here on campus, one of the few not going into the medical program. He works on DNA sequencing for voles in the lab, and in his free time loves to write fiction and play video games. He hopes to one day publish some of the books he has written, and make a difference in the world using the knowledge gained from biology research.

## Interim Inmates

Parker Stenseth

I arrived in St. Louis toward the end of spring to meet with a couple of close friends. We convened there because of the metaphor of the city and because it was located evenly between the three of us. Life was returning to the area, but the air remained chilled. It mattered little. We weren't coming for the air. The purpose of the trip was to give three friends who had gone their separate ways a chance at the lives we wanted. Our time in college was winding down. We were on the closing stretch of our final semesters and were beginning to feel the demands of what came next, even if we didn't know what that was exactly. Lackluster majors forced an identity on us and lined us up for a war that wasn't ours to fight. The trip was our escape rope to draft dodge desk jobs and graduate school. It was our ticket out. We were going to finish our television series pitch and follow in its wake to our ascendancy.

We gathered on the street between the Arch and the old courthouse, positioned between the past and a path to the future. The sun was bright, and we were very concerned with symbols and omens. I was twenty minutes early and sat on my hard-shell suitcase as scooters and Ubers whipped by. A black car pulled before me, and Will got out. He looked weary as we shook hands. It'd been months since we'd seen each other, and I felt better in his presence. Beneath his exhaustion, a perpetual occurrence, his sensibilities were shockingly aligned with popular taste. He was our barometer for progress.

Moments later, Easton sputtered to a halt beside us, riding one of the electric scooters littering the city streets. He had a duffle bag slung over his shoulder and his scarf flapped behind him. He was amusing and well put-together; the only one of us who came across as fully

assembled. I imagined this also meant he had the least at stake. It's probable that under most circumstances he could find himself happy, which made him better equipped for the world.

Together, in near silence, we traversed a few blocks to the loft we'd rented for the next five days. The elevator pushed us to the fifth floor, and we felt that our gestation was nearing its end. Our door swung open and we filed into the cavernous room. It was as we'd expected—as we had needed—a space to float ideas to see if they could fly. The ceilings were high, and the walls were exposed brick broken up by tall windows. The concrete floor was a foundation on which we could bounce without fearing it would crack. There was a single table, couch, and chair surrounded by great volumes of open air.

We threw our bags in a corner. Soon they'd burst open and leak clothes across the floor. This would be a byproduct of our focus. Everything that wasn't the work was at the wayside. We balanced a collection of computers, notebooks, and pens across the table and reviewed our material. Our pitch was for a reality show—but it wasn't like the others, all that dreck. Ours would be real.

The logline was all we had, but it was brilliant: a show in which regular citizens are temporarily thrown into maximum security prisons. The working title was *Interim Inmates*. We were aware of how good this was because of how well it went over at parties. It's true that everyone has a television show idea, but what's not true is that everyone has a brilliant television show idea, and this is what set us apart.

Over the ensuing days we planned to place our idea into writing—which we figured would be easy since we'd spoken of it so many times—and allow the finer details to fall in place. I had one idea that I was particularly proud of and shared it as soon as we had assembled.

"Here's the twist," I said. "Our contestants don't know they're contestants until it's already started."

"How does that make sense?"

"They don't know they're in the show until they're already in prison, and maybe even then we don't tell them. They just have to figure it out, being in prison, what the hell happened to them. It ups the drama

and becomes part of our charm.”

I grinned ear to ear. I couldn't help it. We were dealing with the idea of the century. They seemed hesitant.

“How could that work?”

“Do you mean kidnapping people? Are you asking us to kidnap people for television?”

“Of course not,” I said. “That’s part B of my idea. You’re going to love this. We get a corporate sponsor—I’m thinking Progressive, Marriot, or Enterprise—a company with a contract no one cares about. They become our primary sponsor, ‘*Interim Inmates* brought to you by...’ type of deal, and the exchange is that once a week they throw a clause into one of their contracts that’s essentially a waiver for whatever we’re going to do to our newest contestant. Talking this through out loud, Marriot would probably work best since we’ll know the contestants’ location, but legally we’ll be scotch free.”

“Scot free.”

“Whatever. The main thing is, congratulations, I just made us rich.”

“People couldn't help but watch it,” Will said. He shrugged.

“I don't know,” Easton said. He was on the couch next to Will. I was in the chair. “It might be difficult to pull off. That feels like a risk on the company’s end. And we’d have to pitch this to executives. They might not like the idea of a kidnapping.”

“If they sign a waiver, it’s not a kidnapping.”

“It’s still kind of a kidnapping,” Will said.

“What the hell is going on?” I said. “We just started, and I’m throwing you guys touchdown passes, corner of the endzone, perfect spirals, and you’re watching them fall to the turf like it’s fun for you. The draft is coming up, so what are we doing?”

“It’s probably not viable,” Easton said, “but knock yourself out. Call Geico—”

“Progressive.”

—“And see what they have to say.”

“Fine,” I said, and we left the matter undecided.

Very quickly we realized that none of us were familiar with the

specifics of pitching a reality series. We knew that for a sitcom, one would write a pilot script, and since that wasn't possible for our project, we decided to outline how the first few episodes might be expected to go, highlighting the texture we were after. I lost an early vote and we opted not to include my corporate sponsored "kidnapping" premise into these early outlines.

We spent the remainder of the day in this manner: brainstorming, pacing, and jotting notes. Each of us was to compose a loose outline and present it to the others. We'd then tweak and hone the results until we had a satisfactory showcase. The room darkened, and the three of us moved to our own corners, bent over loose-leaf paper with scratching noises pulled from our pens. An occasional laugh, a sharp exhale, would punch the silence. The air was thick with brains working furiously. We skipped dinner. Greatness doesn't come without sacrifice.

My pages were filled effortlessly. I would glance up to see Easton and Will's twisted faces and knew that I would carry us through this. They were still working at four in the morning when I fell asleep on the couch.

When I woke, I recognized my surroundings at once, and I felt at home. Some people only live in a space; we had taken possession of it. Our energy, our creativity, wafted over every surface. It would linger after we left, impossible to get rid of, like the smell of cat urine. Easton and Will were still asleep, so I crept out and down the street to a coffee shop. When they woke up, we would share our episode outlines. I bought coffee so we would be properly awake. I bought six cups and a dozen bagels, so we wouldn't need to leave the loft again.

I let the door slam behind me as I reentered. They were already up, but I hadn't known this. Their faces were groggy, disheveled, and I wondered if they understood the mountain that lay before us. We sucked down coffee and ate dry bagels before discussing the mountain.

Easton presented his episode first. It was unspoken, but we figured this would allow the momentum to build as we went along. His imagined subject was the variety of man you'd think would do well in prison: big, burly, preferably tattooed. I was nonplussed, but Will

seemed intrigued. It was explained to me that the tension would come from finding out whether the man could perform as expected. If he was as tough as he appeared, or if he was as small and insecure on the inside—like the rest of us.

I offered that we place the macho man in an all-female prison. This seemed more interesting to me. It was unanimously rejected. For the amount of scribbling and brow crunching he'd done, Easton had created very little. This was the extent of his pitch. He used many words to say it, an hour's worth, but this was it: a vague character in an expected situation. Mine was both specific and unpredictable, but Will preceded me, and I held great hopes.

His episode centered around placing a television executive behind bars. It was meta, indulgent, and thumbed its nose at authority. I loved it. Easton raised a valid concern: we'd have to pitch this to the executive we'd be imprisoning. Will reasoned that this was the point, that their solipsistic tendencies—a documented trait of executives—would be so enamored by being mentioned that the context wouldn't matter. We were above the law. Ideally, Will's concept would result as a series of episodes in which several different executives would compete against each other to see who could manage the best or last the longest. Along the way, we'd throw different obstacles at them. We could bunk them with former employees arrested for embezzlement, or simply reveal to the prisoners in the yard which embarrassing pieces of content the soft-bellied executives were responsible for—although we planned to be less than forthcoming on this portion when pitching to the executives themselves. In entertainment as in life, it's often better for one hand not to know what the other hand is up to. I gave Will's episode my seal of approval.

My moment arrived. I stood before the couch without notes and basked in their anticipation. It was mid-afternoon, and I figured after my pitch we'd pass the rest of the day lauding my idea and how successful we were going to be. I looked from Easton to Will to Easton and proceeded to pitch that we send Will's grandmother to prison, which is shocking at first, but, in my defense, is better once you know

that Will's grandmother is blind. I'd hardly finished this sentence—minus the clarification, because Will was very aware that his grandmother was blind—before being met with resistance.

"No," Will said. "Absolutely not."

How could he not see the genius?

"Take it easy," Easton said, and after a moment I realized he was talking to me.

"What's the problem? That's just my first sentence." I had several more of them prepared, some of which likely wouldn't go over well now.

"You're not sending my grandmother to prison."

"It wouldn't be me. It'd be all of us, together."

"We can't do it."

"Of course we can. Do you know how easy it would be to get her to sign the release?"

"I love my grandma."

"As you should. She's a wonderful lady who's made it through a lot, which is why our viewing audience will love her too, and love that she can, hopefully, persevere through this final obstacle."

"Final?"

"Easton, back me up."

"This feels wrong."

"Do you want a television show or not? Do you honestly think we're special for having the idea to lock up innocent people? The actual police do that every day. Where's their show?"

"Cops."

"That's different. The point is we need to differentiate our product. There are nine hundred television channels and eighty streaming services. We're not special. You're not special. If we're not imprisoning unaware grandmothers, do you think anyone will notice? No. Easton, has anyone ever noticed you? Will, why should anyone notice us as we are? The answers are no and no reason. Listen carefully, we will never become successful by writing the words 'Send a guy who looks like he'd fit in prison to prison and see if he actually fits in prison.' I became bored of that sentence three words in. We need to shock, be absurd.

The public has built a tolerance for absurdity. Let's cut through."

I was still standing. They were sitting on the couch. I felt charged, ready to run through the wall, grab a camera, film the whole series then and there. Will rubbed his head. Easton checked his nails.

"I don't think this is quite what I had envisioned," Easton said.

"Then what you had envisioned was boring."

"The ethics of your direction might be kind of hazy," Will said.

"Nothing is more unethical than being boring."

"We might disagree there."

Our loft fell into darkness. The sun set an hour earlier in the city, settling beneath a skyscraper horizon. We had hit a crossroad less than a day after our journey began. They questioned my vision, and I questioned their commitment. None of us could call off our aspirations, so, confined to a single room, we continued to work. It felt as though we were in a closet, butting against each other's presence. We were in a free fall, surrounded by the debris of our discontent. This was fine with me; I would dig my design from the rubble.

Night took hold, and my stack of notes grew. Without interference, I had given over to my whims and followed each to its conclusion. At a certain point—around three in the morning—the ideas ceased to be mine, and I began translating the world as it existed around me in all its absurdity. At four in the morning, I burned Easton and Will's notes. Smoke trailed over the edge of the trash can as I fed it more and more until there was nothing. Destruction was a necessary part of my translation. I left the ashes for them to discover.

In the morning they were furious, and I was almost finished. The work went much faster without their tiresome deliberating. By noon I had every angle charted. My documents were comprehensive and so was my excitement. I still hadn't slept. What use was sleep when something so much larger had been placed at my feet. I needed to work now, take action now. There must be an urgency to creation because we could all die tomorrow. I couldn't wait for the same reason that I couldn't dampen my expression; it would have been a disservice to the idea of life.

Easton and Will had been whispering across the room, their pens still, their brains idle. I asked them to retrieve coffee. They left. The emptiness did me well. It allowed me to expand. I tested my power and made phone calls. With all my talking, days or even years might have passed, but it was only seven hours before Easton and Will returned with a single latte. They made no mention of the line at the café, and I didn't inquire. I had made headway. My mood was inflated, and I tried to force it on them. For whatever reason, they were resistant. I insisted we go out for dinner and drinks, imagining it was around that time. It was.

There was a Peruvian restaurant a block away. Our waitress was German. We ate plantains with Salsa Verde until Johanna stopped bringing them to our table. I thought plantains would diffuse the tension. Delicious as they were, they did not diffuse the tension, and so I talked and talked, hoping that might work instead.

"The key is going to be having familiar sections of the show, segments if you will, and that way each new episode has a feeling of familiarity for returning viewers. They want to be excited by content but not challenged by form. So, I've broken episodes into seven segments, sort of a seven-act structure, and—"

They stopped me mid-sentence, plantain flecks flying from my mouth.

"We're leaving," Easton said.

"We haven't paid yet."

"We're leaving St. Louis."

The two looked solemn but not incredibly so. Sharing one side of the table, they were poised against me. Their expressions were iron. They had nothing more to add. I couldn't understand and didn't much want to.

"Well," I said. "That complicates how we're going to finish the project. It's possible that—"

"Stop. The pitch is off."

"We're making breakthroughs every second. It's going to be the greatest thing anyone's ever seen."

"You started a fire and burnt our notes."

"Yeah, but only because they were bad."

"Your ideas are violent and intrusive. No executive will like them, and nobody will want to watch them."

"People will watch because they're violent and intrusive."

"Easton and I are flying out in the morning."

"What? Do you want me to apologize for pushing you a little bit, for trying to work toward the best product? You should be thanking me. I've been steering this boat the whole trip. You were handling the wheel like children, heading straight for the icebergs, so I'm sorry if I stopped you. I am the Titanic. Do you hear me?"

"I thought you were the captain?"

"Shut up. I am the Titanic, and you, you're the stupid little lifeboats. As long as you don't steer us into the iceberg, you can just tag along, but instead, you want to sink us all."

"The lifeboats didn't sink after the Titanic hit the iceberg."

"Do you think metaphors are easy? Did you think the entertainment business was going to be easy? They're both difficult. It's not going to be fun. It's not supposed to be fun. It's about learning how to get punched in the face and spitting out the bloody teeth before asking to be punched again."

"I don't think it should have to be."

"Then maybe this isn't the business for you."

"We're starting to see that."

"Johanna, the check," I shouted across the room. They flinched, and I made a decision to salvage what had been lost. "Have you bought your tickets yet?" I asked.

"No."

"Allow me to comp them. I have miles. Consider it a token of our friendship despite this."

They didn't protest. We agreed to organize it as soon as we returned to the loft. Johanna brought the check, and I covered that as well. I wasn't wealthier than they were, but this was the cost of something greater.

I booked their flights, splurging and signing them up for the

premium pass through security. They were pleased, so the night had a fine mood for such a falling out. We drank wine and talked about movies and how it had been when we enjoyed these things.

Easton and Will's eyes grew heavy, sedated from the drink. A streetlight buzzed through the window, flickering orange. Our conversation slowed and stalled. They fell asleep against each other on the couch. I was alone in the loft with my television pitch.

I watched the camera monitor, safely distanced from the scene, when they woke up in their cells. The long-term sedatives had left them groggy, so it was several minutes before they noticed their surroundings: a prison cell, cold and grey with stiff bars. Their panic was visceral, even more so when Will noticed his grandmother in the opposite cell, still thoroughly drugged. They rattled at the door and yelled for help, but no one at the St. Louis Correctional Facility came to heed their calls. The Delta Airlines rep stood next to me and was pleased with this early footage. They'd taken a chance on me, on my ideas, but our unique arrangement was just another marketing angle, another reason why the brashness of *Interim Inmates* couldn't help but succeed.

