



The Rubicon

Troy University's Literary Journal
2023

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The Rubicon

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By Avery King



By Sarah Robbins

“A man should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day of his life, in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul.”

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Poetry



By Sarah Robbins

Storyteller

Do you fear the devil, my sweet?
None of that, now
Let me tell you of what I have learned
When I met the devil
Burnt and fallen
Beauty awash in swollen skin
Cracked lips and broken wings
Featherless and obscene
I saw the devil and wept
Not out of fear, mind you, dearest
But out of pity and righteousness
Let me tell you what I learned
When I knelt beside that mean ole devil
When I took that burnt hand
And held it as if I were Atlas
Let me tell you
Of the devil's fragility
About how no matter how gentle I was
The skin turned to ashes beneath my thumb
I cried for the devil
Outcasted, disowned, and fallen
Graceless down here with us
Let me tell you
Of myself
~Ashley Adams



By Alaina Burnham

Lavender Soap

I used to watch bathtub water drain
And imagine myself
A tiny elf
Escaping a sinking spiral
Of lavender-scented soap
And warm water
Gone cold with time.
I can touch my skin
Again and again
To remember
That I am alive
More now than ever before
And as I'd escape the spiral
Again and again
I'd find myself
Rewarded
With awards two times my height

As I drop each trophy
Into a dusty box
And leave them in the attic
To dry, to rot away
And become more fragile
As the sun fades the permanent ink
Labeling my former glory
Stored away.
I find myself covered in attic dust
And return to the accursed bath
That used to rake in piles of unwarranted glory
Did I end up here alone?
This time I don't have to imagine
The sinking spiral
Swallowing me whole.
No one feels empathy
For a single blade of hair
Spinning me whole.
But as lavender soap sinks away
I find former nostalgia
Reminding me that I used to be everything
But now,
A single blade of hair
Sinks down the drain,
Unnoticed.
Who would feel empathy for me now?
Escaping the spiral was my only doubt
And now it's the only fear I've ever felt
As my body tumbles closer
I touch stainless steel
The drain,
And being to feel
Maybe me glory
Was never warranted

~Revlis

The Determiner

Distance isn't fitness
Running the same streets every day
With all the same intentions
In every possible way.

The lengths of my limits
Extend infinitely
As if there is no trace
Of you.

As everything drains from me
Except my pride
I begin to wonder:
Am I the sink strainer?
Turned over again
To pour out every last impurity?

The sink feels fuller
With every involuntary glance
And I turn to stone,
Reentering my trance,
Filled with the impure pieces
Turned over again
To rid the impurity remover
Of impurity.

And again and again

I become the determiner
Although indecisive on my own.

Who do I become
To avoid a life of determining
And impurity?
How will I ever elude
Everything that wants to destroy you?

~Revlis



By Icie Wallace

5 + 1

A twin-born flame and brother,
My match in every way:
Though different blood's between us,
There's never far to stray.

The girl with hair so golden,
She could not keep her rage,
Has grown into a lady,
And cross beyond her age.

And then there is the woman,
So elegant and strong,
Who has always has been better,
Where I am always wrong.

The next is he who fights her,
At all the twists and turns.
Their war is ever bloody,
And neither ever learns.

A child with eyes on the future,
Too young for all our brawls,
She's playing with a flicker,
And dodging all our calls.

On rivalry and ruin,
The volumes I could write,
But if the darkness closes,
The siblings hold the light.

~Kelsey Dunahoo



By Julia Daniels

Summer Sentiments

i covet the violent weeds –
bulrush, spatterdock – my fair,
dainty plants of rock– their

lives' a spar to see the sun
(whose light upon the church bell
makes heaven's hollow hymns swell –

with grace.) the heat on my face
feels like i'll always be young –
like a ripe garden tongue –

that is, to say, summer's but
a passionate mouth, a snake
a lover, a rut, a rake

to take away the leaves of
looming old age, let fly
the blooming cold cage of i.

summer is a poem that
you live – like how morning birds
dream on the creek-bed. Like words

that bring back the brine of love –
young love which will waste away,
but not now, never today.

~Emily Mosier

Wild Black Berries

In June, they start to ripen with the rains.
The sweet, soften'd ones fall with just a glance,
And our palms, speckled with red welts and stains,
Were a testament to Summer's fierce trance.

They grew wild underneath the powerlines –
Adorned, untended brush with clots of coil.
O, how they droop! – these briar-laden vines –
The blackberries pull them toward the soil.

We gathered the glossy beads, eating some,
Through the cool hours of morning leisure.
Sticky, red-blue mouths of fresh, blood-thick rum,
Amongst hard-green knots of coming seizures.

Still blood-thick then– a sun-glist blackberry –
Our South-
ern youth
– toilsome
and unwary.

*~Emily
Mosier*



Old News

Removed, I craft words of a girl's killing,
Words jump over her and onto her spilling —
No name in the lede, no need for glory,
She's not even a front-page news story.
And she's done poured out my ears like vapor,
There's a hundred deaths in every paper.

Happy, I could've gone on not caring
How cold the words I print, how tearing,
If I had not read about your death —
"19-year-old man without a breath."
But it was you. My love, my friend,
The sweet boy on which I did depend.

A stranger crafted words of your killing,
Jumping right over you and onto your spilling —
No one will know your favorite color was green
Or how well you did, all the things you dreamed —
Buried in ink, you'll dust in the archives,
Old news, for the rest of our lives.

~Emily Mosier



By Anna Kathryn Kautz



By Avery King



By Icie Wallace

“She/Me”

The me of the future is existing
 She is laughing
 She is breathing
 I do this all for her, ya know?
 I want to make sure she's happy
I wonder what kind of places she will go
 The me of the future is listening
 Through my thoughts
 And through my memories
 She could be crying
 She could be sleeping
 I love her so much
 I want her to stick around
I have a feeling she doesn't want me to leave either
 Without me, she is nothing
 I wonder if she is mad at me
 I wonder if she understands
 I wonder if we met,
Would she hug me or shake me around?
 Would she be proud of me?
 And how far we have come?
Because she is nothing without me
 Past, present, future are one

~*V.M. Stinson*



By Icie Wallace

Alive

When you feel your heart pounding
And you feel your blood pumping
And you're conscious of it
Is that when you're alive?

When you run and run
And your breath fills your lungs
Your chest rises
Up and Down
Is that when you're alive?

When tears gush from your eyes
And they hold you so tightly
Shouldering your cries
Is that when you're alive?

When you dance till your legs ache
And you spin again and again and again
Till your head feels dizzy
And that smile begins to spread
Is that when you're alive?

When the cold tickles your nose
And your cheeks turn rose
Your breath leaves in a puff of smoke
Is that when you're alive?

When you watch the sunset
And the darkness creeps in
While the stars rise
You anxiously await the daybreak
Is that when you're alive?

You'll laugh
And you'll cry
You'll fail terribly
Even when you try
But in the end of it all
You'll think to yourself
"It's good to be alive."

“The Luck of a Beating Heart”

Can I not dream but for a moment?
Can I not dream without guilt?
Unabashed dreaming is a luxury of children
To truly think of what could be
Without constricting reality

Do dreams come in fleeting moments?
How long do they last when I'm asleep?
How does my waking mind store for my beating heart to keep?
Are dreams the things of fools and lovers and children
Or things we all have but seek to hide?
But aren't we all fools, lovers, and children
Way down deep inside?
Maybe the place where we become these things
Is where our dreams reside

I have a dream that I cradle in my hands like a bird with a broken
wing
It cannot heal on its own
I must put in the time
Before it can fly, before it can sing
How sad to see a dream buried before it took its flight
In the graveyards of dreams
Doth dead birds sing
Their sorrows echo
Their love songs ring
How lucky of me to have a dream with a beating heart

How lucky of me to have a song to sing
With time my dream will flutter
My dream might take flight

You can take chances on the maybes
You can take chances on the mights
Dreams are not reserved for children
You should never outgrow delight
Till hope and pray and wish and dream
That my dream will take its maiden flight
And with the time and with the patience
Maybe, just maybe
It might

~*V.M. Stinson*



By Alaina Burnham

Bird in a Cage

I'm a bird in a cage.
A specimen to be wow'd by others,
But left to rot in my abode.
The false ownership of my space becomes my prison.
And the click of my door shutting becomes the crack of a pistol.
My mind is wounded, and I wonder if I will spread my wings and
fly.