**Parker Stenseth** is an undergraduate student studying English, economics, and French. He has a special interest in film, particularly the silent comedians and French cinema, and will be pursuing graduate studies after this academic year.

## The Firefly Trapper

Jona L. Pedersen

*When the world was still burning, the angels came to us with rain. They extinguished all of the world's fire. But when the rain turned eternal, we got down on our knees and prayed for warmth and light again. In their pity, the angels released a vermillion star into our realm. They might as well have said "Prometheus" when they told us that—in order to restore the world's fire—we must recover the Star.*

As I wade through the shallows, I bear the lantern. Fireflies flicker inside of it, murmuring luciferin codes. The hundred-year-old rain drowns out the thuds of their exoskeletons ramming against the glass.

Something brushes past my ankles. I lower the lantern. The light of the fireflies allows me a glimpse into the murky waters. A carp's dragon-scaled tail shimmers, then disappears into a forest of reeds. I press on. The fringes of my cloak float on the surface. I listen to the water lapping against my knees. Waves stretch on till the end of the world.

The farther I wander from the village, the higher the water climbs. Eventually, it reaches past my shorts, then to my waist. I'm about to turn back when I notice a glow from the mangroves. The branches shelter a swarm. While I've never seen stars—they're long concealed by rainclouds—I think the fireflies might look like them.

I cast my net over the swarm. Then I pull back. With arachnid precision, I pluck each firefly and place it in the lantern. I collect a couple dozen throughout the night.

Guided by the firefly lantern, I return to my lighthouse. There used to be a coastline in its stead, but now, the structure stands halfway underwater. To get inside, I must either climb or dive.

I dive. The fireflies grow frantic as I submerge myself. Their frenzied, blinking light ward off the eyes watching me from the depths.

I plunge through the door of the lighthouse. My chest tightens from asphyxia. Once inside, I push against the staircase steps, propelling my body upwards. The weight of my clothes holds me back. But I reach the third floor. Water ripples over the floorboards as I breach the surface. Gasping for air, lungs burning, I hoist my body onto the planks.

My cloak drips. I quickly undress, hanging my clothes on the curtain hanger of the nearest window. Outside, I see the distant treehouse village, sleeping above rafts and paddy fields. Marshes separate it from my lighthouse on the coast. For a heartbeat, I linger on the view; linger on a life that is no more. The lantern crackles as the fireflies flash their abdomens, anchoring me in the moment. I am not a fisher anymore. I am something else.

I am a seeker of the vermilion Star.

I go up to the fourth floor. In the center of the room, a wick connects to the ceiling. It winds upwards like Jack's beanstalk. Once upon a time, the lighthouse would cast its beam here. But no longer. Instead, fireflies sit on the walls, the ceiling, the wick. They are the only light in the dark.

I pry open the lantern. My newest firefly harvest trickles out. I watch them from my hammock as they join the rest of the swarm. The hammock—which I made from the sails of a shipwreck—holds me in a coarse embrace. The hundred or so fireflies twinkle softly, slowly drifting around me into the misty hours of morning. Some fall asleep in locks of my hair. And that night, we dream of stars, like so many nights just like this.

I trap fireflies every night. Most nights I find none, but I still look. Except during nights of the full moon. Only then does light shine through the clouds. Under the moon's nebulous glow, I travel to the treehouse village. The villagers greet me on the docks. They offer me food and supplies in exchange for information about the landscape and fish migration routes.

When I finish trading, I hear the light drumming of footsteps running across the dock. "Trapper! Trapper!" a small voice shouts.

I turn around. A young girl runs up to me. I nod in greeting.

She returns the gesture with a short bow. "How many did you catch this time, Trapper?" she asks.

"More than last time." I smile. "But you're not here to talk about the fireflies, are you?"

Her gaze turns down to her feet, where fading leech marks cover her russet brown skin. She opens her mouth as if to speak, but no words come out.

I reach into my satchel. The girl dares a glance at me as I do. When she sees me notice, her cheeks redden. I pull out a card. The faded paper frames an illustration of an antlered serpent, coiling itself around a bridge. Some of the edges are iridescent, indicating that it may have been coated at one point. But most of the color is gone, and the text has paled with time and dampness. The only part which remains legible informs me that the card is supposed to represent an "enchanted creature" of some sort. In the corners, there are numbers and symbols I don't understand. "I came across this in one of the ghost towns. You should add it to your collection."

As I hold out the card, she snatches it into her tiny hands. She exclaims, "I can't wait to show Courier!" Almost immediately, she scurries off. "Thank you, Trapper!" she shouts on her way down the dock. I watch her disappear into the hollowed-out trunk of a tree. Her frame is just small enough to fit through.

Once she is gone, I head to the tallest tree. The trunk is so wide that my arms can't reach around it—I would need at least three other people to encircle it. I climb up the branches. The Elder waits for me on top. She sits cross-legged on the veranda, which is nailed into the crown of the tree.

"Welcome back," she says.

I bow to her. She gets up, then heads into the little wooden treehouse. I follow.

Inside, I watch her gently wrap dried sheets of seaweed around

hard-boiled seagull eggs. The steadiness of her wrinkled hands always surprises me. After months of trapping, my own hands are shakier, wearier.

She offers me seagull eggs for supper. I accept. As we eat, she asks, "Are you closer to finding the vermilion Star?"

I shake my head. "I have near a thousand fireflies. But no Star."

"Don't lose hope, Trapper. Our fishers say they've seen the Star hiding in the firefly swarms, like a wolf in sheep's clothing. But none of them share your dedication." She rubs a pale worry stone between her palms.

"Sometimes I wonder if leaving this place behind will be worth it," I say.

"I understand why you might think that way. But you're braver and cleverer than most. You just need patience. And caution. Another bloom will roll through soon."

I look out the window. Beyond the hanging branches, endless tides lie undisturbed on the horizon. The rain is barely a drizzle, and it's difficult to imagine that anything will happen. But even if her conviction is a mystery to me, I thank her for the meal and advice.

I make the journey back, bringing provisions with me from the village. The Elder's warning comes true the following morning. When I wake up in my hammock, jellyfish surround the lighthouse. They cling together like mold, painting the sea scarlet. Their sheer numbers are enough to cover the ocean's surface. As they float, it almost looks like I could walk on top of them. But I know better. For the next days and nights, all I can do is watch as they infiltrate the marshlands and encroach on the village. I am trapped, waiting for the whims of the tides to carry the jellyfish away. But they linger and fester, soaking the sea in red.

As time goes on, the fireflies start to lay eggs everywhere. Their eggs—shaped like tiny, white pearls—cover the cupboards, the tapestry, and even my hair. The parents warm them with their abdominal torches. And, on the fifth night, they hatch.

The Elder once told me that firefly larvae only hatch in the summer,

then pupate in the spring. But in the never-ending rain, they lost track of time. Sometimes metamorphosis comes swiftly, other times not at all. My brood hatches weeks earlier than normal, and they pupate prematurely. Over the next few days, a hundred crystallized larvae form dimly lit constellations on the ceiling. It keeps my mind off the bleeding sea of jellyfish, off the tiring taste of seaweed, off the thrumming rain.

On the eleventh night, the fireflies complete their transformation. They gnaw through their own flesh, finally freeing themselves. Some are missing their forewings. Segmented plates—remnants of their larval stages—stick out from their thoraxes and abdomens like broken glass. Then, in their contorted flight, they join the rest of the swarm.

A vortex of light takes shape in the center of the lighthouse, gradually, until the swarm surpasses a thousand. Their buzzing grows louder than the wails of the last bison, a sound ingrained in my memory from when it drowned in the marshes. The light and noise merge into a blinding, deafening sphere.

For the first time in a hundred years, the lighthouse ignites. A flame crawls up the wick as fireflies consume it in their light. My gaze is drawn to the window, as a beacon now surveils the horizon. The ray of the lighthouse bounces off the bodies of the jellyfish, scattering shimmers of red throughout the air. Light blankets the world.

From the beacon, a silhouette emerges. The figure floats on paper-thin wings, advancing towards the light source. Towards the lighthouse. As red reflect off the jellyfish, the figure is tinted in vermillion. They reach out their hand to knock on the window. I open it.

The being enters. Brilliant light obscures their features, but their silhouette mirrors the shape of a human—aside from three pairs of dragonfly wings growing from their back. The first pair looks stunted compared to the second and third, which almost span across the room.

“You must be the Trapper,” the being proclaims. Fireflies flit around them.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“The angels sent me,” they say.

I understand now. “That was a long time ago, Star.”

"I waited."

"They all say you're too late."

"Yet, you searched for me all this time, did you not?"

When I don't respond, the Star reaches out their hand. I take it without second thought. Their touch is so warm I almost flinch. But before I can react, the swarm swells around the Star, soon swallowing my hand in their light.

I pull back. There is no resistance. Only warmth. As I stumble, the hammock catches my fall.

At the same time, the vortex of light engulfs the being. Light crackles around them like electricity. It grows and grows, like a moon afloat in the lighthouse. It grows so bright I can no longer distinguish the fireflies. Then, the light bursts through the opening of the window. I run over.

Only a single firefly—its deformed wings unable to carry it—lingers on the sill. The rest of the swarm tears up the sky in a ball of light. I watch them disintegrate like a comet. The Star disappears alongside them.

In their trail, a crack forms. Clouds part, and light trickles through. The silence is larger than anything I know. Louder than the last bison, louder than the swarm. I hold my breath. The smoke forces me to cough.

The rain stopped.

The lighthouse burns.

**Jona L. Pedersen** grew up in Norway, but has since relocated to the US where they are pursuing English and biology at the University of North Dakota. Their work appears in *Floodwall*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *The Allegheny Review*. When they aren't studying or writing, they like to explore the outdoors, roll dice with friends, and create art. Other passions such as wildlife biology, entomology, and environmental justice also inspire their writing. Check out their other work at [www.jonalpedersen.com](http://www.jonalpedersen.com) or follow their Twitter @JonaLPedersen for updates.

# *photography*

*Portfolio by  
Madison Waldron*

1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



**Madison Waldron** is a current forensic psychology Masters student here at UND. She obtained her undergraduate degree from UND in psychology with a criminal justice minor. Along with her passion for science and law, Maddi has a strong passion for photography. Starting photography when she was just 13, she now runs a photography business in hopes to take it full time this summer.

***poetry***

## Carrots

Charles Henry

Can you just write a poem  
about random things,  
like a car, or socks, or a vegetable?  
Could I write about a carrot?

I mean I guess I could...just try to rhyme it  
with carrot  
like, parrot or ferret,  
but that doesn't seem to have any merit,  
at least not inherently.

Perhaps I could be more sentimental and talk about  
how a carrot:  
with friends,  
you can always share it;  
but then again,  
not unless you're willing to pare it  
with a knife.

But who could be so torrid  
to murder the hero of the plot  
by cutting them in half on a board  
or a block.

Not me, I fear. Oh dear, I wouldn't know where at to start.

I guess, then, there's no other way to prepare it;  
There's simply no poetry that can be had with a carrot!

**Charles Henry** is a second semester English MA student at UND, with interests in composition theory, sociolinguistics, and British literature. He received his undergraduate in English and Education at West Liberty University, where he also began his creative writing journey. His writings often deal with exploring the underside of the expected experience of language and examining the shifting forms and conventions of writing. Charles has lived all over the eastern US, originally growing up on a farm in the Ohio valley.

## Stars Unobscured

Delaney Otto

Take me to the untouched sky  
Where smog and gas have not reached  
Take me to where the comets streak by  
Where the artificial glare hasn't breached

I want to see the lights above  
Who cast their visages from years ago  
Time preserved in flashing pinpricks  
History that's all aglow

A place where the cars don't rumble  
A place where neon signs don't survive  
A place where the wildlife's lungs are unclogged  
A place where they can thrive

Take me to the unobstructed heavens  
That the suited men soaked in cigar smoke haven't seen  
Take me to where the old things watch  
And the quiet is pure and serene

I want to rest awhile there  
And breathe in something fresh  
I want to gaze at the things we'll never touch  
That will never know of our unrest

**Delaney Otto** is a third-year student at UND with a major in communications and a minor in English. She's a fan of horror, fantasy, magical realism, and happy endings. Aside from writing, music and art are also very important to her, and she has a firm belief that anyone can create if they have the desire to do so.

## After Pose

Abigail Petersen

*How many of them fell?*

Your beautiful babies  
dancing amongst the stars  
with glazed eyes  
and aching bodies.  
Who tore apart their physical self  
and remade them in their own image.

The first AIDS cases were reported in the United States in 1981. By December 31, 2000, 774,467 people had been diagnosed with AIDS and 448,060 of those people died. Of these cases, 79% were men and 61% were black or Hispanic.

*How many of them fell, God?*

How many listened to the rain  
one too many times  
and were punished for it?  
Who were caught in the shadows  
like alley cats  
in a mass exodus.

AIDS was most common amongst homosexual individuals. Socioeconomic factors associated with increased risk of contracting AIDS are homophobia, high rates of poverty and unemployment, and lack of access to health care.

*How many of your children were abandoned?*

Who found new mothers  
amongst the sea of  
disowned children,  
all looking for  
a home.

*Save us.*

**Abigail Petersen** is a criminal justice and sociology major at UND. She enjoys writing fiction and poetry. She draws most of her inspiration from the world around her, music, and her pets.



to dedicate my thoughts and my breaths,  
my actions and my death,  
to devote one hundred percent of myself,  
to something that may not even be true

still, I want to finally believe in you.

***Jasmine Duran** is a senior at UND, where she's majoring in philosophy. She likes writing poems. Sometimes, she even writes good ones.*

## Two Poems

Casey Fuller

### The Sound of Outlaw Sprint Cars

—River City Speedway, Grand Forks, North Dakota

A billion bison circling a mountain  
of fire. Dante. Giant lions. Rabid dragons.

Waiting, the feeling a fascist makes  
in a soccer stadium, that brief pause,

after a speech—then, death applause.  
An oil tanker exploding, the quiet port

razed, gone. A thousand chainsaws  
attacking an alternative school. Doug

Stewart's Hemi-Cuda when I was 9.  
Forest fires versus tornadoes. American

flame throwers versus foreign rainforests.  
The idea of death suddenly appearing

real. No, a tornado taking a forest fire  
over. A tsunami of fire. A fire seen

from satellites. Then, that fire reaching  
those satellites. Total fire. Fire everywhere.

A conflagration of flame. The whole  
Earth burning. Star sound, a sun.

## **The Kittens**

i caught two magnificent kittens  
and held them in my arms  
one a roughneck tuxedo  
with broken yellow teeth  
another a calico i flew to my mom  
from texas to seattle  
siblings they never ran  
after i brought out the wet food  
i named the toothless tuxedo baldie  
and the flawless calico harriet  
after the shiest character in emma  
who falls hopelessly in love  
again and again  
full blown roses i knew  
i had to take them to the vet  
to get them fixed  
but i didn't have money  
i moved to san antonio  
to fix my broken marriage  
my wife just lost the job  
we moved to texas for  
three weeks after we moved  
like all desperate man  
i began looking out windows  
and there they appeared  
first as a group of three  
baldwin harriet and a third  
i never named  
tired with a ripped ear  
baldie's skinny body  
was scabbed from

endless fights with  
a giant tom  
harriet young so young  
and already pregnant  
slept on a palm tree branch  
i found a place that would  
take them but couldn't promise  
they wouldn't be killed  
then i found a coalition  
who said if i trained  
to capture wild cats  
i could take them to a vet  
any third wednesday of the month  
for only five bucks  
traps i found are  
rectangular cages  
that slide close on one end  
and are stored by volunteers  
who the cat coalition  
divides into regions  
you had to schedule with your region  
coordinate with your regional volunteer  
schedule with your vet  
document the attempt  
and after you lured the cat in the trap  
if you could lure the cat in the trap  
you have to take them to the vet  
at the time they said  
then store them in your house  
in the rectangular cages  
for forty eight hours  
if you miss your wednesday  
you have to return your trap  
and try again

in a disheartening month  
ruined by her lost job  
my wife blamed me  
for moving to texas  
and the fight she had  
with her bosses  
i made all the food  
washed all the dishes  
washed all the clothes  
walked the dog  
took out the trash  
never complained  
had a job that would start  
in two weeks  
it was over  
and we knew it was over  
before we split  
and she moved to minnesota  
i saw baldie get run over  
with his nameless brother  
in a miracle  
baldie made it out  
but his nameless brother  
was smashed on the street  
tried to get up  
and go on  
but fell  
writhed  
and fell again  
i watched from the window  
and my wife  
who no longer loved me  
saw me crying  
unable to speak

in front of the glass  
then she walked out  
picked it up  
hugged it  
moved it to some grass  
so no one else  
could run it over  
again.

**Casey Fuller** is an English PhD student at the University of North Dakota.

## >Remembering John Hauser

Leah Hanley

*From: UND Notifications ([noreply@und.edu](mailto:noreply@und.edu))*

*The University of North Dakota community is deeply saddened to learn of the death of John Hauser, a student majoring in Commercial Aviation from Chicago, Illinois.*

*We extend our heartfelt condolences to John's family, friends, classmates, and fraternity brothers. They are all in our thoughts and prayers.*

On the afternoon I realized that John Hauser was gone,  
he had been dead almost four days.

The afternoon sky, as the sun slowly set,  
was a pure crystal of rosy purple  
except for a few low clouds that looked like  
blobs of paint smeared with a palette knife.

John Hauser would never admire another painted sky.

Walking home, I saw a solitary plane  
flying toward the airport, and wondered  
if the pilot was thinking about John Hauser, too.

That night, on my knees at the side of my son's bed,  
his hair smoothed back and cheeks rosy with sleep,  
we clasped hands and prayed the Lord our souls to keep.

He didn't understand my lingering gaze  
and laughed at my repeated *I love yous*.

Leaving his room, I prayed that John Hauser's mother  
could remember similar nights.

Sometime in the deep evening, my eyes opened with a jerk.  
John? John Hauser! John! *Oh no. No, no, no.*  
In the dark, I searched through records, and found  
his name on last year's class roster: John Hauser.  
And then I saw his face, illuminated, blue light,  
and I asked him, demanding, "John, what happened?"  
But he just gave me his polite smile  
and looked away.  
Reaching out for comfort, I woke the father of my child.  
His hands found mine, warm, soothing. He left  
to fetch some water, and came back cheerful, "It snowed."  
*I'm not ready for that*, but went to the window, compelled.  
Not snow; every surface was alight with  
a thick blanket of moonlight.

**Leah Noel Hanley** is currently in pursuit of a Master of Arts degree in English at the University of North Dakota. Her writing focuses on the exploration of deeply human experiences, through which she hopes to inspire empathy across cultural boundaries. She also hopes to inspire conservation and preservation of our Earth through her use of natural subjects and landscapes. When Leah is not writing (or grading papers), she is likely cross stitching, cooking, or spending quality time with her loved ones.

## The Brides of Achilles

Olivia Kost

O brides of Hades,  
to be cut down in your youth,  
by a father,  
    an enemy,  
all for a man who could not heel.  
How did you find the strength  
to remain resolute,  
    unyielding  
against masculine martyrdom?

O brave Poluxene,  
    to be robbed of nobility,  
    a life,  
        a hope.

And yet, you welcomed death  
with heart bared  
for all to admire  
the loveliness  
    of unblemished ivory and dripping scarlet.  
Could you hear the wails of your mother  
as she petitioned  
for a place  
    at your steadfast side?  
Please,  
grant me an ounce of your vigor  
which allowed you to remain  
like marble in your forced fortitude.

O innocent Iphigenia,  
    victim of Agamemnon—  
    a father's unyielding hubris.  
Under false pretenses did you go willingly  
    to your sacrifice—  
    a promise of marriage,  
    union unto death.  
Did your knees falter as your altar  
transformed—  
    cream to crimson?  
Did you feel the winds rise as your breath faded?

O sweet, budding Parthenos, avenged by rage-filled mothers—  
    Maternal visions tinged murderous merlot.  
Did their strength course through your opened veins  
as you died for a man who was never intended to be  
yours?  
As your daughter through unfaltering femininity alone,  
    allow your strength to flow  
    through me as I stand,  
    unwavering woman,  
    as you once did.

**Olivia Kost** is currently in her final semester at UND, graduating with degrees in English and secondary education. She is originally from Bismarck, North Dakota. Olivia would not be where she is today without the support of both her family and friends. Her love for literature was ignited by her father and their many trips to Barnes and Noble since she was a child.

## Two Poems

Daria Cullen

### Chocolate Orange

Green and gold hang from the branches  
of the drooping pine and  
gold beads weave through the mementos of our childhood as  
the tv turns blue. We sigh in contentment  
at the adventures of Jo, Beth, Amy, and Meg.

Tomorrow, we would receive chocolate oranges in our  
handmade stockings—  
the same every year. They would be wedged  
at the bottom, filling out the knitted toe.  
A handy placeholder.

Always, the six of us tried our best to save and section  
the small gift  
throughout the chilled brown months  
of the new year.

Afterwards, I would remember  
the scene in little women where the sisters  
were all gifted sunlit oranges.  
My mother told me it was a luxury.

Though, I didn't need that to be explained,  
as I kept the reflective blue foil wrapped  
carefully around the orange-tinged chocolate  
for months to come.

## September

Inside—a child rolls around,  
Sticks his feet into your side,

Lies on your lungs and  
Answers to the sound of the father's voice.

Gains an ounce a day and kneads his tiny fist  
By your hip.

A deer in the quiet morning field wanders off,  
Not to be seen again

For a while.  
The small squirrel runs from hollow in tree to tree,

Fixing its patchwork nest of  
Burnt-marshmallow brown.

The stark overbearance of summer blue leads to  
Grey and white,

Fluff and smog.  
A bite and gnawing wind caresses,

The tree branches ripple in  
Stagnant puddles.

The season greets  
Death as

The vivid greens that have been made anew from forest fires  
Are dying.

The color of earth  
Rises up to the sky.

Deep brown and roiling red  
What a strange blending of time—

This month of September.

**Daria Cullen** is an English MA student at the University of North Dakota. After many long years in academia, she looks forward to graduating this spring and reading and writing as much as she can possibly fit into her schedule. In her poetry, she reflects on her childhood in the backwoods of Louisiana, and her subsequent move to an oil boomtown in North Dakota.

## **A Conversation with Crow**

Elena Uhlenkamp

I had a conversation with a Crow,  
Her black feathers shimmering in the sun.  
I asked her, "How should I sing?"  
With her beautiful gruff voice, she said,  
"However you would like."

I asked Miss Crow, "How will I know what I like?"  
She ruffled her feathers and softly cooed,  
"When you sing the way you want to,  
Your heart will sing along."

"How will I know when my heart sings?"  
Miss Crow cawed into the bright day,  
"You will just know! It will leap like a frog  
And feel like a thunderstorm.  
Your heart will sigh like a waterfall  
And it will sing like a bluebird.  
When you finally sing your song,  
You will feel it in your heart."

Miss Crow looked down from the lamp post,  
Her eyes glittering in the sun.  
"I can already see the question on your lips;  
'Will what I sing truly matter?'  
And, my dear, the truth is  
Your song does matter.  
So sing it, loud and proud  
Through the valleys and the mountains  
And the streets of the town!  
Sing your song; Then, you will fly."

**Elena Uhlenkamp** came from a small town in the heart of Minnesota to UND to study English. She enjoys reading and writing fantasy, especially if it involves magic and dragons. She also likes to dabble in realistic fiction, science fiction, and horror. Besides reading and writing, Elena loves doing escape rooms with friends and family, embroidering, and trap shooting. She has a fantasy trilogy in the works and hopes to publish the first book in the next few years.

## Butterflies

Aubrey Roemmich

I haven't been feeling very good lately  
Very poorly in fact  
I don't sleep well anymore  
And the sun sets much too early

*(Please don't tell me it will all pass, it's much more than that)*

The clock hasn't stopped ticking

*(Oh goodness, how much more narcissistic could I get?)*

Could someone find me a glass lake?

*(There is not a single thing I could feel that hasn't been  
felt before)*

Cue the poets and the painters

I feel it all in my stomach  
I remember *(haha, get it, Mr. Fuller?)* when they used to  
Be described as butterflies  
That was a nice thought, wasn't it?  
Butterflies are always so gentle  
But this feeling in my stomach won't let me keep food down

I feel isolated  
Alone  
Desolate  
Adrift in a world that does not care for me  
Oh god, I hate feeling bad for myself, but I want someone to hold me  
and tell me it will be okay

I will be okay

I will be okay

But sometimes I believe I won't be

*(Don't worry reader I am too much of a coward to ever hurt myself,  
but sometimes I stop eating in an attempt to finally feel something)*

Skin and bones, skin and bones

*(It never works)*

I can feel my skin and bones

*(Please read this all in a whisper)*

They're too loud, they're all too loud

I've composed a text to my friend

But I don't want her to worry about me

*(I also don't want her to forget about me. She is having the time of  
her life at a different college with new friends, and I am so fucking  
proud of her, but Jesus Christ I am so afraid she will outgrow me)*

But I want her to reassure me

I need to know that she still loves me

Because I don't love me but if she does, I will be okay

Hey! I just wanted you to know I've been thinking about you, and I am so glad we are friends. I really don't know what I would do without you <3

Anyways, I'm super excited for the Mt. Joy concert this summer! I've never been to Colorado, and I know that this band is going to be so good live.

We need to FaceTime soon. I miss talking to you face to face :)

Read 10:58 pm

I haven't felt like myself in a while. My head and heart feel heavy... honestly, I really wanna go home and I don't think I wanna be a lawyer anymore. I feel like I'm drowning in everyone's expectations and I'm going to let them all down.

Sorry, that's a lot to handle. I'm not trying to dump it all on you. I just needed someone to hear it. Anyways, I'm really looking forward to seeing you over break.

Sent 1:30 am

I don't know why that first text says "Read 10:58 pm"  
She's never left me on read before  
She never will  
But I'm so afraid she will

I miss when butterflies in my stomach felt nice  
I miss when I was a happy little girl  
I miss all the things I know I'm missing out on  
I miss. I miss. I miss.

**Aubrey Roemmich** is currently a sophomore at UND. She is majoring in English and minoring in political science while working towards a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing and editing. She enjoys spending her time reading, writing, and going on walks.

## Click

Claire Arneson

We regret to inform you. Click.

I am sorry to say.

Click. Click.

Just once I'd like to hear: "It's going to be okay."

Click.

He didn't make it back. Click.

His body hasn't been found. Click. Click.

I wish I could hear his voice. God, I miss that sound.

Click. Click. Click.

**Claire Arneson** is an English major with a minor in communication. She can be found starting and finishing a book in a day and writing for herself and the Dakota Student newspaper. She loves to hang out with friends, going to hockey games, and being outside.

## Grief

Emilia Adkinson

Grief doesn't just show up the day they die.

It shows up in the morning,  
when you can barely remember their voice.

It shows up on a Tuesday,  
when they aren't there to take you to the library.

It shows up on your birthday,  
when you realize they won't be calling you.

It shows up when you're switching through channels,  
and their favorite show is on.

It shows up on your wedding day,  
when they aren't there to walk you down the aisle.

It shows up in aisle eight of the grocery store,  
where their favorite snacks are.

It shows up on sleepless nights,  
when you wonder if you will ever be okay again.

It shows up on holidays,  
when they aren't in their favorite chair smiling.

It shows up when their favorite song comes on,  
and they aren't there to sing along with you.

Grief doesn't just show up the day they die,  
It shows up unexpectedly, everywhere.  
But it is never invited.

**Emilia Rose Adkinson** is a junior majoring in English at UND. She is working towards her certificates in both creative writing and editing and publishing, with the hopes of being an author or a publisher. She is originally from South Carolina, and she spends her free time reading, doing puzzles, and facetimeing her family. She loves journaling and writing, and hopes to touch people with her work.

# *digital art*

*Portfolio by  
Hailey Narloch*

## A Reminder of the Complexities of World Creation



Collage of conceptual sketches, to show a sliver of progress in the art of character and world design.

## Lysstar Aurora



Acrylic on canvas

## Dreams of Syn



*Digital Painting. The first of its kind from the artist, Dreams of Syn is inspired by the lofi aesthetic and the color pink, a humorous contrast to the morally gray subject of the artwork.*

**Hailey Narloch** is an avid creator of what most consider the unreal.



***nonfiction***

## Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino.

Maren Schettler

If there was ever a movie that perfectly bridged the gap between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the classic late-90s rom com *You've Got Mail* is it. Hear me out, anyone who despises rom coms would likely also despise this movie. Those who are decidedly not self-proclaimed hopeless romantics see the silly idealism *You've Got Mail* portrays, and if they cannot find it within themselves to push aside their realist mindsets for 119 minutes, this movie cannot be enjoyed. (I, on the other hand, am on the edge of my seat every time the love interests come in contact with each other, in agony—as is Kathleen Kelly about her favorite book characters, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy—over whether they are really going to get together. The skillfully orchestrated dramatic irony *kills* me in the best, most excruciating way.) What makes this rom com stand out among others is its wonderfully quippy humor (who could possibly resist the witty charm of duo Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan?) and the fact that the movie itself is a romanticized snapshot of the beginning of a new social age—the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*You've Got Mail* represents a constant push and pull between the old and the new—a blind date in a café or meeting anonymously in an email chatroom, endearing small businesses or booming corporations, local coffee shops or the glossy new Starbucks stores. Obviously (and thankfully), the phrase “you’ve got mail” is left behind in the era of dial-up internet, but what from the movie remains today? Like the allure of receiving love letters in the mail, we watch *You've Got Mail* with growing nostalgia for what we would now call “simpler times.” We long for days past when people cared for cultural and interpersonal growth rather than the bottom line. Wouldn't it be nice to return to a time when online

dating wasn't the norm, and when Starbucks was an exciting, growing business that most believed only the chic or intellectual or business-minded people felt comfortable venturing into?

Now, I'm not about to analyze the pros and cons of internet chatrooms, nor will I talk about the progression of commercial monopolies. I'm here to talk about coffee—its culture, aesthetic, and how in the world *You've Got Mail* unintentionally predicted America's growing obsession with it.

When the movie came out in 1998, Starbucks had been opening stores all across the United States, introducing the West to overpriced specialty coffee. Starbucks is shown throughout the movie, and it's repeatedly mentioned in the context of drinking expensive cappuccinos while browsing through the film's notorious chain bookstore, Fox Books. At the beginning of the movie, before we know the true character of ambitious businessman Joe Fox (Tom Hanks), he casually emails Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) a comment on the newly ubiquitous coffee shops:

The whole purpose of places like Starbucks is for people with no decision-making ability whatsoever to make six decisions just to buy one cup of coffee. Short, tall, light, dark, caf, decaf, low-fat, non-fat, etc. So people who don't know what the hell they're doing, or who on earth they are can—for only \$2.95—get not just a cup of coffee but an absolutely defining sense of self: Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino.