~*Ariel Smith*

Masks we all Wear

When you've done nothing, yet
Hide the things that make you above.
People feel regret and tell tales,
As to why their eyes are not level with thine.
But the guilt spreads,
As you shouldn't have uttered a word
And your truth becomes their lie.

~Ariel Smith

Waning Presence

The sun sets against the city skyline. A silver van hums across the bridge, sprawling across the vast crystal blue ocean. The water performs a dance as the sun rages her force on the party. It is a spectacle to behold as the velocity reaches its peak with an array of lighted magnitude sparkling across her waves. The sun begins to set on the city and the opal glass-fitted windows of towers illuminate with enchantment. The streets file themselves erratically with neon glares while traffic lights dot the landscape. My head begins to nod as I try to fight sleep. My eyes start to close and a thought slips past my consciousness: "I hope I'm not missing out on anything I didn't see."

~Ariel Smith

I thank God for this driftwood

I thank God for this driftwood
Because although the mainland is nowhere in sight
I've finally made it out of the water

~Lilynn Smith



By Avery King

Short Stories



By Sarah Robbins

Home

By Ashley Adams

She was humming.

It was either a song lost or new to time. She had no way of knowing just yet how the melody would resonate with others. Would it be lovely enough to stay for a while or unimaginative enough to warrant forgetfulness? Would its rhythm be found, remembered, and sung for the masses?

She wasn't meant to, but she secretly helped to urge the song along. She gave it to the birds sitting on the low-hanging branches outside her window with her vibrating vocal cords. Then, all she would have to do was wait. In time – always time – the echo from different sets of throats would come to her. One season to learn; another to teach. Her birds would carry the tune within their bellies and expel the notes to new corners of the world. A world that would soon die, fade, and return when it was ready.

Until then, she hummed to the birds, and cracked the kitchen window further open for the breeze. The wind was gentle as it invited itself into her cottage and dipped its formless shape into a bow. Smiling, she placed her arm around her middle, bent her knees, tipped her head, and offered out her hand. The gale whistled, brushed along her wrist, and swept her up. She twirled with it, swaying around her kitchen with light toes, and sliding feet. Outside, the birds sang louder, adding a sweet tempo to their pirouette. Like water, time had slipped over her, smoothing her skin as it did to rocks in its streams. With it, almost without her notice, and certainly without her permission, the rush had nearly swallowed up her laugh.

She thought she missed it ... but she was unsure why. If she should or not. There was no one there to listen, hear, and add. Her twirling began to slow, feet coming to a hesitant halt. There was once. A long, long time ago. Before the world lost its colors and stopped

speaking to even the most sensitive ear. She still saw her in the flares of the sun. She pulled herself away from the wind, skin prickled, cheeks flushed. She turned to the door, the wood creaking as she brushed her fingers against the splinters. Light spilled from between the cracks, flirting with the pads, outlining the whorls. Her memory prohibited her from remembering the last time her door opened, refused to tell her the last time someone came, and stayed.

But she remembered the last time someone had left.

She was on the floor by the door for days after. Scratching at the wood. Begging the silent gods. Wailing at the ceiling. She did not rise until the press of her ribs against the boards became unbearable.

Unbearable:

adjective

not able to be endured or tolerated.

So, why had she been able to get herself up when all she had wanted to do was lie there until she was indistinguishable from dust? Would that not have been kinder? Gentler? She leaned forward, resting her forehead on the door, lashes fluttering. Moats of grime breathed with her, flickering in the rays, flashes and sprays of the brightest gold. She was gold once – no – yellow. Springtime yellow, young and spry. A newborn fawn, still shaky, but at the start of life. Now she was grey winter, dry and brittle. A spotless doe, a little unsteady, but far from the end.

She pushed the door open, the sun raining down on her, warming her from the inside out. She exhaled, expelling the old, inhaling the new.

The new.

A silhouette broke across the top of the hill. Leached of color, black as an aged night, and just as daunting. And she was gold. When you and time spend every day together, imagination is shared, and built up like a tower of cards. Falsely stable; easily felled. When she closed her eyes, what took a brush, and painted across the backs of her lids was jubilation. Screaming. Running. Arms like wings, open and wide. Tears.

So many tears. And there were. They just weren't happy ones. Her jaw trembled, vision swimming, blurring the figure coming towards her to inhuman levels. She was not sure if she wanted to see with clarity.

“E.”

She did not look up. She found she could not. Not even for that spider's silk voice.

“Welcome me home, E. Please.”

Please:

adverb

used to add urgency and emotion to a request.

Do not use please. Not on me. Plead for me. Beg for me. Why do you stand when you should be kneeling? Miss me as I have missed you. Love me as I have loved you. Hate me as I have grown to hate you.

Sunlight parted like a curtain around them, bathing them in shadows, robbing them of vibrancy. Clouds rolled in like waves across the sky, breaking, and crashing. The blue paled to red, the set of the sun burning orange, swiping the yellow from sight. A black crescent blocked the sun, assaulting the shining purity, dropping it into oil. Birds fluffed their feathers, drawing their appendages close, hiding away in their bodily cages. Thunder growled as her defense, sending in veins of lightning as her offense. Then the rain came. Showering them to soaking, chilling their skin, flattening their hair, and shielding her face. Her shield. She used to have one of those, rare as they were. One still chose her, then left her.

Back now, but unrecognizable.

“E. Look at me.”

There was the begging. The pleading. The *love*.

She raised her head, and she looked. O gazed down at her with irises made of finery, lips shaped like a broken heart, and cheeks smeared with rain. The earth shuddered in an imitation of her spine when she found those eyes on her. She adored those eyes. That voice. Hair. Skin. Lashes. Hands. Legs. Scars. Soul.

She swallowed, the rainfall following the curve of her throat, reflecting the movement in the air above them. It took an age for her to speak.

“You found them.”

“They were waiting.”

“And what were they doing after?”

O gave her head a minute shake. “Nothing.”

“Finished, then.”

“I am.”

Silence.

“I’ve come home,” O said.

“There is no home here.”

“You are here, and so there is a home.”

Cracks of lightning shot across them, highlighting the harsh lines of their jutting bones, and bruised bodies. One went to war; returned with battle written on her body. One stayed behind; abandonment ripped into her flesh.

“*I hate you.*” She whispered.

“I know.”

“*I hate you.*”

“I know, E.”