Hold up. My cup of coffee has nothing to do with my identity.

Well, at the very least, it certainly has to do with social culture, which will define you in one way or another, whether you like it or not.

Coffee culture broke out in the United States after Howard Schultz, one of the men who expanded Starbucks to a \$110 billion corporation, returned from a business trip in Europe with lofty aspirations to broaden America's view of the caffeinated drink. Prior to the '90s, coffee was a morning starter, a break in the workday, or an afternoon pick-me-up.

This reliance-based view of coffee differed greatly from most other cultures' coffee-drinking rituals. This ritual often involved the hours-long process of washing, roasting, and grinding the coffee beans themselves, and then conversing with friends and family. Even in Europe, coffee was not meant to be taken to-go; it was something to be sipped while pondering life or thinking about whatever Europeans think about while sitting in the sun on the veranda. Regardless, this was the vision for Starbucks in America: slow down, sit in the lounge, sip coffee, read a book, chat with a friend or colleague, and...get an absolutely defining sense of self.

Even if you don't drink coffee, there's a good chance you drink tea, sit in cafés, or have somehow—through our culture's current, wild obsession with coffee and its aesthetic—been influenced by this craze. In my experience as a coffee-reliant college student, I see it everywhere. Most of my friends have it on a daily basis, either from Starbucks, our campus coffee shop, or their Keurig. It has entirely infiltrated pop culture: the television series *Gilmore Girls* and *Friends* center around Luke's Diner and Central Perk, respectively; TikTok provides a forum for Starbucks customers to share their unique flavor combinations, including the ridiculously long order by a guy named Edward, which went viral after a barista posted his order on social media (and subsequently lost her job); the aesthetically chill lo-fi song "Coffee" by Beabadoobea became the sixth most-streamed song of the summer of 2020; dozens of "coffee shop vibe" playlists have invaded Apple Music and Spotify. The list goes on and on. Coffee is now a conversation starter ("I can't keep my eyes open, I haven't had my coffee yet"—yes, *my* coffee). It's mentioned in every cute indie I-love-seeing-you-wake-up-in-the-morning song (see "Cold Coffee" by Ed Sheeran, "Best Part" by H.E.R. and Daniel Caesar, "Coffee" by Quinn XCII, "Falling in Love at a Coffee Shop" by Landon Pigg, or "Black Coffee" by Ryan Wartick). It's simply inescapable.

Because coffee has integrated itself so irreversibly into the fabric of our society, your choice of coffee (or your choice *not* to drink coffee) does label something about your individuality within the culture's

broader context. Do you drink coffee or not? Why? Do you drink only black coffee, or do you add cream and sugar? The truth is, no one but you cares. That's why it's a "defining sense of self." Joe Fox is clearly mocking those who feel better about themselves by decisively establishing a piece of their identity that Doesn't. Even. Matter.

Now that we've established that coffee culture is undeniably part of being American, the question you must ask is whether you will allow yourself to be defined by something as arbitrary as your coffee order. True, there is a stereotype attached to your choice of coffee, just as your clothes influence others' perception of your personality. What it comes down to is this: you will either allow popular culture to label you, or you will be satisfied with drinking what you like because you like to drink it. It doesn't have to mean anything more. Starbucks and other American coffee shops capitalize on what makes us human—our uncertainty of identity, and our contrary desires to be unique yet to fit in. In fact, Starbucks' mission statement begins with "to inspire and nurture the human spirit." It sounds a bit like they're aiming for more than just selling good coffee.

Before the 2000s, Starbucks was the siren calling intellectuals, artists, and entrepreneurs to congregate and sip coffee while talking about ways to make the world a better, more creative place. Now the sophisticated culture has slipped into preteen selfie-taking TikTok stars posting about their high-calorie sugar bombs—but it's considered creativity and artistry because they add an extra pump of caramel and some cold foam on top. These "strokes of genius" have been glorified as indicators of unique personalities. This could not have possibly been the goal of Starbucks. In fact, I almost feel sorry for their legacy. People have taken what's supposed to make them personally unique and made it kitschy on social media. Teenagers and millennials have decultured a company whose purpose was to bring something new and beautiful to the United States. What a shame.

Whether we drink coffee because we like to post about it on social media, because it gives us a caffeine high, or because we just *adore* charming cafés, let's remind ourselves what the culture of coffee was

intended to be: a *contributor to*, not a *definition of*, your sense of self. Just so everyone knows, Joe Fox was being sarcastic. Sure, the black coffee I'm drinking right now makes me feel like a sophisticated yet down-to-earth person, but that doesn't make me one, and it certainly doesn't make me superior to those who drink the aforementioned sugar-bomb coffees. If I allowed my coffee to define me so drastically, I would change my identity on a daily basis.

But this is just a review on Joe Fox's profound statement and its strange relationship to us. *You've Got Mail* continues to offer wisdom on not only relationships but also on what society can and should contribute to our identities. Some aspects of the past should remain untouched by fast-growing corporations, money-mongers, and the influence of the social status quo. Meanwhile, keep ordering your favorite coffee, because even though it won't offer you any true fulfillment, it does taste pretty dang good.

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**Maren Schettler** is a sophomore English major pursuing a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing, and minors in political science and in music. She is interested in becoming an editor or journalist for either a news publication or a Christian ministry. Aside from reading and writing, Maren enjoys spending time with her friends and family, playing with her boxer dog Pacha, exploring various coffee shops, listening to music, and being in nature. "Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino." is Maren's first attempt at creative nonfiction, and she's fallen in love with the genre, hoping to continue developing her voice and style.

## **Playtime: A Review**

Parker Stenseth

Created on the heels of *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* and *Mon Oncle*, *Playtime* was Jacques Tati's most expensive picture, most arduous production, and greatest box office disappointment. It's also his greatest work and one of the most daring comedies to be put on film. It's unusual, especially to modern sensibilities which view the genre as extremely pleasure-oriented, to see a comedy that is formally challenging and offers an unwavering look at world alienation as its subject.

The film is effectively plotless, a meandering journey through postmodern Paris. Tati's Monsieur Hulot is the main character only insofar as he is in frame more often than anyone else. The other difference between him and other characters is that he seems out of place in the world, unable to act within it to achieve his goals. The film rotates through a series of locations, each outlandish in its new normalcy. It opens in an airport terminal—establishing open spaces and glass panels as instrumental to the film's design—and demonstrates the film's leading formal principals, deep focus and multiple ongoing interactions with the environment at any given moment. Hulot doesn't show up for some time, and the audience is introduced to a human aquarium. A full aquarium doesn't have a single focal point and neither do the frames in this film. Occasionally new elements will be introduced and grab attention by way of their newness or the volume of space that they occupy, but they have not *a priori* been given preference over the other elements in the frame.

Watching *Playtime* is an act of choosing where attention is being directed, making selections when too much information has been

provided. Herein lies part of the film's postmodern logic. Even when Tati is in-frame—despite movie-star, main-character conditioning—his presence is not overwhelming in a way that would compromise the film's structure. Tati is one of film's most magnetic physical performers, but he understands composition in a way that lets him join the environment. This joint display of humility and brilliance allows the film to oscillate between individual and society, showing how the latter might have outmoded the former.

In an early scene, Tati arrives at an office building to seek a meeting. The old doorman uses an impossibly complicated panel to call his superior and ask what to do with Hulot. They send him to a waiting room where he struggles to sit in a chair of a new design. Another man enters. He's younger, impeccably dressed, and of particular manner. He sits for a brief moment before being asked to enter. Hulot continues to wait. When it appears as though he's been forgotten, Hulot wanders out through long hallways and endless cubicles. This extended sequence observes his struggle against the world in both a physical and social structure. This, of course, is a common theme for comedians—especially the silent or near-silent films—but with Tati there is a difference, a matter of emphasis. Most comedians want to direct focus to the struggle and mine this area for laughs. Tati decides to focus on the world, on the context (or, ultimately, the source) of Hulot's struggle. This is effective because it demonstrates that the world alienation experienced by Hulot is not his alone. We see it everywhere in the frame, flooding with life. We see it in the American tourists gawking at glass buildings. We see it in Athenian-pillar garbage cans. And we see it in a dinner club whose upper-class façade can't last through its opening night. With these tapestries, Tati demonstrates a mature understanding of life and an overwhelming ability to communicate it on film.

**Parker Stenseth** is an undergraduate student studying English, Economics, and French. He has a special interest in film, particularly the silent comedians and French cinema, and will be pursuing graduate studies after this academic year.

## The Spider God

Nicholas Ramos

It's been over ten years since I left, but I will never feel like I actually escaped the spider web that is religion. My entire education has been at one religious school or another. The first was a Catholic school, but I was too young to retain any memories of it. Well, except for that one fly of a memory that randomly buzzes around my head every so often, reminding me of the traumatic time I made some simple mistake and had to be dragged to the principal's office to be paddled. Luckily, the Christian school I went to after that did not have physical punishment as part of the curriculum, but psychological abuse can be just as annoying a pest as any other.

If I'm being honest, I can't say that I have *no* fond memories of my time at that school. In fact, I have many little ladybugs that eat away at the other bad memories, but the reality is that there are far too many aphids in the garden of my head for those brave warrior women to fight off. Still though, I remember many rainy evenings at that school. The vast, warped, metal legs of the giant spider that spread itself across the entire school kept me dry as I wandered about the campus. Sometimes I just walked aimlessly, completely taken in and calmed by the beautiful chorus of raindrops that were so exceedingly common in the Florida weather.

Even when the sky screamed and flashed at me with all its might, I felt safe under the spindly legs of the metal spider. She protected me, kept me safe. Perhaps this is only because I in turn kept her offspring safe. Indeed, my brain was a breeding ground for her egg sacs of religious beliefs, as all the students' minds were. Our job was to keep our minds free of any outside thought from the world around us so that

the emptiness of our brains could be comfortably occupied by the Word of the Lord, in all its pulsating and ready-to-burst glory.

I performed my duties admirably, pushing myself to learn more about the parasite to which I devoted my brain and my life, reading His word so that I could be a more deserving host. However, the more I read and learned, the more I became disillusioned with my role in life. Regardless of my own personal interests and desires, was my only real goal to convince others that they too should open their minds to the infestation of my Tarantula God? I'm supposed to accept that my life, on its own, is meaningless outside of how many others I bring to His webbed altar?

Well, I did. I wasn't entirely happy about it, but I'm also just a nest. So, my desires were nothing in the face of His many eyes that see and know all. And under the protection of her silvery legs stretched all across the school, I was content with the fate that was chosen for me. While the school planted her eggs in my skull, I allowed His Arachnid Excellence to fill those empty egg sacs with His many offspring in the form of His teachings. I was a good host, doing my best to prepare myself for when I would one day leave this cave so that I could lure others back inside.

Until, of course, the day I realized I was an abomination. In His own Words, I had become that which deserved only the hottest flames of hell in which those heathen insects would burn for eternity. Rather than continue my role as one who breeds with the opposite sex so that I can make even more hosts for His Hairy-Legged Holiness, I had made the *choice* to find interest in those of the same sex, from which no hosts could possibly be farmed. I was an affront to the plan that is His eternal web. I needed to be ousted like the pest I was.

Somehow though, He saw fit to allow me to continue to survive in His presence and under the protection of her metallic appendages. Truly, I was blessed and shown mercy. I would finish out the rest of my training for maintaining a proper nest despite my head being filled with the pesticide of free thought. You cannot understand the intense fear one feels when they believed themselves to be among people who cared and loved for them, only to realize they had simply given over

control to the spiders that had hatched inside of them and that they only cared for the spiders inside of yourself. It would be easy to run away from that situation, but when those spiders have offered you the only protection you have ever known in your life, you sit down and act the part, doing your best not to show any sign of the abject horror you are now constantly experiencing as the ocean of spiders crawls all over you and the bodies of those you loved.

As I said at the beginning, I escaped that nest, and my mind is no longer one as well. Now, it is a garden that I take care to maintain, raising all manner of beautiful flowers and nourishing plants. Pests may come and attempt to eat at the fruits of my labor, but they do not last so long as I remain vigilant. Could I one day fall prey to yet another insectoid beast wishing to hollow me out and use my flesh and bones for its personal breeding ground? Absolutely. But my memories of being a nest will not leave me any time soon. I can't let those kinds of experiences go. Not easily.

For that reason, I am on constant guard, always asking what the motive of any line of thought from someone else may have. Do they want to help? Or do they want to hurt? Worse yet, do they want to control? The thought of giving my mind up for someone else's use terrifies me to this day. That level of fear may not be healthy, and it may even stunt the growth of my garden, but it keeps me safe.

Perhaps one day I will live in a world where it's safe enough to relax my mind. A world where I don't have to listen out for the buzzing of wings or the death-tapping of spindly legs. But that day has not yet come. And so, I remain guarded. Always listening, always watching. Always knowing that, even though I escaped His web, there are millions still writhing inside, bursting open to pour His legion out to the rest of the world.

**Nicholas Ramos** is a gay, Puerto Rican military vet from Florida. His life is weird and he's weirder, but he expresses it all through his writing—and that seems to be working well for him so far!

## Afraid of?

Aubrey Roemmich

"It's all nonsense. It's only nonsense. I'm not afraid of the rain. I am not afraid of the rain.

Oh, oh, God, I wish I wasn't."

– Ernest Hemingway, From *A Farewell to Arms*

*—I have never been brave. I'm far too nervous to be brave. I do not even have the courage to acknowledge the things I really fear. Instead, I have spent my entire life hiding behind superficial fears and excuses. As a child, I always felt things deeply. I feared failure, loneliness. Before I could even articulate these anxieties, I was contemplating my own worth in comparison to the people and events around me. How then does a child tell her mother that she is not afraid of the monkey bars, but she's afraid that she will fail at them while all her classmates don't have an issue crossing the rungs?*

*She doesn't. She simply says, "I'm afraid of heights."*

"What are you afraid of?"

"Spiders."

*—I'm not sure when I decided that spiders and bugs were so scary. They just always have been. Maybe it's from watching my mom make my dad kill all the bugs in the house. Maybe it's from the giant barn spiders that used to make webs above our front door. But they always made me feel small, helpless, vulnerable. I hate feeling vulnerable. The creeping, crawling feeling moves up my spine, wrapping my chest in constricting webs of weakness. I cannot show you my weakness in fear you will find it makes me ugly. I am independent, stable. My knees should not shake over something so small. A bug should not make me feel weak.*

"I've always been afraid of snakes."

"Now that I think of it, I've always been wary of large animals."

*—When I was in elementary school, my friend and I walked our neighborhood attempting to sell Girl Scout Cookies. Our neighborhood was nice and safe. The perfect place to raise a family with a white picket fence and a couple of dogs. Family friendly dogs were a staple of my childhood, along with my fear of any animal on four legs with sharp teeth. Two little girls, their hair in ponytails, with scuffed knees, denim shorts, and five-dollar Old Navy flip-flops, walk up and down driveways holding a clipboard and loose change. Parents answer doors, kids say hi, and friendly dogs are held by their collars—until one house with no one home and a dog lounging on the porch. I saw his leg twitch, but that seemed insignificant till after. As my friend rang the doorbell, the dog jumped up, snapping its teeth and lunging for our arms and legs. We ran, but I ran faster. No one was hurt, yet I couldn't stop shaking for the rest of the day. I don't like the unpredictable nature of animals. I don't like the wild lurking in the shadow of their minds.*

"They only bother me when I'm walking alone."