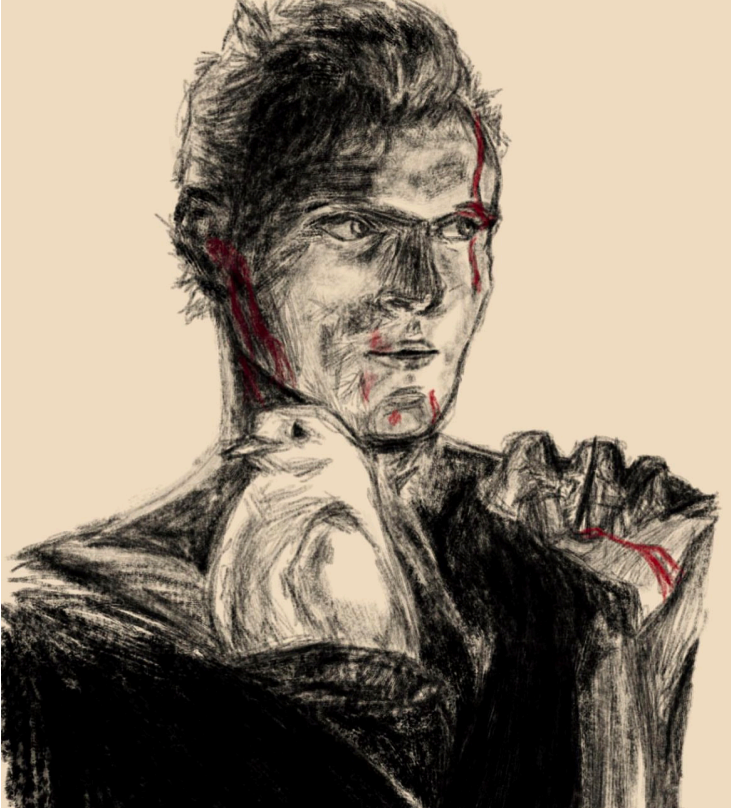
“I hate you.” She sobbed. “I hate you!”

Time enjoyed sitting with her. Whether at the table, on her bed, or in the bath. Its favorite game to play was to wrap her up in nostalgia to get her all nice and snug...safe and warm...before tearing her to shreds. She was a wet canvas, water colored, and runny. But she was a daydreamer. And, oh, how she dreamed. She ran. She jumped. She flew. Arms open, spread wide, and falling like Icarus into the arms of her golden lover. The rain continued to fall, though the clouds dispersed, and the sun began to embrace them once more.

It was April.

E believed it was her favorite season.

“...Welcome home, O.”



By Sarah Robbins



By Alaina Burnham

Pumpkin Head

By Ashley Adams

It sat there grinning at him.

And Joseph ‘Joey’ Ken felt the strangest urge to grin back. He didn’t necessarily know where it came from, but it was there all the same. Maybe it was something deep inside that tapped at him to smile back. To curl his lips away from his teeth and show them off. Primal. He had seen a coyote do it once when his dad had startled it. A feral, unsteady smile that showed off rows of crusted teeth and fangs. The urge had been present then, too, at the age of nine.

To say: Hey.

Hi.

Hello.

He held it in, swallowing it down. The candle inside the scooped-out head swayed, causing the hollowed eyes to flicker, orange flaring. Shadows lengthened the carved teeth, pulling at the corners of the mouth, the smile painfully wide. Joseph stared until the Jack-o-lantern fuzzed around the edges and tilted its head at him.

It said, Hey.

It said, Hi.

It said, Hello.

And Joseph-

“Smile!”

His eyes burned as a bright flash lit up the night. He groaned, rubbing at them, smacking the air to his immediate right. “Oh, come on, man! Don’t do that. .”

“Happy Halloween!”

“I think you damaged my retinas.”

“Whoa, really? Are they leaking out? Let me see.” A hand tugged at his wrist and this time when he lashed out, his palm slapped a thin chest. Score.

“Seth. How many times have I told you to take the flash off?”

“I don’t know,” Seth scoffed. “You expect me to keep track?”

Joseph sighed, blinking rapidly to get the dots to fade before leveling Seth with his best glare. It was probably a piss-poor display seeing as how there was still a burning sensation that pushed for more salty leakage. His friend just grinned back; teeth offensively white to his sensitive eyes.

Seth McClain was a slight thing, sickly often, and loud as a bull in a china shop. His hair was a mess, a product of his nervous fingers, and the blond dye in it was starting to fade. His contacts were in, the bright shade of blue hiding the natural brown, a couple of broken blood vessels in his left eye yet another example of his flighty hands. His Halloween spirit was in full swing, dressed all in black, his face painted to resemble a grim skeleton’s. The image was diminished, though, as little to nothing could keep a smile off his face.

“What’re you supposed to be?” Seth flicked his gaze up and down. “A disappointment?”

Joseph rolled his eyes, half his head going with the movement. “I thought I’d hang that up for one night. I don’t know, man, a ghost?”

Seth laughed, turning his phone over and over. “I guess that could work. I should’ve gotten a scythe to reap your soul with.”

“Next year,” Joseph shrugged, shoving his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. He flexed his digits, the cold slinking underneath the joints, stiffening them up. He should’ve taken the gloves his mom offered him, but then she would have known he would’ve been cold, and he didn’t want her to know he could be affected like that. So, he cupped his palms together, and brought them closer to his belly.

“What houses are you planning on hitting up?”

Seth hummed, moving his head from side to side. “Probably Williams’,”. We’ve got to go down Lee Street, though. Oo, and I heard from Bobby G. that Robinson’s got a surprise set up for everyone! Supposed to be a lot of decorations and those massive candy bars.”

“Cool.”

The two started moving, Seth jabbering about how Lizzy Bennet,

you know the one, Joey, she's a year behind us, was supposedly caught holding Abigail Sue's hand behind their high school near the trees, and *what do you think about that Joey, huh, what do you think?* Every now and then, when Seth was between breaths, he'd stop to take his pictures, always with that flash on. Joseph looked away each time.

"Did you make that pumpkin?"

"What?"

Seth knocked their shoulders together, head down as he scrolled through his recent captures. "The one you were making googly eyes at." He lifted his face to bat his lashes. "You know there are better options than a *pumpkin*."

Joseph clenched his jaw. "I don't want to hear it. And no, I didn't make it. It was just there on my porch."

"Your mom?"

"You know she's got that thing about germs. She wouldn't think to touch pumpkin guts."

"Right, right..." Seth laughed as a group of kids rushed past, the pack of five screaming happily, bags weighing them down. He spun to follow them with his camera, got the memory saved, and turned back around. The streets were becoming rambunctious as their little neighborhood melted behind them and the larger houses appeared. Soon, it wasn't just the streetlights that gave them a way to see, but howling decorations, and giggling ornaments. Tired parents trailed after their wily kids and tried their best to not mix them up.

"Superheroes are popular this year," Seth commented as yet another Wonder Woman ran between them.

"Aren't they every year?"

"Nah, last year was the time for ninjas for some reason."

"I hate your memory."

Seth shrugged, spinning his phone. Around and around. "Gets me good grades."

"Whatever." Joseph took out a hand to blow hot air against it. October took his breath and turned it into fog. "How long do you want to stay out here?"

“Till I can wait until next year.”

Joseph glanced over at him, sighing a cloud of white when he saw how excited Seth was, practically vibrating out of his skin. Hours. They could be out here for hours to sate him. Seth was a void. Endless. An overabundance of energy that made his momma smack him around and his daddy separate himself with a piece of paper and his John Hancock.

Joseph thought he knew himself well enough to characterize himself. He did have nearly seventeen years of self-data. He wasn't like Seth, but that wasn't saying much seeing as how nobody was quite like Seth. Joseph Ken was more like a rock. Or that was how he pictured himself most days. The better days. He hadn't chosen a rock for the obvious reason. No, he wasn't built solidly. The voice of the Jack-o-lantern whispered in the back of his mind.

It said-

A rock because it was there. Just there. Difficult to break, sure, by human standards. No fist could crack a rock. No voice could. Rocks listened to no one and felt nothing. And didn't that sound amazing? Just - being. Sitting there, maybe on a grassy hill, or sinking in a puddle. Not a bother in the world to think about or face. Joseph was not built properly, he knew that, and sometimes that scared him. Usually, that fear would mount him in the dead of night, hold him down by his hair, and eat him raw. Rocks, though, *rocks*.