"Yeah, walking alone makes me nervous in general."

*—I actually really enjoy walking alone. It's the most peaceful part of my day. I like going on walks in the morning when the sun is waking up. The fresh air in my lungs and the blood running through my legs revives my spirit, but it's not safe. As a girl it's not safe to walk alone. One of the essential parts of being a girl is being taught to be afraid: park by lights, don't travel alone, go to the bathroom in groups, keep your location on so your friends can find you, ask a man to accompany you to your car, door, building. People scoff and say it's paranoia, but I can't enjoy walking alone when men follow too closely. I can't enjoy walking alone when my sisters whisper, "Be careful or you won't make it home."*

"Especially at night!"

"Now that you say that, I've never really liked the dark."

—My childhood home had a basement and a “basement” basement. The basement’s windows sat on the ground (perfect to climb in and out of). The basement was nice, finished, but the “basement” basement was unfinished. The floor was cold concrete, the skeleton walls created a see-through maze resembling a cage, and the single window was trapped by the window well (home to all sorts of eight-legged devils). The worst part of it all was the ever-present darkness fought back by a single exposed lightbulb. When my little sister was born, my room was moved to the basement. Every night I hid in bed waiting for the darkness of the “basement” basement to creep up the stairs to my room and swallow me. Darkness, I’ve come to realize, is the ultimate embodiment of the unknown. My parents (and a few cruel kids as well) used to joke that I was a know-it-all, but the thing is, I don’t know it all, and that scares me. I don’t know what’s in the dark. I don’t know what’s not known. The uncertainty of life, the darkness eats away at me. When I face this dark abyss, I’m seven years old again hiding in my bed as the darkness gnaws at my bones.

“Honestly I’d live in the dark if it meant I never have to speak in front of people again.”

“I’d rather do that than ever take another math test.”

—I’m smart, I know I am. But if someone even asks me to complete simple addition, I swear my brain melts. I took an economics class, and I understood the concepts, but I simply could not get my brain to wrap around the graphs and calculations. The thing is, I should have understood fine. The math hardly exceeded a high school level. My one claim to fame is good grades, and that class made me feel stupid. The worst feeling in the world is feeling stupid, inadequate. I hated that economics class, but I spent the most time on it because I had to. C’s may get degrees, but C’s don’t get into law school. When I was in fourth grade, I got a C on a spelling test. I remember being upset about it, and my teacher comforted me by saying, “It’s okay, C’s are average.” When I got home that night, I comforted my mom by saying the same thing. She responded, “You are not average, and I never want to see another

C again." Of course, as a fourth grader I internalized this to mean that the only way I can please my parents is by being perfect. If I'm not smart, then I'm not anything, and of course I know none of this is true and my worth as a human is not defined by academic success and I work myself into a panic over simple things like one bad economics grade and at the end of my life I will probably regret how much time I spent on this class but the point still stands: there is nothing more nauseating than simply not understanding.

"What's your greatest fear?"

"Deep water."

—Murky depths swirling underneath me have always made me nervous. I've been told that drowning is a peaceful way to die, but here's the thing: it's not the act of drowning that makes me wary of deep water, but rather the untouchableness of it. We won't ever really know what's down there, what's hiding, what it's capable of. Often, I feel like my mind is a swirling torrent of insanity. What am I capable of? What is my mind capable of? Do I really want to delve into the waves of my own unconscious? At least at the lake there is hope of someone saving me. Life preservers are there in abundance. Who will save me from myself? I can save myself from everything else, but not the darkness of my own mind. Our minds are powerful, and too often they are cruel. Yet there is no escaping the electrical impulses that shape my psyche. At the end of the day, the thing that scares me the most is myself.

**Aubrey Roemmich** is currently a sophomore at UND. She is majoring in English and minoring in political science while working towards a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing and editing. She enjoys spending her time reading, writing, and going on walks.

# *photography*

*Portfolio by  
Elena Uhlenkamp*

## Crystal Leaves



## Red Truck



**Elena Uhlenkamp** came from a small town in the heart of Minnesota to UND to study English. She enjoys reading and writing fantasy, especially if it involves magic and dragons. She also likes to dabble in realistic fiction, science fiction, and horror. Besides reading and writing, Elena loves doing escape rooms with friends and family, embroidering, and trap shooting. She has a fantasy trilogy in the works and hopes to publish the first book in the next few years.

***creative writing  
scholarship winners***

## The Street Dog's Dowry

Karissa Wehri

### **Winner of the 2022 John Little Fiction Scholarship**

The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Karissa Wehri's "The Street Dog's Dowry": *"In the opening sentence, Karissa Wehri's 'The Street Dog's Dowry' invites the reader into a meditation on generosity, compassion, and the ties that bind us. Her story is an object lesson in patience, consideration, and kindness—and she crafts it in a timeless and wise narrative voice."*

There was a man who lived as a date farmer and goat herder on the coast of the Euphrates, and his name was Omkar. He lived in a small village where the people were neither rich nor poor, but lived comfortably by their modest earnings. The only needful creature was a starving, wretched street dog, but no one really cared for that. No, all the people were happy with their standings, and this was all that mattered to them. Omkar himself had little worries about anything, but spent his days tending the date palms and caring for the goats alongside his father.

Every morning the two would rise early to ensure that their goats were well, and Omkar would bring them down to the Euphrates for their morning drink. When they returned for their breakfast, his grandmother would be waiting with coffee and *khubz*, a traditional flatbread, served with dateberry jam on a large plate. There Omkar and his father would eat quietly, listening to Grandmother as she waved her arms and told

another tale of her run-ins with the local street dog. It often made excursions into the open doors of people's homes and had stolen many a *khubz* from unassuming grannies. Each of her stories would end with a dramatic kick to the poor dog and her happily stroking her silver bracelet; it had been given to her by Grandfather, many years before.

"But at least the *djinn* shall never steal my bracelet!" Grandmother would always say with contentment; "His love shall be kept here forever, *Inshallah*, if that dog never gets an eye for worthwhile things!"

Omkar's day would continue with his inspecting the date palms and herding the goats this way and that and various little tasks in between. He was often sent to fetch water, a task usually reserved for the women, but his grandmother had grown too old for travel and he did not feel ashamed at the responsibility. He only needed to fetch two pails of water for his family: one for drink, and the other for boiling and cleaning.

One day Omkar was fetching water at the well in the middle of town, and when he arrived, he encountered the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was hefting four water pails with a pole slung across her shoulders, and he was so smitten that he at once took and lifted the pole himself. She thanked him profusely, and as soon as Omkar had brought the water to her home, he promised her that every day he would meet her at the well, if only to share a walk with her. Indeed, he was faithful with his promise: even on the hottest and windiest of days, he would be waiting at the well for Aasma, and on his shoulders he would heft the forbidding load of four water pails. Yet he hardly noticed the weight; all he could think of during these walks was the beauty of the woman and the many lovely things she said. After many weeks of this, Omkar finally asked if he could be shown to Aasma's father. She was elated to oblige and could not help but to laugh with joy when he asked her for her hand.

Her father thanked him for helping his daughter fetch the water, then asked if he could speak with her in private. Her father, a Mullah, was a progressive man for his time; he asked his daughter if she would like to marry the man, whereas most fathers would immediately ask

about the suitor's trade and wealth. She said yes, she would very much like to marry him, and she looked so happy that the Mullah's heart glowed. He called Omkar in and told him the good news. Omkar could have danced for joy, but he restrained himself and asked in earnest, "How much shall the dowry be?"

The father took his daughter's hand and looked at her with a smile, and answered, "No dowry at all is needed. I only wish to see you make my Aasma happy, and you have already accomplished this!"

Omkar thanked the old man for such generosity but insisted that a dowry be made. The Mullah persisted in refusing a price until, after such dramatic offers as a hundred silver dinars, Omkar finally sputtered, "I shall give you a dowry of a thousand gold dinars, for a woman so lovely deserves nothing less!"

Aasma gasped and looked at her father, who merely gazed at Omkar while stroking his long beard, as all wise men are supposed to do. After a thoughtful pause, he answered, "If this is what shall make you feel deserved, then I accept the dowry-arrangement. You shall not have my daughter's hand until it is paid."

Omkar thanked him many times and ran back home. He was breathless when he ran into the room where his father and grandmother sat cross-legged, discussing a recent occurrence.

"Father, Grandmother," Omkar happily cried, "I have been arranged to marry the beautiful daughter of a village Mullah!"

"Hah!" Grandmother cried and fell backward.

"What is to be the dowry, then?" asked Father, who always made up for Grandma's drama with unwavering calm. Omkar paused, folded his arms, and began to blush.

"I," he began, but then found he couldn't say it, he felt so foolish. Only at the insistent urging of Grandmother did he finally state the price of a thousand gold dinars. The poor woman shrieked and gripped a protective hand over her silver bracelet, and even his father looked dumbfounded.

"You foolish, foolish boy!" Grandmother scolded. "All this, and after my finest chop of lamb-meat has been stolen by that dog! Your

poor father has to deal with that dog, and now with *this*, also. And where is the water? You have left your pails behind? Ah, Merciful Allah, have mercy! I shall never make my soup.”

Omkar received quite the scolding, and his father and grandmother were angry for a time; but when he brought Aasma along for a family visit, they took well to the kind woman and became forgiving of the high dowry-cost. Without much more than a sigh, Grandmother decided that the dates were ripe for drying and took to the daunting task of the dozens of date palms. Omkar and his father harvested while Grandmother dried and canned them. It took several months for the dates to be prepared for the market, and there was such a large supply that Omkar decided to sell at the neighboring villages as well. While he traveled about the country, Father remained home with Grandmother to sell his own stock. He was gone for over a month, and they both worried for him all the while.

When Omkar returned with five hundred gold dinars, his family was ecstatic and had a large dinner prepared of one of their finest goats. They celebrated and enjoyed one another's company for the rest of the night, not thinking of the dowry at all for the first time in many days. It was only when the morning came that Omkar finally asked Father as to how many dinars he had earned. It was with a sigh that he answered four-hundred. He knew that this would fall them yet short of their goal. Omkar could not help but feel depressed at this gap as well, but he only had it in his heart to thank his father for all the help he had been. That day he chose to be left alone and wandered about the date palms, gazing forlornly at their barrenness. He did not know what he was to do to achieve the final one hundred dinars. He could not sell the goats, he knew, for they were his father's most coveted possession and were only kept to sustain the family. He also missed Aasma very dearly, but could not stand to face her, knowing he would have to tell her that he had failed to earn the dowry money. How foolish he had been, to name such an impossible price! But Aasma was such a wonderful woman, and her father was so wise and generous. How could he have named anything less?

Father and Grandmother watched as he sulked amongst the barren date palms, and they felt terrible for him. Perhaps he had been foolish, but he had certainly tried his hardest and worked the most of them both. He deserved more, they decided together. And so, while Omkar pondered his situation with a sad heart, his father and grandmother plotted a way to earn the last of the dowry.

At nightfall Omkar returned to his home, and he was surprised to find both his father and grandmother missing. He searched the sitting-room, the two sleeping-rooms, and the cooking area, but they were nowhere to be seen. In a panic he ran on the beaten road toward the village and was much relieved to find the missing persons on the return journey. He hugged his grandmother and breathlessly scolded, "Now, what are you doing so far from home? You know that you are too old for these long walks."

"I was collecting the last of the dowry," Grandmother answered, and with the biggest smile she presented the satchel of a hundred dinars.

"What?" Omkar lost his balance, but his father steadied him with a strong hand and explained how Grandmother had sold her silver bracelet for fifty dinars, and how he had sold two of their finest billy goats for twenty-five dinars each. Omkar was speechless, overcome with both happiness and dismay.

"The finest goats?" he managed to stammer, and, "But, Grandfather gave you that bracelet!"

"His love is still with me, even without the bracelet," Grandmother smiled ruefully. "And now that we have the dowry, you may have your life-partner yourself. That is all your grandfather would have wanted."

Omkar was so excited that he nearly left right then for Aasma's, but his father laughed and restrained him, saying that such a thing was best left for the morning. So the three of them returned home, content but especially relieved that the whole ordeal was done with. 'Tomorrow, I shall be married to Aasma!' Omkar could not stop thinking, and he gathered all the thousand dinars into a single satchel and placed it in a basket in the kitchen. Grandmother usually stored meat in the basket,

but it was empty and seemed an adequate hiding spot for the night. And so Omkar hid away the dowry, informed Father and Grandmother of its location, and fell to a peaceful rest for the first time in months.

In the morning Omkar set immediately to Aasma's home, and he put his father and grandmother to the task of preparing a great meal of cooked goat, sauced with the last of the remaining dates, as a tribute to how they succeeded the dowry payment. When he set into the village for the first time in many weeks, he found Aasma as he had first seen her: She was at the well in the middle of town, attempting to heft the formidable load of four water pails.

"Aasma!" he cried, and she nearly tumbled the pole from her shoulders when she saw him. She ran to him with a shout of glee and they embraced in a fit of laughter and joy. 'This is my wife!' Omkar realized, and he was filled with that much more happiness. He explained to her the months of labor that he and his family had gone through, and Aasma's face lit up when she learned that the dowry was prepared.

"I shall bring you and your father home with me," he grinned; "I have a meal awaiting your arrival, and then we shall have our wedding!"

Once again he carried the water pails himself to Aasma's home, and he relayed the news to her father. The Mullah merely nodded at this, and consented to go to Omkar's home for dinner and for the collection of the dowry. Omkar had a happy heart as he brought Aasma and the Mullah to his home for the very first time, though they were not yet arrived when his poor grandmother appeared on the road, struggling towards them at a most hurried pace.

"Grandmother!" Omkar scolded. "Why are you moving at such a pace, and all by yourself? Where is Father?"

But she could hardly breathe, and he had to support her for several minutes before she managed to stutter, "The... the *street dog* got the dowry! Your father has left in search of it. Oh, Omkar!" and she broke down in tears.

Omkar knew that he was insensitive to question her further, but his heart began to race and his face flushed up with anger.

"How did that wretched thing find it?!" he cried.

"It could smell the cooking goat," Grandmother sniffled; "It ran into the kitchen and took what was in the basket, and it was the dowry-satchel!"

All the while the Mullah listened to the story with a stoic face, though Aasma searched wildly for a solution, she wanted so much to marry the man.

"The dog! I know where it often lingers!" she gasped, and the Mullah gave her a grim look but said nothing.

"Take me to the place, once I have brought my grandmother safely home," Omkar demanded, and sometime later they were back in the village.

Aasma led Omkar and the Mullah into a narrow passageway between a slaughterhouse and a small mosque, which ended at the back-entrance of somebody's home. Just outside the entrance lay the street dog, its head resting solemnly on its paws. Omkar couldn't help but flinch at the sight of it; the ridges of its spine were plainly visible, and its ribs looked as if they would heave through the skin. It was horribly skinny, but he managed to adjust to the sight when he thought of the dowry it had taken.

"You, pathetic mongrel!" Omkar cried at the creature, wielding a baton used to discipline his goats. "What have you done with my dowry?"

Aasma gasped and tried to reach out to him, but the Mullah laid a restraining hand on her shoulder. They watched as Omkar cornered the shivering dog.