Not a care in the world.

Joseph stopped in front of a leering witch. He tilted his head back to meet her yellow eyes. She was on her broom, suspended in the air, and she was pointing her gnarled finger at the center of his skull. “*I bet I could crack you open.*” The witch cackled. He was only half sure it was real.

Joseph moved his attention away to watch Seth sneak up on a group of kids. He was smart about it. He used his small frame to his advantage and his quick feet carried him closer...closer...closer...

A little girl with glittering wings shrieked as Seth poked her back. Her cry infected the others and chaos descended on the group of seven.

They started running back and forth, yelling and laughing. Seth was soon caught in a revolt as the children playing at being heroes staged a counterattack. A boy costumed as Batman grabbed Seth's leg while a girl jumped on his back, her mask studded with gems, cape billowing.

Click. Click. Click.

Flash. Flash. Flash.

Joseph blinked hard, looking away.

Seth hurried back to him, out of breath, cheeks pink. "I need smaller targets," he wheezed, hunched over with his hands on his knees. Joseph grunted, slapping his back, punching what little air Seth had left out of his lungs.

"C'mon," Joseph said, "let's go all the way to the end."

"Okay!" Seth ran off, twirled around, and took Joseph's picture. The night brightened. His eyes stung.

"Mother-" Joseph shook his head and lunged forward. Squealing, Seth took off. Joseph chased after him, hand reaching out to try and snag Seth's shirt collar. The wind screeched in his ears, fall air chilling his lungs, throat on fire as he sucked in small bites of breath. Lights blurred, smearing the dark. Orange. Bright, spirited October orange. Joseph huffed, mirth building in his stomach, easing up his trachea, buzzing across his lips. Seth looked over his shoulder, meeting his gaze, and Joseph could see a reflection of his own amusement on his friend's face.

And it was-

Dark.

It was so dark.

Pitch.

Joseph slowed; Seth stopped.

Joseph panted, chest heaving, falling a bit forward as his legs shook, his diaphragm shuddering. Seth blew out mist, head dropped back, face to the sky. A sky that was empty of stars. Vast. Black. Nothingness.

A void.

"I think we-" Seth gasped. "We ran too far."

“Yeah...” Joseph picked up his head, craning his neck to the side to search for what they left behind. And it was darkness. The road ending - no - cutting off a few inches away from his heels. Slowly, he straightened, and grabbed Seth’s arm. He didn’t take his eyes off the remnants of the asphalt. “Seth. Seth, do you see...?”

“Y-yeah.” Seth swallowed. “What...what happened to the road?”

“What happened to it all?” Joseph whispered. He squinted, searching the black, trying to peel it all back with his sight alone. His fingers twitched at his side. Seth shuffled closer. Joseph could feel his every inhale and exhale as if they were his own. His brain refused to take in what his eyes were supplying. He scrubbed his face with his knuckles until his skin burned. He dropped his hand. It swung from side to side as if unattached to the rest of him. He blinked. He blinked so hard green sparked across his vision.

They died away; the endless black stayed.

“Seth. Seth, I don’t...Seth?”

“Joey, what’s-I can’t see-Joey-”

Wet.

What sprayed the right side of his face was warm and wet.

Crunch.

The sound that hit his ears was loud and set his teeth on edge.

Joseph looked.

Because how could he not?

Look?

See?

And he *saw*.

Seth’s skull was split open. Underneath the cracks came a wriggling that pushed the edges of the bones apart, the growing space allowing for something to slither through. Orange. It was orange. Tendrils of roots came sprouting out of Seth’s broken scalp, reaching upwards, curling. A second, somehow louder, wetter *crack* came from Seth’s face as his jaw dislodged. It hung open, flapping limply, throat engorging as a moving lump formed just below his Adam’s apple. It moved up. Up. Up. It was in the back of his mouth now, forcing itself

forward, shattering the plate of bone on the roof. Teeth popped out – *white, white, white* - cascading down Seth’s chest, blood trickling in rivulets. A pause that bounced with Joseph’s heart.

THUMP.

Roots whipped out of Seth’s gaping mouth.

White seeds erupted to join the gummy teeth on the ground, the hoarse gurgling that followed raised the hairs on Joseph’s neck, the noise affecting him so badly it snapped the cord keeping him in his skin. Seth’s body convulsed, eyes rolling into the back of his head, the whites clouding over with bursting vessels. The balls swelled, straining at the pressure - Seth screaming. Seth babbling. Seth clawing at his cheeks, nails bending as they hit bone, his pupils enormously black.

And

And

And-

Pop.

Seth’s eyes were gone.

Empty.

Nothing was real. Not anymore. Extinction had come and gone. Something had finally failed. There had been no whimper. No bang. Simply the end. The end. The. End. Why wasn’t it ending? *Why?*

Seth’s neck collapsed, head falling, chin landing on his bone thin chest. He stayed there for a time. Horribly standing upright without his head being supported. Seth shuddered. His shoulders twitched, his skull pulsed, and his face turned. He didn’t stop until his neck was impossibly crooked, his chin to the sky. Boring into Joseph were those hollow sockets and unlike his, they were able to peel him apart. A flicker. A spark. Hellfire roared to life and its gaze flayed him alive.

Joseph fell.

The asphalt caught him, bruising his tailbone, scratching his palms bloody. Falling was all he could manage. His joints had locked, bones brittle, heart rupturing itself in the cage of his ribs. There wasn’t a word for what he felt. Only the dead could sympathize.

And then-

It said-

“You.”

Joseph’s spine seized.

“You. You. I remember YOU.”

The voice that came above him was dry, scraping out of a bulging throat, and an infested mouth. The roots trembled, lashing the air, twining around the crown of Seth’s deformed skull.

“Remember me?”

God, he did. He did. He swore to fucking God he did!

“What you did. What it felt like. Remember?”

And he did. He did. He did. He did.

And it was-

It said-

Mush.

When Joseph put his hands on the little boy’s flesh, when he dropped his full weight, when he pushed. Wet. Crack. Loud. So loud. The flesh felt like mush as the teeny tiny bones shattered and reformed into the shape he needed. They needed. He had to fit, after all. That was what this was all for, after all. That is what it all boiled down to.

The body had to fit inside the pumpkin.

And Seth?

Seth couldn’t do it.

Why? Why can’t you-

Joey! Joey. I can’t-I can’t Joey!

Why! Why! Seth. Seth. Why? Why would you-

I didn’t mean-Joey, listen, please just listen to me. Joey. I didn’t mean to, Joey! I promise! I promise!

Why, Seth...why?

I didn’t...he wouldn’t stop...he just wouldn’t stop...So loud, Joey. So LOUD and I couldn’t - I just wanted him to be quiet. Joey, please. Please. Help me. Help me...

And Joey said: *Okay.*

He fit. When they were done with him. He fit.

“You. You. YOU.” Seth’s body bowed, spine arching, elbows

bending outward, misshapen fingers filling Joseph's sight. *"Broke me. Twisted me. Hurt me. Why? Why? WHY?"*

No answer came. Joseph couldn't give one. His hand had not been the one that dealt death. But he had not been a lone dancer in the ballad. The killing and mutilation of a four-year-old boy.

"I remember. Always. Curse. Forever curse."

One spasming finger pointing to the center of Joseph's forehead.

"You remember. Always. Curse. Forever curse."

The hollow holes in Seth's head throbbed. Alive.

"Mouth shut."

Nails hung from their fleshy beds as one hand withdrew to grasp the swinging bottom half of Seth's jaw and tug.

"Open."

The dark pressed into Joseph, sliding up his sides, weighing down his back, crushing his front, seeping into his mouth.

"Open WIDE."

A child screamed. You can never forget the screams of children. Another joined. Then another. Another. Until the night crested with the crescendo of both new and old cries. Joseph opened his eyes.

Orange. It was all orange and bright.

Laying on the road, on both his stomach and back, body contorted past human capabilities, was Seth.

His sockets were hollow.

His phone, tight in his death grip, lit up as the screen woke. The Jack-o-lantern appeared, a blip of orange in a never-ending abyss, and as Joseph watched, the image started flipping. Faster and faster. The grinning head came closer. Closer. Closer. The screen filled with the pumpkin head, eyes blazing, grin painfully stretched.

And it said, Hey.

It said, Hi.

It said, Hello.

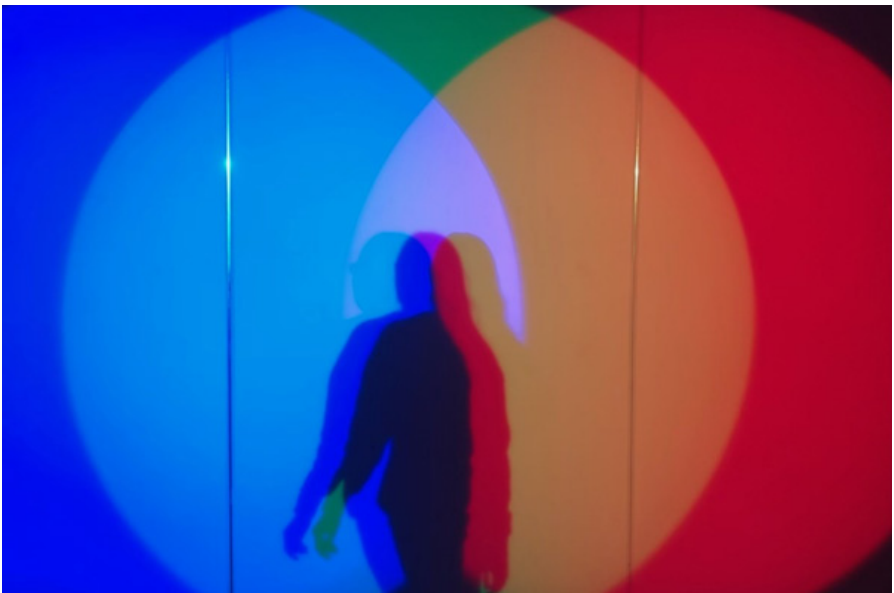
And Joseph 'Joey' Ken opened his mouth.

Click.

Flash.



By Robert Vilardi



By Alaina Burnham

They Know Where You Are

Ashley Adams

I awoke.

The chill across my skin tightened my bones and I sought to curl inside of myself just for a tick. Just to see if I could. If my insides would allow me a safe harbor away from the waking world. I brought my arms close, knuckles digging into my sternum, nails scratching at the dry skin to find a way in. There was always a weak spot to find. To nestle into. Had to be. I was human, after all, and we are made of weak points. All I had to do was find it and break through and burrow inside and soak in all the warmth. Warmth. *Warmthwarmthwarmth*

Oh. Yes, that's right. I am awake. I open my eyes to my new world. To my new awakening. I see myself, my eyes staring back, peeling apart my lids, staring deep inside the colored pockets of my irises until I can see myself, until I can know myself, and understand-

Oh. Yes, that's right. I should be up and not flat on my back like a common bitch. Spread legs and overeager nerves. That's not correct, is it? That is a fault of mine, I know. I have just barely begun. It is time to stretch my skeleton and bend outwards until something cracks lovingly. Only then will I understand and know who and what and why I am who I am. I reach up above me, press my palms to my reflection, and push my false self away. Then, miraculously, I can breathe. And breathe deeply I do as I exit my coffin and pull my tendons and muscles and joints loose as I step freely out onto the *coldchillingshivering* platform. I point my toes to the floor, stand on them, and feel the satisfying way the nails break and bend. Specks of red ooze out alongside the smooth, thin lines of the nail beds, and I know suddenly that I am here. That I am home.

Home. What a concept. A feeling, sure, but a *concept*? There isn't anything like it. Even if I do not recognize this place-I know it in the way I know the beating of the organ of meat and red blood cells and

arteries pounding away behind my cage of cartilage. I am a ballerina or that is what my brothersistercousionmotherfather was and I adopted it just as I adopted their features and mannerisms to skate by. How else was I going to get here? Home? Safety and pleasure and fun. *Funfunfun*. And it would be. I am here now, after all. I smiled and my reflection told me it was an adoring smile as I brushed the very tips of my fingers along the rest of the coffins. Though, they weren't coffins, not to the sleeping corpses inside. No. No, no, no.

"Just sleeping," I rasp, pursing my lips in a mother's coo.

"They are all only sleeping."

Patience. *Patience*. I learned patience when the man with the metal smell and bitter taste took my tongue and made it his own. Try and take from me? Me? Cut and severe and plop my parts in jars, will you? Give them a good shake and stir, have you? Do you drink me down, too? Like a good little boy with his nasty medicine? You are a man of the arts, correct? Then open your rotting maw wide and feed the maggots growing in your belly. I will come and check on them later. Oh. Yes, I did. I promised him. Promises and home and adoration and safety and love and hate and pain and peace. Take a breath. Turn your head and look outside at the vastness before you.

I smile as my eyes soak in the galaxies and black holes and stars. All for me. For them. I lounge on one of the coffins - *SLEEP CHAMBERS, STUPID*- and exhale brightly. I hum for them, my newest, and longest-lasting friends. I even sing for them as a songbird would about diamond rings. I love them all, you see. Do you see? Because I see. I see it all. The painted mist on the walls. The hastily scrawled message. The pain it must have taken to write it. I see it all for what it thinks it is: a warning.

Oh. No, but it is a taunt. A taunt! For me. Only for me. I can feel it now. The rage. The electricity sparks through my synapses, boiling my insides. No. Oh, no. This isn't their home. It is mine. All mine. Do they think they can see us? Have always seen us? I dip my fingers underneath my big toenail, rub the red together, and paint an answer underneath the first. They know nothing because I see all. Me.

COME



By Emily Mosier

Chicken

By J. Antonio Bass

By the sweat of their brow, there was introduced an esurient lust. The September heat cascaded down onto the block, cooking the cracked concrete (from the outside in) in front of their house. The temperature baked the thick, rich, creamy earth beneath the hard crust, and the scent escaped through every cleft and crevice, ascending, then extending to their nostrils, flooding their airways with those crisp, tender memories of home.

Home. Their family had worked that land – the plantation – ever since 1865. The master and his family were kind enough to let the slaves have it once liberty was allowed. That was the word they used. Kind. Inside their hearts, they wanted to see the slaves fail. They wanted to prove Lincoln made a mistake. However, while many of those left

on the fields spread across the South (and some up North), one family stayed. That family grew, and they made a living tending the crops and farming as usual – as they had done when they were in bondage, but this time they were free.

Years went by. The Depression forced the family to make some tough decisions. They divided up their plantation to many in the area who were left homeless. To earn money, they sold the few livestock they had – all except for the hens and roosters. With that effort, some sharecropping here and there, and the pathetic jobs brought about by Roosevelt’s New Deal, the family managed to hold on to their home until the end of World War II.

Eventually, the rest of the plantation was given up in order to provide land for Section 8 housing. The family was paid a large sum and was able to keep a plot for a small home of their own. That is where that house still sits. A new family lives there now.