"Hah!" he shouted with impatience; "It is not here! What have you done with the dinars, wretched thing!" and he began swiping the baton toward the starving animal with a terrible shout.

The frightened dog took past the man, disappearing around the corner of the mosque. Omkar began to pursue it but stopped at the sight of the Mullah. Fury shone from the old man's face, and Omkar begged forgiveness for losing the long-sought dowry. However, the Mullah turned his back and walked stiffly down the alley before he could speak. Aasma wordlessly followed her father, and they both disappeared

into the back-entrance door. It was then that Omkar realized that this passageway led to their home. He thought of following but decided against it, the anger of the Mullah had seemed so great. Omkar felt terribly ashamed at having lost so much hard work and so much gold to a loathsome *street dog*, but suffered himself to return home. He would return the next day to Aasma's father, he decided, and would do his best to create another arrangement to earn his daughter's hand.

Omkar rose very early the next morning, he was so eager to speak with the Mullah. He washed his face and wore his best frocks and headed straight away to the village before his father or grandmother had awakened. When he walked into the Mullah's home, the Mullah was just finishing his morning prayer on a rug facing the far-off Mecca. Omkar waited impatiently for him to finish, then proceeded to beg the Mullah to be merciful, and allow another arrangement to be made. The Mullah silently listened as Omkar explained that he had nothing with which to earn more dinars, and that he would perform any service as to take the lovely Aasma in marriage. For a long while the Mullah did not speak. Omkar began to lose hope for any future, and wished that he had dealt with the street dog long before he had fallen in love. But just as he sighed to himself and began to leave, the Mullah spoke, "Help my daughter to fetch water, and I shall consider your proposal."

Though surprised at being assigned with such a simple task, Omkar was thrilled at the renewed possibility of marrying Aasma. That morning he accompanied Aasma to the well, for she much enjoyed the walk, and he easily carried the four pales on his strong shoulders. On returning he asked the Mullah for his daughter's hand, but the Mullah waved him off and stated, "Help her fetch water this afternoon, and I shall consider your proposal."

And so Omkar returned again in the afternoon and carried the four pales to the well and back. His proposal, however, received the same answer: he should fetch water for the Mullah's daughter the next morning, and his proposal would be considered. This continued on for many days, with Omkar fetching pails and pails of water only for his proposal to be reconsidered and reconsidered. Several weeks had

passed before he finally had enough of the nonsense. He was walking alongside Aasma with the four pails of water slung across his shoulders, and they felt heavier than they ever had to his dreary heart. Aasma often gave him looks of pity but never said anything. When the Mullah's home came in sight, Omkar thought of how many times he had repeated this process to no avail, and he knew with certainty that he would only be turned away once more. With such thoughts in his head, Omkar gave a morose cry and fell to his knees. The pole fell from his shoulders and the water spilled forth onto the pathway. Aasma shouted with fright and ran to fetch her father, and the Mullah came onto the scene with an unhurried step. Omkar laid collapsed on the ground, and could not find it in himself to stand. He was defeated.

The Mullah gazed calmly at the water soaking into the dirt and kneeled himself down. He slid the buckets to their proper places on the carrying-pole and lifted it onto his own feeble shoulders. He stood tall and stared down on Omkar.

"Stand up," the Mullah commanded.

There was such power in the old man's voice, Omkar forced himself to his feet despite his heavy heart. He looked sheepishly into the Mullah's eyes, feeling quite pathetic. He tried to take the heavy buckets from the man's shoulders, but the Mullah refused his reach.

"No," he said, "You shall only follow me." And the old man started back toward the well, with Aasma and poor Omkar following behind.

He filled the four buckets to the brim with water, and Omkar insisted earnestly that he be allowed to carry such a load, but the Mullah swiped away his hand. He turned to Omkar with a surprising rigour, and scolded him with religious passion, "You foolish, foolish boy! Repeatedly I have sent you to fetch four pails of water, and you have never once felt compelled to question as to *why* I send you to fetch such an amount! Look at me and look at my daughter-- tell me *why*, exactly, we would need more than two pails; why would we need more than drinking water, more than water for boiling and cleaning!"

Omkar stared helplessly at the man, for the question had indeed never struck him, and he had no answer at all for it. After a pause, the

angry Mullah continued, "No wonder you have given up like this; after all that extraordinary work to earn a thousand gold dinars, and it has taken but four pails of water to defeat you! It is because you do not understand the deeper purpose, the truer meaning of it all. Come with me, and I shall show you the great balancing-act of the world."

The Mullah hefted the pole across his little shoulders, two pails of water on each side, and began his way home. Omkar followed, perplexed. The Mullah walked all the way to his sitting-room before placing his heavy load to the floor. He commanded Omkar to seat himself. Omkar did so without hesitation. The old man then took the carrying-pole and slid it from the bucket handles, placing it against a nearby wall. He stood so that two buckets flanked each of his feet and spread his hands above them. Omkar watched the Mullah with fascination and listened to his words with awe. And what he said was this:

"There are four pails here: All hold water, though each of their purposes differs completely from the others. These," and he waved his left palm over a pair, "are meant for the matters of this Earth. One is for drinking, and the other is for cleaning the house and boiling the eggs. But these," and he gestured with his right palm, "are collected for matters of the Spiritual Realm. One is meant for my daily ablutions in worship of Allah. And may you guess, now, what the other is for?"

Again Omkar could find no answer, but said, "I do not know. You have water for drinking, water for cleaning and boiling, and water for worship. What is the fourth pail for?"

"I shall show you," the Mullah replied. He took and set the three pails on a table, leaving the last alone on the floor. He left to the back-entrance of his home, opened the door, and gave a shrill whistle into the empty passageway between the mosque and slaughterhouse. Omkar was stumped. What was this about?

And then the street dog appeared from around the corner, its scrawny tail waving happily as it answered the Mullah's call. It ran past the man into the home. Omkar was angered at this and began to rise, to chase off the troublesome creature. Aasma, who sat next to him, laid a

firm hand on his shoulder and gave a meaningful look, and so he forced himself to sit. But what was a lowly mongrel doing in the house of a Mullah?

The dog cantered into the sitting-room and froze when it saw Omkar. Its body went stiff, and it tensed to flee when the Mullah gently stroked its cowering head. Thus comforted, the creature slunk slowly toward the pail, eyeing Omkar all the while. He merely watched the dog, willing himself not to move at all. After a tense minute, the dog finally began its morning drink. It happily lapped up the water, wagging its tail as the Mullah stroked it.

"The fourth pail," gently whispered the Mullah, "is for charity."

When the dog finished its drink, it licked the Mullah's hand and cantered out the backdoor, its tail wagging behind an emaciated body. Omkar closely watched the old man and the sadness that came over his face. He shook his head and whistled a solemn tune.

"I wish there was more that I could do. We have such little meat for ourselves."

Omkar pondered this while the downcast Mullah took the remaining water of the pail and dumped it outside. Without waiting for another proposal, the old man spoke, "Help my daughter fetch water this afternoon, and I shall consider your proposal." With that, the man disappeared into an adjacent room, and Aasma showed Omkar to the door.

For hours Omkar pondered what the Mullah had said, and he thought regretfully of the poor dog he had nearly abused. When afternoon came, Omkar arrived as faithfully as ever to Aasma's assistance. He took the four pails and slung their weight across his shoulders and fetched the water with more efficiency than ever before. Aasma's father looked surprised by the speed with which he returned with the water, and stroked his beard thoughtfully, as the first time they had met.

"And I assume, now, you shall ask for my daughter's hand?" the Mullah spoke, his voice slow and contemplating. Omkar set the pails before the man's feet, stood tall, and shook his head. For the first time,

he had not come to make the marriage proposal.

"I come for the dog," he stated, and met the man's gaze with a stern look. The Mullah regarded him carefully, then walked to his backdoor. He whistled, and the skinny dog came running.

Again the animal was frightened to see Omkar. Omkar smiled softly at the creature and knelt himself to his knees.

"Come," he whispered softly, "I have a gift for you," and from his cloak he pulled a leg of goat meat. Aasma glanced at her father with joy, and a smile lifted the old man's beard.

The street dog studied the meat for a minute, then looked at Omkar. He waited patiently, and finally the dog accepted the gift of goat meat and loped happily from the house. A strange sense of contentment filled the young man's heart, and he smiled as he watched the creature leave. A profound moment of silence filled the household.

"And when you go home tonight," the Mullah finally spoke, "what shall you find there?"

Omkar thought for a moment, then looked at the Mullah with a smile. "I shall find my father, who has lost the best of his goats for such a fool as I, and who nonetheless teaches me important lessons with his constant companionship. I shall find my grandmother, who lost her dearest silver bracelet that was given to her by her husband, just that I may have a love of my own. These things are what I shall find."

The Mullah nodded, and said, "You see, every day you are given charities and until now you have failed to realize them. That is what happens when one hefts four pails of water every day, without ever considering what they *mean*. They mean religion and charity outside of one's own desires."

"I now know what they mean," Omkar smiled, "and I shall continue to fetch the water for you, if just that the dog may have sustenance!"

And with a shout of joy, the Mullah embraced the surprised Omkar and clapped him on the back. "You have done it," he cried with glee; "You have finally done it!"

"What?" asked Omkar, quite shaken. "What have I done?"

"You have finally given the proper dowry, the goat meat to the

street dog, and you shall marry my daughter! For that single act of compassion is worth more than a thousand gold dinars.”

And so Omkar was married to Aasma, and for many years they lived together in peace and prosperity. But, one year, their fortune would change: A drought gripped the land, and it was so great that all the date palms shriveled and refused to bear fruit, and every single one of the goats died of thirst. The Euphrates itself began to dry up. Water became so rare that the cruel representatives of the village began to charge for every pail of water that was taken from the well, though Omkar and his family now had little at all to give. They were forced to move to town, and with their date palms shriveled and their goats all dead, they had nothing with which to purchase much water. Omkar had to sell many of his finest clothes for just a few dinars-- enough to purchase a single pail of water. And this was the last of their money. Omkar, his father, his grandmother, Aasma, and the Mullah decided that they would all share the last of the drinking water and pray for divine mercy.

Omkar, as the young man, was the last to receive the pail. There was not much water left, and a feeling of self-pity took hold of him. Then he remembered the street dog, who lived just as hungry and thirsty day-to-day as Omkar himself now lived. ‘And to think that I had been so cruel as to resent it, poor creature!’ he thought scornfully. His self-pity became sadness for the dog, which he had not seen since the drought began. For several months they had been unable to give any water to the creature, they were so thirsty themselves. Now, as Omkar stared at the remaining pool of water that was meant for himself, he came to a decision. While everyone else was busy, he crept out the backdoor of his father-in-law’s house and set the pail outside. Though his lips were dry and his throat was sore, Omkar gave his longest, shrillest whistle. He awaited the appearance of the dog for a long while, but it never came. His heart became heavy, and a horrible feeling overtook him. ‘The dog has died of thirst, for I have only quenched my own throat!’ Omkar thought to himself, and he would have cried had he not been the man of his household. He went back inside and spent the rest of the day

comforting his poor grandmother, who was convinced that they would die of thirst. Omkar said his best words, yet even the Mullah looked forlorn. The night came, and Omkar forced himself to fall asleep while holding Aasma in his arms. She cried to herself, though no tears ever left her eyes.

The next morning, Omkar remembered that he had left the water pail outside. Though it was of little use anymore, he went to retrieve it anyway. When he stepped out the backdoor, however, he found the pail had disappeared: and, in its place, a satchel of a thousand gold dinars was left.

**From the Editors:** *"The Street Dog's Dowry" was first published in Floodwall volume 2, issue 4 (fall 2021). The editors are grateful to Karissa for permission to reprint the story in recognition of her selection as this year's John Little Fiction Scholarship recipient.*

**Karissa Wehri** was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She has always been interested in other cultures and moral viewpoints, and she uses her writing to explore these themes. She plans to use UND's Study Abroad program to expand her knowledge for even more stories!

## Lo. Lee. Ta.

Aubrey Roemmich

### **Runner-up for the 2022 John Little Fiction Scholarship**

The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Aubrey Roemmich's "Lo. Lee. Ta.": *"With her controlled use of multiple points of view, her deft hand at creating interiority, and her sharp dialogue, Aubrey Roemmich's story depicts in stark detail the consequences of texts, rhetoric, and language."*

I.

She's ushered in with the breeze. Her hair is windblown, and her cheeks are flushed a brilliant, innocent pink. She looks fresh and nymphlike while adjusting her tote bag over her right shoulder. She is the epitome of class dressed in tan wide-legged slacks, delicate low heels, and what appears to be a Michelangelo graphic tee tucked into her pants with a belt accentuating her slim waistline. She digs around in her bag before depositing it in an open chair. She grabs her wallet and approaches the barista and begins to order her coffee.

The man watching her from the corner with thick, round-framed glasses is too far away to hear what must be a delicate, and musical, voice. *Her shirt is a little basic, but she seems like the type to drink her coffee black*, the man thinks. He finds this revelation refreshing and appealing. He believes too many women these days are focused on luxury, especially luxury in food. *The hyper sugary drinks are making them all fat. Women should never exceed 120 pounds. They should be*

*small and dainty. All the internet discussion over “body positivity” is nonsense. There’s nothing positive about an ugly woman.*

He’s still watching her as she sits down with her drink and brings out a journal and novel. From his angle he can’t see what she’s reading, but he can see her slowly sip her coffee as she quickly works through the pages. Stopping every five minutes to make notes in her journal. *She needs to work on her posture. Her curved back is doing nothing for her breasts, and it grossly exposes her stomach rolls. She doesn’t look like she weighs much, but it would be much easier to hide her imperfections if she would sit up.*

The sunlight is gentle behind her. It softly lights her face, but also casts shadows over her furrowed brow and slight frown that indicates a deep concentration. The man rolls his eyes at her expression. *Women should always be smiling. Any other expression is simply unattractive. It’s a pity society no longer teaches women how to act properly, especially in public or in the view of men. She’s going to get premature wrinkles and be completely undesirable if she spends any more time frowning. There’s nothing that important in her little book that could cause that type of concentration.* The man chuckles as he imagines being so worked up over a woman’s novel. *She is no doubt reading about fashion or “female empowerment,”* he concludes.

She goes to take a sip, but soon realizes it’s empty. She sets the cup down before marking her page in the novel. She moves the black journal in front of her and writes continuously for the next twenty minutes. After a while her hand cramps and she sits back, flexing it several times. She looks around the coffee shop and makes eye contact with the man sitting in a corner. He leans back in his chair, with his legs spread to an extreme degree. Huffing and rolling her eyes at his overly masculine display, she stands to order another coffee.

After sitting back down with her second drink, the woman places the end of her pen between her lips. The man is completely infatuated with her mouth. *I wonder what else her beautiful mouth can do. It’s stupid of her to be chewing on her pen. She’s going to bite through the end and get covered in ink.* He shifts in his seat and thinks about what

else he could imagine dripping from her mouth. He looks around for the nearest napkin dispenser, preparing for the inevitable when he has to go save her.