Back then, grandmama was famous. Every two weeks on a Sunday, the entire neighborhood would come to her porch waiting for some of that wonderfully, gorgeous chicken. As the story goes, when they had finished building their little home, grandpapa couldn’t carry the burden as the breadwinner by himself anymore (he had a terrible accident, injuring his back at the old locomotive factory), so grandmama started baking chicken for a few folks close by, handing it over after they came back from church.

But grandpapa suggested she fry the chicken instead. It was the best suggestion she had ever gotten, too. Soon, people from other neighborhoods had caught a whiff of the flavors and wanted to sink their teeth and gums into those golden, bronze-crusteds meats.

After grandmama passed, the people did, too.
But the memories didn’t.

They swirled and folded in their stomach, churning the juices

to prepare it for a slow boil before the contents were added. The sweltering, stifling breeze engulfed them, throwing their palate into a state of a most insatiable thirst – not to quench, but to feed.

It was a white stove with a digital clock. The stovetop was black and framed in glass, having four burners; the larger were at the back, and the smaller were in front.

They pulled a 3.5-inch non-enameled cast iron skillet from the cabinet in the top left corner above the stove, sitting it carefully on the back right-hand eye.

There were faint scuff marks along the glass. One more scuff and there would be a crack. Why they decided to buy this kind was foreign to them.

What wasn't was the smooth stainless steel of the dial between their thumb and the second knuckle of their index finger as it turned counterclockwise. Two clicks. Medium heat.

They unscrewed the dark blue cap on the jug and poured one-fourth of an inch of the Crisco vegetable oil into the skillet. No scent, yet the aroma took them back to their childhood, waiting anxiously for that last starving soul to leave with their foil-smothered plate of chicken.

It would take about 5-10 minutes for it to heat up. Enough time to get the basics ready.

They pulled out a nude-colored glass bowl and a clear plastic plate from the cabinet in the top right corner above the stove. Sitting them on the counter on the left, they turned away and went to the refrigerator.

They rummaged around in the box for a while before coming back to the stove with the raw meat. Legs. They were white and pale-ish pink. The entire container was wrapped in plastic film. They scratched

the bottom of the pack and slowly unwrapped it. It was like a gift. The top was exposed, allowing the air to slip over, inside, and in between the contents within.

The skillet had risen to a calm sizzle.

There were 12 drumsticks. They only took out three. More for next time.

The chicken was placed on the plate, and they re-wrapped the rest up and returned it to the refrigerator. The smell of uncooked meat stood where they had until they returned to their place in front of the stove. They stared at the three pieces for a moment, briefly fantasizing about the experience to come. A beautiful sight to taste. And taste they soon would, indeed.

They stepped to the right of the stove – to the pantry – shifting and moving things. What were they looking for? The dry, cold chicken waited patiently. The oil in the pan hissed on.

They came back with salt, pepper, and flour, sitting them on the countertop one by one.

They reached behind (probably to the kitchen table) and tore off a sheet of paper towels, placing them beside the plate of naked chicken.

A knob – the baton – squeaked, followed by the heavy droplets of water – the symphony– then a gradual stream – the concerto. A high-pitched whistle began in a pianissimo. It was the only other sound besides the unrhythmic poppings of the oil. They listened to it. They listened carefully. The audibility of their right ear deafened – the volume of the crackling on the stovetop went silent. Tacet. The sweet-sounding shrill coming from the sink grew. Strong and loud. Forte. Their left ear was dedicated to the birth of the melody, twitching with the rise of every new octave. The song was familiar, a tune their grandparents used to sing to each other. They listened more intently now. Their ear caught the soundstream and allowed itself to be carried away back to that distant

memory. Slowly, at first – adagio – then quickly, drifting off into the theme – allegro.

The music became clear. They found themselves swaying softly among the echoes of then in the ecstasies of now. They closed their eyes (there was nothing to see anyway). They could hear the sliding of feet along hardwood floors. They could hear the brushing of clothes – the flow of a gown, the cape of a robe – and soft chuckling beneath the symphony.

These memories – these audible phantasmagorias – translated themselves into smells. Suddenly, it was Sunday again, and the greens were in the pot, and the cheese was in the oven, and the rolls were on the table, and the pie was on the counter. They snaked into their nose and slithered down their throat, filling them, though not satisfying. Only one scent alone could accomplish such a feat – and it was missing.

The absence of it peeled their eyelids open again, exposing the whites and the chocolate brown and black centers, melting down their cheeks. Tears.

“Never before has someone been more...”

The memories spiraled around his head with every word of the lyrics.

Their right ear undeafened as they returned to the present. The sink whistled and the oil snapped rhythmically. It was time.

“...unforgettable.”

They took the chicken legs and washed them thoroughly, one by one. The water was lukewarm.

The wet meat was put in the bowl. They reached for the flour now. All-purpose Pillsbury – the same that grandma used. It was packed tightly into the paper bag. They scratched the top until it tore open. Grabbing a cup out of the counter drawer, they scooped up some of it, filling it half-full. After folding the bag down as best as they

could, they poured the flour into the bowl. A bit of it became airborne, billowing in their face, rising, and then spreading throughout the kitchen.

They turned each piece over in the white sands of the bowl for a few minutes. Small mounds formed. Some flour pebbled inside the bowl along the perimeter of the chicken. Their fingers raked through the mounds, gathering small portions at the base inside their beak-shaped hand, snowing it over the chicken.

And then it was buried. The drumroll began. They waited one minute. The drumroll swelled in volume. The hands made their ways toward the pillowy grave. The minute was up. The drumroll, loud now, halted abruptly. The fingers wormed straight down until they felt the meat, resurrecting them. Two were in the left hand, the third was in the right.

The excess flour fell off with a slight shake. It sanded back into the bowl. The chicken was carried over to the bubbling vegetable oil in the pan. At the same time, their hands opened and let the meat fall in.

And there was that most unforgettable sound. Incredible.

The chicken fried. They had gotten a pair of tongs from the drawer at the end of the counter, turning it inside the skillet slowly, methodically. There was really no need for this since the pan was deep enough to have the oil cover all three drumsticks. They did it anyway – a personal choice.

Heat shimmered above the stove. The noises of bubbling oil and gurgling grease whispered to them, a handsome language – a mysterious one.

The chicken was turned. It was crisping now. The smells of

golden bronze-cruled mana waltzed their way into the nose, a ballroom hosting their very presence. A delightful occasion, indeed.

Southern aromas with a hint of September fever swirled between the lungs, teasing the belly of what it so painfully craved with an unfiltered vehemence. Such edacious fervor was expressed in growls and rumbles. The stomach could not capture the scents like the nose; the stomach could not perceive the glory of what transpired beyond it like the eye. It could only consume. It could only digest. And digest it soon would.

The chicken had crusted over much more. Time had passed.

That esurient lust lumped in their throat. This was their first love, of course.

It was done.

They turned the eye off just as they had turned it on before. The burner was a ring of crimson. It had a bright glow that dimmed softly to a mild violet, then orange.

The chicken still popped and crackled in the skillet.

They pulled a white marble plate out of a cabinet somewhere in the kitchen, tore off another paper towel (just one this time), and set a place for themselves somewhere at the table.

They used the tongs to place each piece on the plastic plate (now covered with the sheet of paper towels). Smoke rose and curled up towards the ceiling. It smiled, gray and wide, and white, as if it had been in a cramped place and needed a good sprawl.

The grease was soaked up, though an excess of the glaze was left for the enjoyment of the tastebuds.

They carried the hot plate to the marble one after a while, transferring the food in a delicate manner to not lose any crumbing.

Each chicken leg sat beautifully, a slow warm whisper still steaming eversoftly to them.

They sat in a chair. It creaked as they scraped the floor, trying to get closer to the heaven before them.

They inhaled. Their tongue was drowned in a flood of saliva. The stale taste that had been underneath it slugged happily down their throat as they swallowed.

They blessed the food. That was the right thing to do. Their hands, originally clasped below the table for the short prayer, were separated now, reaching towards the first piece of chicken.

They touched it, barely holding it because of the heat. They brought it to their mouth. They sank their teeth right through.

If they were a person dying – holding on to their last breath – having lived a miserable life, the crunch of chicken between their fore-teeth would testify of a life well lived to anyone who asked. And it wouldn't be a lie.

It had been a long time since fried chicken had passed their lips. Too long. And now it passed their teeth. The meat was somersaulted in their mouth by the flicking tongue. They quickly sucked in air to cool it. No need to interrupt this moment for a swallow of a cold drink. It wouldn't have been necessary. If their mouth was burned, that was the pleasure. If it wasn't, that was the pain.

They chewed. Nice and slow. The lullaby of crunching chicken inside their cheek – between their jaws – within their mouth was soothing to the palate, and flavorful to the ears.

The faint smoke swiftd and twirled in the place where the bite was. Amazing meat, greases and juices dripped out onto their clothes.

They didn't care.

The salt and pepper had been forgotten. They didn't care. The faucet was still whistling that regal tune. They didn't care. The rest of the oil was still warm in the skillet. They didn't care. All was left to do now was to swallow that first magnificent bite. They

did.

Hot and unbothered, the meat slid longing down the throat. When it reached the belly, a small smile stretched itself out across their face, reclining there as the digestion began.

Satisfied, they repeated the act. One, two, three, four, five times and more.

The memories joined them at the table for the meal – the smells and the sounds, of course. There was no visible recollection because it was all collected on their plate.

A beautiful taste to sight. And sight they did, indeed.

Unforgettable. Incredible. Chicken.



Amicitia Vera Illuminat

By Emily Mosier

Helen is not real, and there's a very real possibility that her name isn't Helen. The cracked and gray, 3-foot statue was mounted in the middle of a tiny, memorial rose garden, poised elegantly amongst budding cups of pink and white. As far as Lora could tell, the statue did not have an official name.

Their university only had one female statue, and as such, she was largely neglected. Moss grew in the crevices of her hair, and pieces of her face were chipped away and brown. It had become ritual for Lora to leave offerings in the heart-shaped saucer that Helen held against her chest, anything from bottle caps to pieces of glittery confetti, or even plastic king-cake figures. Small gifts.

And so, on their way to sneak onto the roof of the English building, Lora and Amica stopped first to pay their respects to Helen.

"Will this do?" Amica asked, holding out a glossy penny and a wine cork.

"It's perfect."

Something about the way the moonlight reached out and touched her hair made Amica look celestial, although, in the daylight, both girls were rather plain.

It was 3 a.m., but Lora delivered newspapers on campus once a week and therefore had a key to all the academic buildings. They simply waltzed in, giggling to themselves in short bursts of silly conversation. Amica followed Lora up the wrought-iron staircase, through the empty hallway, into the men's lavatory, and stood with her before the very last stall in the room.

"The only upstairs window that they keep unlocked is this one," Lora said, gesturing to the opening that hovered above the stall. "I've already placed a chair outside, so we can climb up and then step down onto it."

“You’ve done this before?”

“It’s good sometimes to see the stars when you’re alone. Not just alone from people, but from roads and books, and dirt.”

Amica, seeming to appreciate Lora’s maudlin tone, said softly, “You should climb up first, so I can see how.”

Lora entered the stall. She stood on the edge of the commode, pressing her hand flat against the tiled wall to steady herself, and then she placed one foot on the door’s metal hinge to hoist herself up to the window ledge. She sat parallel to the window in order to open it, and then she swung her legs around and jumped.

On the ground, she raised her arms so that her hands were above the ledge and waved at Amica.

“It’s that easy!”

A moment later, Amica was beside her. They spent a few minutes parading about the roof, saying over and over again how nice it was, and then Amica pulled a tiny, portable radio out of her jacket pocket.

They danced. Moving around each other, the girls swayed unabashedly to cliché pop music, offbeat, throwing their arms out however which way, and arching their backs dramatically. They looked like birds who had forgotten how to fly and were desperately trying not to fall. And they were happy.

They didn’t stop until the music changed without warning to a slow, deep tempo. A male voice sang of starry-eyed women.

Panting, Amica said, “You know, I took a ballroom dancing course over the Summer.”

So Amica taught Lora a rough, rudimentary version of tango, and they took turns spinning each other.

As the song ended, Amica fell into Lora’s arms, briefly, laughing, trying to explain in ungraceful words about how height adds a magical quality to darkness, to having the cold air caress your skin in a way that felt like freedom. All Lora could think of was that it is such a girlish reassurance to act romantically with your best friend. You are deserving of love, and be it platonic, be it just emotional, I will love you.

They sat down on the edge of the roof. Lora swung her legs back

and forth, liking the way it felt to have nothing under her.

“I needed this tonight,” Lora said.

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know, sometimes, I just feel gray, cracked, even, if you don't mind me sounding dramatic. I’m stuck in one place. Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy, and I love the beauty and roses that color my life, the pink and the white, but, sometimes, I feel as if I’m living for someone else’s memory and not my own.”

Amica slid her hand around Lora’s and raised it to her heart-shaped mouth. She pressed her lips against Lora’s hand, leaving a glittery stain from her lip gloss. A small gift.



By Kaleyah Gilbert



By Avery King



By Gabrielle Jent

A Baptist Church

Emily Mosier

Seated proud on a Florida hill of white grass – frosted over by the curt December air – is a quaint, wooden Baptist church about three miles from the Alabama border. It is small and painted white. A large, silver crucifix is mounted above the tall, green doors, and the top rests nicely in the crest of the roof's triangular point, almost as if holding it together. A front-facing graveyard touches the church in the same way that a beach is connected to the shore, meaning that I am unable to separate the two in my mind. And, in the tragic manner of living in a modern world, the church's hill sits back only a short distance from the highway, so that even though the other three sides enjoy the sparse cover of looming oak and pine trees, if you stand at the front door and faced away, all you can see is death and semi-trucks.

Looking towards the church is much more pleasant. When the sermon lets out, the sun is in just the right place to glimmer off the crucifix, setting it ablaze in a blinding glow, and underneath it, lining the walls, are southern flowers just as bright – and strong despite the cold. My dear Aunt Ruth labors all year long encouraging the vibrant flower beds. When I think of Ruth, I think of her on her knees in the soil, a wide-brimmed sun hat atop her head.

It was Sunday morning, and I walked, alone, through the stickered brush that lines the highway. Feeling empowered by my aloneness, I walked how I damn well pleased, stretching my arms out and folding them behind me, leaning my head back so I could feel the tips of my hair move against my shoulder blades. My house is just a short, five-minute walk from the church.

I live in an old community, and the church touts only a few young people – namely me and my step-cousins. Some seventy years ago, the church had been a school. The graveyard is filled with late congregation members, most of whom had graduated during its schoolhouse days– only to be buried on the same land. A beach and its shore: the dead had been rolled out of the church just like a wave, maybe with some foamy white caps made of hymnal books.

I always sit next to Maw in church. Maw is my stepdad’s grandmother, and I call her Maw even though I’ve only known her for three years. She is strong, with a presence like a rushing wind.

Even if she asks me every single Sunday why my parents aren’t there.

My cousins, Anna and Beth, are the worship team. Ruth sits in the very back and controls the projector that puts the lyrics behind them.