*Women are always needing to be saved. They are completely incapable of functioning without a man and that's how it should be. Men are obviously superior in every aspect. Women are the secondary gender. They should be small, quiet, and submissive. Anything else is simply acting outside the natural order. All of these progressive women are going to ruin the world. They're misinformed, uneducated. They just need a strong hand to guide them. She seems moldable. With a little discipline I'm sure she would bend to the will of any man.*

The woman is unaware of the man watching her and drawing his conclusions about her existence. Little does she know that he has decided he wants her. He'll move slowly for her sake. He doesn't want to scare her off, but he has no intention of letting her leave until he has at least her number. Preferably, he would be leaving the coffee shop with her on his arm, but he's in no rush.

*This beautiful, mysterious woman will be the death of me. Or maybe if I'm lucky, I'll be the death of her.*

II.

"Lo. Lee. Ta? What could a beautiful nymphet like you possibly be doing reading such a large novel all alone?"

"Who says I'm here alone?"

"I've been watching you for quite some time and no one has even spoken to you."

"Fine, but being alone does not equate to loneliness. I assure you that, if I wanted, I could have all the company in the world. I purposely came to this coffee shop to not be disturbed."

"Are you always so catty? Don't you realize you owe men more respect than that?"

"I don't owe anyone anything, especially not intrusive men."

"Come on, sweetheart. Don't be like that. Just give me a smile and accept the compliment of my attention. There's no reason to resist my

company.”

“I’d prefer if you would leave me alone.”

“That’s not an option. We’re going to have a nice conversation about that fascinating little book you’re reading. Now what is it called?”

“*Lolita*. By Vladimir Nabokov.”

“I haven’t read it. Is it any good?”

“It’s adequately terrifying. I’d prefer if you leave now.”

“From now on, you should only paint your nails red. It’s a much sexier color and it keeps up your magical allure. That green color is for grandmas and ugly women.”

“Fortunately, my appearance is not dictated by obscene men, but rather my own preferences.”

“That must be why you have such a basic artist on your shirt.”

“Since you insist on bothering me, would you like to explain that ridiculous statement?”

“That art on your shirt is a piece by Michelangelo, obviously. Every basic white girl is obsessed with his work, especially because they believe it somehow makes them appear intelligent.”

“First, that’s an absurd generalization of women. They are capable of enjoying art just like everyone else, whether that’s simply because it is beautiful or for deeper purposes. Both of those are equally important endeavors. Second, Michelangelo is universally enjoyed. There’s no shame in liking something that is popular. It’s popular for a reason. It’s popular because it is amazing, awe-inspiring art, not because liking it makes one appear sophisticated. Finally, the piece on my shirt wasn’t even painted by Michelangelo. This piece is *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. It’s based off the story from the Bible where the brave Judith saved Israel from its enemies when the *men* were too cowardly. She beheaded the enemy’s leader in his tent. It was painted by one of the most influential and talented female artists of the Renaissance in 1612. Which if you were so educated about art history like you make yourself out to be you will remember that Michelangelo died in 1564. Therefore, these two people never met nor collaborated... ever.”

“You must think very highly of yourself, considering how much

you seem to know about literature and art. What are you trying to be a professor?"

"Actually, I already am a professor. I have degrees in literature and art. I'm also a published author who has guest lectured all over the world. So yes, I am in fact very knowledgeable in these fields as my livelihood depends on it."

"You wouldn't have to worry about a livelihood if you would let a man provide for you."

"A man like you? A man who is obviously small-minded, ignorant, and completely incapable of empathy?"

"I don't appreciate your tone. I came over here to have a nice conversation with a beautiful woman and damnit that's what I'm going to get."

"I would like you to leave now. I didn't want to talk to you originally and I especially don't want to talk to you now."

"One day someone will tame you and you will realize how much easier your life would be if you accepted your role, Lo. Lee. Ta."

III.

*Lo. Lee. Ta.*

Those words echo in her mind as she walk back to her office. The way he enunciated each syllable makes her skin crawl. It feels dark, ominous... evil. She spends the last few blocks looking over her shoulder to make sure that man wasn't following her. She has half a mind to call someone to come meet her just to feel safer. Despite it being broad daylight, she has no doubt the man with the thick, round framed glasses would attempt something. Regardless of the risk. Daylight no longer equates to safety for a lone woman.

Eventually, she reaches the university building that houses the English department. She lets herself in with the key faculty were given so they could access the building on the weekends. She quickly enters and pushes the door shut with all her strength. Once the door is locked, she finally takes a deep breath and lets herself relax. She ascends the stairs to the fourth floor, where her office is situated.

She loves her office. It's not overly large but she has an entire wall of windows and the remaining three walls are covered in bookshelves. It's comfortable and intimate. Her students enjoy the overstuffed armchairs she's collected over the years, and she enjoys her students visiting even if it's just to tell her about their morning coffee and the rain they got caught in on the way to class.

She sits down at her desk and takes a deep breath before rubbing her eyes a little too aggressively. She doesn't want to admit it, but the interaction in the coffee shop has shaken her. Her nerves feel raw, and she has the desire to scream at the universe for the stupidity of men. But the thing she can't seem to shake is how casually the man had mentioned *Lolita*. He claimed he had never read it, but he kept calling her a "nymphet." Even the way he spoke seemed reminiscent of the novel. How deeply were these misogynistic ideals embedded in our culture? More concerning is the fact that it comes from a book explicitly condemning the objectification of women and girls. Yet somehow "Lolita" and "nymphet" have made their way into everyday vocabulary.

The professor is perplexed by this. She's spent many years dodging overbearing men, but what were the chances that the most terrifying experience in her life was colored by the language of a character far too similar to the infamous Quilty? The language, the attitude, all of it made her feel like she was falling through a much darker and dangerous looking glass than Alice ever found herself in.

The professor sits down at her desk and unpacks her bag. As she sets her copy of *Lolita* on her desk, it falls open to page nine. Her own annotations recapture her attention. Picking up the book, she reads, "*Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.*"

...

*Look at this tangle of thorns. Look at this tangle of thorns. Look at this tangle of horns. Look... at this... tangle... of thorns. Thorns. Thorns. Tangle... of... thorns...*

...

“The relationship between Humbert and Lolita and the rest of the world was exactly as Humbert himself described it: ‘a tangle of thorns.’ So much so that this tangle of thorns is now so prevalent within our own society, our own vernacular that men and women alike throw around the vocabulary of depraved pedophiles to justify their own misogynistic tendencies. I usually do not like instituting a call to action in my presentations because I prefer my audience use their own critical analysis skills to form their opinions, but I am going to implore you all now to remember the name Lolita. Lo. Lee. Ta. It is not the name of forbidden love. It is not the name of a seductress. It is not the romanticization of child-grooming, abuse, and the destruction of lives. It is the name of a child, a victim. It is the name of a young girl who was failed by everyone in her life. Humbert does not deserve sympathy. Humbert does not deserve understanding. Never forget who Lolita is.

“Remember her name in honor of the little girls we once knew, the ones we know now, and all that will follow. The language of misogyny and objectification will only continue to normalize the predatory behavior all girls and women experience throughout their lives. Don’t let the tangle of thorns confuse you, the Lolita’s of the world are innocent.”

With that the professor steps away from the podium and the audience applauds. She feels proud of herself and her work. This presentation is the beginning of many she hopes to give on this topic around the world. What was supposed to be a routine academic article meant to be published and forgotten quickly had become her life’s passion.

As she leaves the lecture hall hours later, she notices a man with thick, round-framed glasses leering at her from his place, leaned against the wall. A deep, strangling fear clutches her chest. She walks quicker and tries to calm the panicked thrumming of her heart. It’s been months. There is no way that man is the same man from the coffee shop. She never told him her name.

*But I told him I was a professor of English and art. There’s only one large university. I shouldn’t be walking alone right now. I should have left with everyone else. Okay, just don’t panic. All you have to do is get*

*back to your office and you'll be safe. Then tomorrow you can go to the police and file for a restraining order. Everything will be okay.*

As she turns the corner onto the street where her beloved university office is located, she feels a large presence drag her into the alleyway. Immediately she struggles against the strong arms. Opening her mouth to scream, her head is slammed against the brick wall. Dizzy and disoriented, she tries to focus her eyes on the man in front of her. All she can discern is thick, round-framed glasses.

His hand clamps over her mouth and his breath is foul in her face. "It really is a beautiful tangle of thorns, Lo. Lee. Ta."

**Aubrey Roemmich** is currently a sophomore at UND. She is majoring in English and minoring in political science while working towards a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing and editing. She enjoys spending her time reading, writing, and going on walks.

## **Acknowledgment: Thomas McGrath Award Winner**

Nerissa Dolney

### ***Winner of the 2022 Thomas McGrath Award in Poetry***

The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Nerissa Dolney's poetry: *"Nerissa Dolney's poems are incisive, sharp, and urgent. Her powerful lines, compelling voice, and vision as a poet have lingered with us, as will the message of her poems."*

It is the honor of the *Floodwall* editors to acknowledge Nerissa's selection as the winner of this year's Thomas McGrath Award in Poetry.

**Nerissa Dolney** is a clinical psychology PhD and INPSYDE student at the University of North Dakota.

## Living with Michael

Casey Fuller

### ***Runner-up for the 2022 Thomas McGrath Award in Poetry***

The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Casey Fuller's "Living with Michael": *"Frank, meditative, and patient, Casey Fuller's 'Living with Michael' is a portrait of joy and beauty found in the unexpected interruptions of noisy partiers, of labor, of routine tasks. We know that Casey's readers, too, will fall into the rhythm of these reflections as they immerse themselves in this poem."*

I wake up.  
I stretch.  
It's 5am.  
I yawn.  
I expect no one.  
Although it was loud last night.  
But it is loud every night.  
Did I hear trumpets?  
Did I hear drums?  
Little waves thudded my body, sure.  
But I had my headphones on.  
I could not hear everything.  
I open my bedroom door.  
Twenty-two people are asleep in the living room.  
The refrigerator door is open.

A stove burner is on.  
Beautiful strangers are sleeping in unusual ways.  
They will wake up sore, I think.  
I step on a few walking to the bathroom.  
They moan: cursing, whispering jokes.  
I pee.  
I look out the bathroom window.  
A school bus is in the driveway.  
It may be stolen.  
I don't know if it's stolen.  
I don't know who these people are.  
They smell like artists.  
I walk out of the bathroom with care.  
I turn off the burner.  
I close the refrigerator door.  
I see a guitar case.  
I see a brass horn.  
They're musicians.  
Beautiful musicians.  
I do not make coffee.  
I do not make lunch.  
I do not eat a bagel.  
I put pants on; a flannel, a hoodie.  
I stumble outside over their haphazard bodies.  
I bike to work.  
I arrive at the warehouse.  
It's early.  
I sweep the floor.  
I stage some boxes.  
I roll the carts by the door.  
I unhook the lifts from the chargers.  
I make packets in the back.  
I wave to my boss.  
He walks in front roll door.

He sees I'm early.  
He thinks I'm a good worker.  
I have nowhere to go.

**Casey Fuller** is an English PhD student at the University of North Dakota.

## The History of Hurry: A Historical Reflection on John Mark Comer's *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*

Maren Schettler

### **Winner of the 2022 Gladys Boen Scholarship**

The Gladys Boen Scholarship is awarded "for the best short story, poem or collection of poems, or essay submitted by an undergraduate currently enrolled in the university." The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Maren Schettler's "The History of Hurry": *"With its fragmented form and its melding of criticism with the personal essay, Maren Schettler's essay enacts the very principle defended in her essay's argument: that we must slow down, resist the urge to hurry, and break free from the rule of clocks and calendars."*

*Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day.*

*You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.*

– Dallas Willard (Comer 19)

"How're you doing?"

"I'm fine, just busy, you know?"

I sighed and let my head fall onto my arms, which were crossed on the table in front of me. It was a miracle I even had an hour of my day free to meet up with Brenna, my old roommate from college, but I couldn't get out of my head. The color-coded blocks highlighted on my phone's calendar were plastered on the walls inside my brain, and there

was no escaping them.

"Hey...have you been taking care of yourself?" Brenna said, tapping my arm to get my attention. I kept my head down, and my words came out muffled behind my sleeves.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, getting sleep, drinking water, eating healthy, exercising...?"

Ha, I thought. Who on earth has time for that?

"I don't know what to do, Brenna. I'm out of college, and it's not like I'm working 70 hours a week. I get paid well enough, and I'm working full time, but even after balancing everything, scheduling everything, and organizing everything, I'm just *tired*, down to my bones. What am I doing wrong? Why don't I feel like I have time to be healthy, to breathe, to *live*?"

\*

*They are too alive to die, and too dead to live.*

–Byung-Chul Han (pp. 9)

How did we get here? Or, perhaps I should first ask, where is here?

"Here" is:

my soul is exhausted—no, numb  
 my emotional and social capacity is eaten away every day of my life  
 I have no idea what I'm thinking or feeling at any given moment  
 my mind is entirely consumed by my agenda  
 there is no love, joy, or peace in my life  
 instead, I'm irritable, hypersensitive, restless; I can't seem to stop  
 working, I can't get my priorities straight, I can't take care of my  
 body; I try to escape from reality, I isolate, I substitute spiritual  
 growth with activities that are truly a waste of time.

Now, how did we get here?

\*

*We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.*

–John Ortberg (27)

We scoff at the idea of horse-drawn buggies, building fires to cook food, or mailing letters. Now we have bullet trains, microwaves, and international instant messaging. Slow is bad. Fast is good.

In fact, fast is so good that our attention span has recently diminished to less than that of a goldfish (ours at eight seconds, Goldie's at nine). So good that the average iPhone operator touches his or her phone 2,617 times a day, because everyone is addicted to their time-saving time suck. (If you are in denial, turn off your phone for 24—no—12 hours and get back to me.) So good that we are unable to form deep, intentional relationships because all we are trying to do is save time and be productive rather than be purposeful.

Life has not always been as frenetic as it is today. We have to drastically alter our minds to imagine what our days would look like without smartphones, motor vehicles, home appliances, the Internet: most of the technology we rely so heavily on today came into existence within only the last century. Living a hurried life is a *recent* societal standard. In the "old days," leisure time was a sign of wealth; now, busyness and overtime pay are the mark of a successful businessperson. Time is money, but what is your time really worth?

Speaking of the "old days" ...

\*

*The gods confound the man who first found out  
How to distinguish hours! Confound him, too,  
Who in this place set up a sun-dial  
To cut and hack my days so wretchedly  
Into small portions!*

–Plautus, ca. 200 BC (30)

The stream of time has run whether a measurement of time has existed or not. The first commonly used household "clock" was the Roman

sundial, which divided the day into twelve hours. Though sundials had been used by earlier, more ancient cultures, the Greeks and Romans refined the science and geometry that made a twelve-hour day (mostly) consistent across seasons. They also cut the day into ante meridiem (AM) and post meridiem (PM).

Have you ever gone a day without checking the time? It feels stressful if you don't.

Why?

\*

*The solution to an overbusy life is not more time.*

*It's to slow down and simplify our lives around what really matters.*

–John Mark Comer (62)

"There just aren't enough hours in a day."

"Maren, there have always been the same number of hours in a day."

"It doesn't feel like it."

"Well, yeah, because you've been filling every second of it. You're basically moving your body from place to place to place, and not allowing your soul to catch up. You've been hurrying through the last couple years. How far behind do you think your soul is?"

"It's not like that."

"Really? How have you been spending your limited days? You should be focusing on what matters."

What matters?

To St. Benedict, prayer mattered. The next step in the evolution of time management, in the most literal sense of the phrase, was organizing the day around prayer. Seven times a day, monks were called to collective prayer. Within another century (around 1100), monasteries used mechanical clocks to divide their days.

The first poor decision in a long series of poor decisions.

\*

*Here was man's declaration of independence from the sun, new proof of his mastery over himself and his surroundings. Only later would it be revealed that he has accomplished this mastery by putting himself under dominion of a machine with imperious demands all its own.*

–Daniel J. Boorstin (31)

Most historians agree that the turning point of the use of timekeeping occurred in 1370: in Cologne, Germany, the first public clock tower was erected for all to see, a dominating structure in the city which displayed society-wide artificial time. The day was no longer dictated by the rising and setting of the sun, nor did seasons or celestial bodies determine the length of workdays. How devastating for our bodies to be commanded not by the natural world, but by the manmade formations of time that changed the human norm from simple living to forced productivity, to be woken by the drone of an alarm clock rather than by the sun.

Currently one in three adults do not get enough sleep. How much is enough? At least seven hours. Well, the working class in earlier centuries probably got that much or less sleep, because they began work when the sun came up, right? Wrong. Prior to Edison's invention of the light bulb, which enabled people to stay up long after dark, the average person got

eleven

hours of sleep

a night.

\*

*The Sabbath—the Jewish institution co-opted by Christianity...reflected a now-battered belief that a sustained spiritual life is simply unfeasible for most mortals without these refuges from noise and work to buffer us and remind us who we really are.*

—Andrew Sullivan (35)

Whether you are Christian or Jewish, atheist or agnostic, we all feel like we could use a day off. At one point, most people did in fact have a day off—every week. A day on which the racket of the world was turned off, stores were closed, people were forced to stay home and restfully reflect on their week. Beginning in the 1960s, that day has been filled for the sake of convenience, of needless productivity, and of our inability to slow our lives down. We stop—or “shabbat,” as referred to in Judeo-Christian culture—not to be idle or slothful, but to actively refresh our minds and hearts. To allow our souls to catch up. Leisure time used to be a sign of status, that one had the money to afford doing nothing. Busyness has recently replaced relaxation as a sign of wealth. Our society has begun to glorify the workaholic, the god of productivity.

If you need further convincing that days off are not in fact a sign of laziness but instead a major contributor to a healthy lifestyle, look to the Seventh-day Adventists. This sect of Christianity prioritizes Sabbath most out of any Christian denomination. A study done on what groups of people were considered the happiest people on earth revealed Seventh-day Adventists to be towards the top of the list, and they were noted to live ten years longer than the average American. Every day of those additional ten years corresponds to a Sabbath that would be taken throughout their lives. If you would like to understand the math behind it, here you go:

Let’s say you were taught to Sabbath at a young age. If you practiced Sabbath every week until age 79, which is the average American life expectancy, that would be around 3,600 days of rest. How many years is that? Almost exactly ten years of added life.

\*

*After a millennia of slow, gradual acceleration, in recent decades the sheer velocity of our culture has reached an exponential fever pitch... What is all this distraction, addiction, and pace of life doing to our souls?*

—John Mark Comer (43)

According to most historians, the year 2007 was the next worldwide inflection point after 1440 (in which the invention of the printing press ignited the Reformation and Enlightenment). In 2007, Steve Jobs released the iPhone, Facebook became wildly used, and Twitter was invented, to name a few of the world-shattering technological advances. How have these supposed labor-saving devices destroyed our intentionally-lived-out days? Rather than spend time looking around downtown for a restaurant, you look up reviews on one and how to get there. You text your friends and stay up-to-date on social media rather than meeting up with friends for a meal or coffee. You sit for hours scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. You cannot live without your smartphone.

Newsflash: people want money. How do the big shots in Silicon Valley make money? They take your time by distracting you with the newest, flashiest, sleekest, most convenience-oriented device or app. They offer dopamine hit after dopamine hit. You are the product. Your attention and peace of mind are for sale.

That takes us to today.

\*

*"If there's a secret to happiness, it's simple—presence to the moment."*

—John Mark Comer (24)

"How do I get out of this cycle? The whole world is running on this wild, frantic schedule, and there's no way I can stop."

"Close your eyes."

"What? No," I scoffed, glancing around thinking about how weird my friend could decide to be in the middle of this coffee shop.

"Just do it, don't worry, this'll be good."

"...Fine," I say, shutting my eyes and hoping that Brenna wouldn't

do anything embarrassing.

“Okay,” she said, “first, take a deep breath. Think about what you’re feeling.”

The colored blocks of my phone’s agenda spun around my head, and it was almost impossible to sit still thinking about how much I had to do today...and tomorrow....

“Don’t think about the rest of the week,” Brenna added knowingly, and I momentarily hated her for that, but pushing away the schedule, I could almost relax. I took another few seconds to breathe deeply again, without her asking me to.

“If you didn’t have to worry about tomorrow, you would just have today. And if you just had today, wouldn’t you do everything you could to try to fulfill your purpose here? Would you finish out this afternoon and evening running around with your head cut off to reach your deadlines? Remind yourself that you work hard, and if you took a day off every week, it wouldn’t be lazy, it would be deserved. You can still work hard and live a restful life. You just can’t live the way everyone else seems to have accepted as the only way to live.”

In that coffee shop, in the quiet space created and afforded to me by my friend, I finally felt that peace was possible. At any moment, I could change my life and be better for it. All I had to do was slow... down.

\*

*Love is painfully time-consuming.*

—John Mark Comer (23)

Love—whether it is self-love, selfless love, brotherly love, or romantic love—is viewed by people groups and religions of all types to be the ultimate goal, purpose, or motivator of life. Christians say God himself is love; Socrates claimed that love is the word that frees us from life’s burdens; the Beatles say it’s all you need.

I would personally agree with all three of these statements, but you may not, and I’m not going to try to convince you otherwise. I will say this: If you want to offer love to others or receive love from others, it

cannot be done in a hurry.

How do we slow down?

Here are a few ideas:

- 1.) Be okay with being alone. Be okay with being bored. Be okay with being still. You don't need to go on your phone at every spare moment. Sit, think, pray, meditate—whatever you need to do to take stock of your mind, heart, and soul throughout the day.
- 2.) Take a day off often and consistently. This doesn't have to be Sabbath per se; there is time to rest or take a vacation, even if you think there's not.
- 3.) Simplify your life. We get caught up in the little, ultimately meaningless things, like clothes we wear, shows we watch, emails we answer. Do everything you can to minimize your possessions: less stuff you own means less stuff to worry about.
- 4.) Literally slow down. Walk places. Drive the speed limit. Read poetry rather than skim articles on the Internet. Dumb down your smartphone. Limit your screen time. Eat in, don't take out. Journal.

You may not want to do all these things, but know that not a single one of them would be harmful to your health. You can return to the simple life. It won't be easy in this fast-paced world that we've created for ourselves, to slow down and love and live. But it will be worth it.

So, why not?

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**Maren Schettler** is a sophomore English major, minoring in music and political science. She hopes to pursue a career in writing or editing for a news publication or a ministry. While she enjoys school, her favorite pastimes are playing flute, spending time with friends and family, camping, biking, and finding new coffee shops to sit (or sip!) and read in.

## Between

Caitlin Scheresky

### **Runner-up for the 2022 Gladys Boen Scholarship**

The Gladys Boen Scholarship is awarded “for the best short story, poem or collection of poems, or essay submitted by an undergraduate currently enrolled in the university.” The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Caitlin Scheresky’s “Between,” the runner-up for this year’s Gladys Boen Scholarship: *“In this poem, Caitlin Scheresky addresses the inexorable march of time and the impossibility of escaping its inevitable progress. Yet, in that space, Caitlin’s poem generates hope, closeness, and tenderness.”*

Time shows no mercy towards those who do not  
Heed her warning.  
When she comes, and she will,  
She flows between gusts of wind,  
Flares of red and gold and pink;  
She will make no sound,  
leaving behind grace and dewdrops  
And silk and honey.  
You will not see her coming,  
For if you do, it will have been  
Too late.

Time is endless, and we are not. But  
To us, I pray,  
She grants just a bit more.  
Enough to find balance  
Between blankets and body heat,  
To memorize the swell of  
Lungs filling, emptying, the steady beat  
Of hearts intertwined.  
Just enough, nothing more,  
For layers of our own skin we peel back  
To clot crimson and scar violet,  
Please  
Let us become permanent  
As we march forward, step by step, closer to destruction,  
A hell of our own making.

Sometimes  
I think I can feel her coming.

But here,  
Behind this brick and glass, hidden deep within  
Support beams and Insulation, between  
layers of spruce, of secrets and stories told  
through sips of  
Coffee and the clinking of cups,  
Of bodies explored, skin soft, breaths  
Shallow,  
All that is, is still, is peace.  
In our own corner of the world,  
Time stopped, breathless, and  
We are safe.  
Within these walls we create our own fire, our own sin,  
And it is beautiful, and we are safe.

**Caitlin Scheresky** is a freshman at UND, currently pursuing her degree in English. When she's not collecting her passing thoughts in her notes app or on spare sticky notes, she's spending time with friends and family, petting her dogs, listening to music, or, of course, reading.



## Contributor Notes

**Emilia Rose Adkinson** is a junior majoring in English at UND. She is working towards her certificates in both creative writing and editing and publishing, with the hopes of being an author or a publisher. She is originally from South Carolina, and she spends her free time reading, doing puzzles, and facetimeing her family. She loves journaling and writing, and hopes to touch people with her work.

**Claire Arneson** is an English major with a minor in communication. She can be found starting and finishing a book in a day and writing for herself and the *Dakota Student* newspaper. She loves to hang out with friends, going to hockey games, and being outside.

**Zachary Bigelow** is a biology major here on campus, one of the few not going into the medical program. He works on DNA sequencing for voles in the lab, and in his free time loves to write fiction and play video games. He hopes to one day publish some of the books he has written, and make a difference in the world using the knowledge gained from biology research.

**Valkyrie Bradford** is an English graduate student at UND, whose free time is spent with her dog Loki, cat Atalanta, or the animals she fosters for the local shelters. This piece was inspired by her avoidance of the romance genre, a friend's challenge that she couldn't do it, followed by the attempt at codifying the sensation of falling in love.

**Daria Cullen** is an English MA student at the University of North Dakota.

After many long years in academia, she looks forward to graduating this spring and reading and writing as much as she can possibly fit into her schedule. In her poetry, she reflects on her childhood in the backwoods of Louisiana, and her subsequent move to an oil boomtown in North Dakota.

**Nerissa Dolney** is a clinical psychology PhD and INPSYDE student at the University of North Dakota.

**Jasmine Duran** is a senior at UND, where she's majoring in philosophy. She likes writing poems. Sometimes, she even writes good ones.

**Casey Fuller** is an English PhD student at the University of North Dakota.

**Leah Noel Hanley** is currently in pursuit of a Master of Arts degree in English at the University of North Dakota. Her writing focuses on the exploration of deeply human experiences, through which she hopes to inspire empathy across cultural boundaries. She also hopes to inspire conservation and preservation of our Earth through her use of natural subjects and landscapes. When Leah is not writing (or grading papers), she is likely cross stitching, cooking, or spending quality time with her loved ones.

**Charles Henry** is a second semester English MA student at UND, with interests in composition theory, sociolinguistics, and British literature. He received his undergraduate in English and Education at West Liberty University, where he also began his creative writing journey. His writings often deal with exploring the underside of the expected experience of language and examining the shifting forms and conventions of writing. Charles has lived all over the eastern US, originally growing up on a farm in the Ohio valley.

**Madison Knoll** is a second-year English masters graduate student. She

plans on pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing in the future while working on her current project, which is also inspired by fairy tales.

**Olivia Kost** is currently in her final semester at UND, graduating with degrees in English and secondary education. She is originally from Bismarck, North Dakota. Olivia would not be where she is today without the support of both her family and friends. Her love for literature was ignited by her father and their many trips to Barnes and Noble since she was a child.

**Maiken Møller-Andersen** is a graduate student at UND studying English. Born and raised in Norway, they loved the ocean as a child, growing more and more curious about what they could never see from the surface. Maiken took a huge interest in folklore and storytelling at a young age, and their favorite fairytale is King Valemon. They also really like scary stories, which is one of the inspirations for their flash fiction.

**Hailey Narloch** is an avid creator of what most consider the unreal.

**Delaney Otto** is a third-year student at UND with a major in communications and a minor in English. She's a fan of horror, fantasy, magical realism, and happy endings. Aside from writing, music and art are also very important to her, and she has a firm belief that anyone can create if they have the desire to do so.

**Jona L. Pedersen** grew up in Norway, but has since relocated to the US where they are pursuing English and biology at the University of North Dakota. Their work appears in *Floodwall*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *The Allegheny Review*. When they aren't studying or writing, they like to explore the outdoors, roll dice with friends, and create art. Other passions such as wildlife biology, entomology, and environmental justice also inspire their writing. Check out their other work at [www.jonalpedersen.com](http://www.jonalpedersen.com) or follow their Twitter @JonalPedersen for updates.

**Abigail Petersen** is a criminal justice and sociology major at UND. She enjoys writing fiction and poetry. She draws most of her inspiration from the world around her, music, and her pets.

**Nicholas Ramos** is a gay, Puerto Rican military vet from Florida. His life is weird and he's weirder, but he expresses it all through his writing—and that seems to be working well for him so far!

**Aubrey Roemmich** is currently a sophomore at UND. She is majoring in English and minoring in political science while working towards a certificate in creative writing and a certificate in writing and editing. She enjoys spending her time reading, writing, and going on walks.

**Caitlin Scheresky** is a freshman at UND, currently pursuing her degree in English. When she's not collecting her passing thoughts in her notes app or on spare sticky notes, she's spending time with friends and family, petting her dogs, listening to music, or, of course, reading.

**Maren Schettler** is a sophomore English major pursuing a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing, and minors in political science and in music. She is interested in becoming an editor or journalist for either a news publication or a Christian ministry. Aside from reading and writing, Maren enjoys spending time with her friends and family, playing with her boxer dog Pacha, exploring various coffee shops, listening to music, and being in nature. "Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino." is Maren's first attempt at creative nonfiction, and she's fallen in love with the genre, hoping to continue developing her voice and style.

**Parker Stenseth** is an undergraduate student studying English, economics, and French. He has a special interest in film, particularly the silent comedians and French cinema, and will be pursuing graduate studies after this academic year.

**Elena Uhlenkamp** came from a small town in the heart of Minnesota

to UND to study English. She enjoys reading and writing fantasy, especially if it involves magic and dragons. She also likes to dabble in realistic fiction, science fiction, and horror. Besides reading and writing, Elena loves doing escape rooms with friends and family, embroidering, and trap shooting. She has a fantasy trilogy in the works and hopes to publish the first book in the next few years.

**Madison Waldron** is a current forensic psychology Masters student here at UND. She obtained her undergraduate degree from UND in psychology with a criminal justice minor. Along with her passion for science and law, Maddi has a strong passion for photography. Starting photography when she was just 13, she now runs a photography business in hopes to take it full time this summer.

**Karissa Wehri** was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She has always been interested in other cultures and moral viewpoints, and she uses her writing to explore these themes. She plans to use UND's Study Abroad program to expand her knowledge for even more stories!



# Floodwall

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Madison Knoll  
Olivia Kost  
Maiken Møller-Andersen  
Hailey Narloch  
Delaney Otto  
Jona L. Pedersen  
Abigail Petersen  
Nicholas Ramos  
Aubrey Roemmich  
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