The pastor sat in the pew in front of me. Pastor Thomas is a thirty-year-old man with a large beard. He frowned at me slightly when I raised my palms upward while singing, probably because it’s “too Pentecostal a practice.” Still, I am convinced that Thomas is in love with me – I can tell by the way he’s always shifting his eyes toward me while he preaches. I think if he ever tried to kiss me, I’d kiss him back, but definitely nothing more than that.

I put my hands down, imagining the downward motion of my hands was the pulling of a lever.

The song ended. Thomas stood and we all closed our eyes while he prayed, and then he went and stood on the pulpit, already starting to speak, asking about what it means to have faith.

I have lots of faith, more than a lot of people, maybe.

Everyone there had been in church all their life, except for me. Did any of the people in these pews know how it felt to be strung out of their minds? Have they ever had to love themselves away from self-deprivation? Did they know how it feels to be dead?

It probably looked to Thomas that I wasn’t listening, even though I was, because I was looking quite seriously at the looming

stained window on my far right. Red, blue, yellow – a kaleidoscope Paul on the road to Damascus in one pane - Jesus in shades of beige on the other.

Maw nudged me with her elbow. “I’m here,” I whispered to her. The light coming in through the window was bright enough that when I turned, the world was significantly duller.

“I’m right here.”



By Avery King



By Alaina Burnham

I know why they call him Mutt

By Samantha Neeley

In the moments you love me most, to hear you tell it, I am a Steinbeck quote,

I am the oath taken by the watchers on the wall,

I am what Rowling meant by turning on the light—

Luminous and few, the exception, not just any port in a storm but the lighthouse, the artificial star propagated by man so by which their moral compasses can be checked—

in the moments you love me most, I am the Alpha and the Omega, what is and always will be—

and you explain the term “flat arc” to me as if it were a compliment and not a curse—

“You’re the part of the story that doesn’t change. You are the fixed point from the beginning. The world changes around you but it doesn’t take you with it. You’re the only truth in an uncertain plot.”

And while all of that seems lovely, lines in vows that will never be read before man or gods—

what you fail to realize is that it is no longer true:

I have touched and have been touched by all things in heaven and Hell,

I have started into the abyss and felt you starting back—

I have fought monsters long enough to question if I have become one.

You see, for too long, I forgot I am not just a character in your quest line—

I am not the heroine or the villain, despite what your mood may tell you,

I do not exist to further the story in a life where all you have proven to do is chase the next point of tension, the next resolve—

With such venom and disregard that I am not sure you haven't lost the plot entirely.

I know you believe in throwing caution to the wind but you should at least remove the baby from the bath water before you do it.

—because if you are unsatisfied with the words that leave your lips, you simply cannot just start a new page,

the man who writes the sentences should have the guts to swing the sword, and if you cannot then let my pen be the Light bearer—
Life is not Stranger than Fiction and you are not omnipresent or omnipotent through you operate through oppression,

Suppression and regression—
And let this be a lesson,
That I too can move in beat with your progression.
Though this may look like digression—

YOU know what I did there.

No one else will, so let me break the fourth wall and explain that I have,

once again, taken your tone—

and proven that is, undeniably, never when I am at my best.

But through this act and the last, I have been whitewashed into whatever one dimensional player you need me to serve as to the point where my dialogue is reduced,

Each line lodged in my throat in that place where all bitter pills go when they are hard to swallow—

And I no longer wish to serve as a light in the darkness,

I no longer wish to be the pillar the guides broken boys disguised as frightened men,

Even in the worst of times, you can only assess the damage if you remember to turn on the light,

but what lives in the shadows still thrives in its presence because you cannot have one without the other—

You cannot have one without the other.

One without the other.

I am one without the other.

And, my dear, you were right when you wrote in ink that Assyria cannot save us—

But maybe,

Maybe there is hope for me yet.

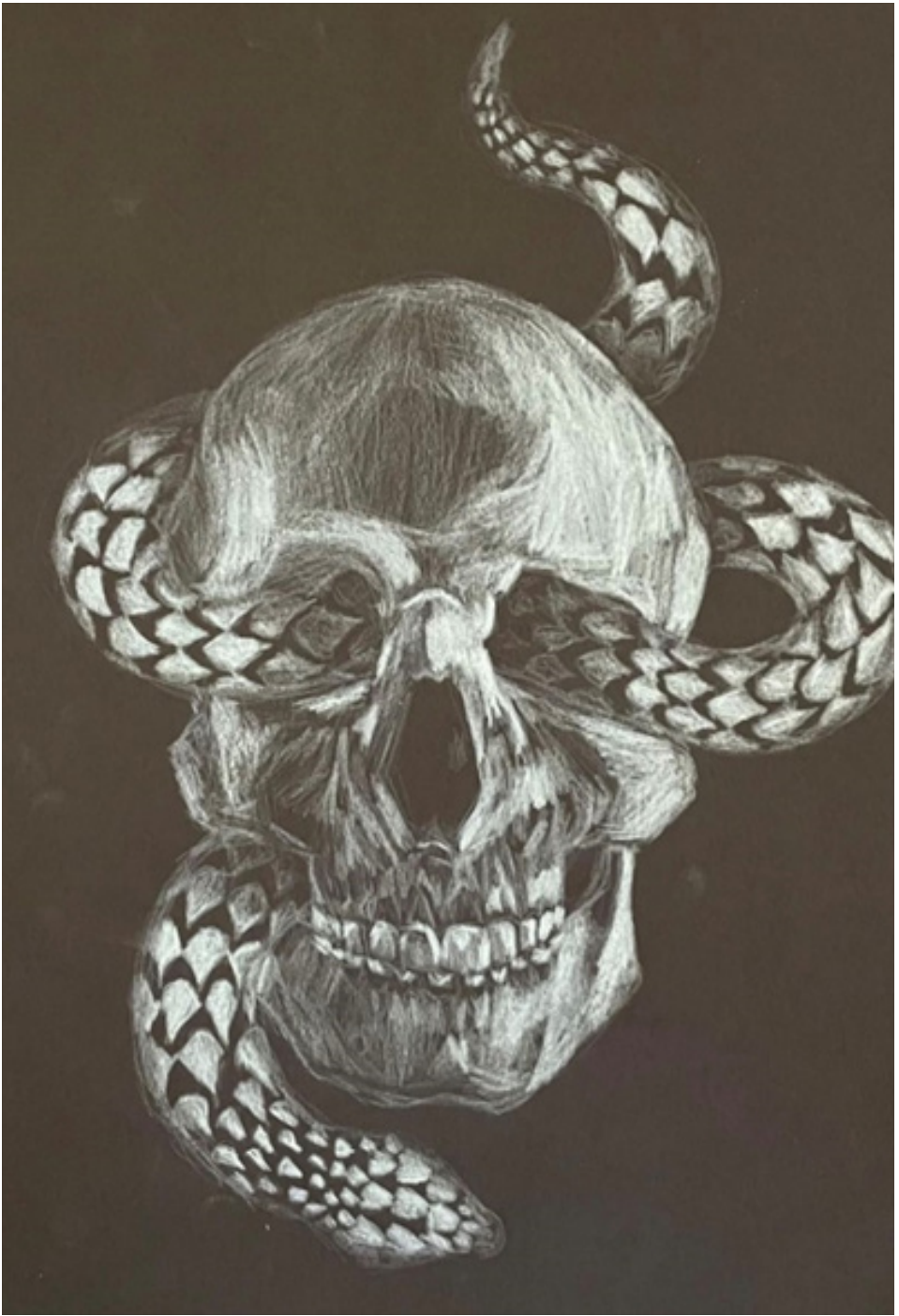
If I can only remember to turn out the light.



By Anna Kathryn Kautz



By Emily Mosier



By Sarah Robbins

Something about snakes, orange sneakers, and temptation.

By Samantha Neeley

The first time I saw him,

I thought he was dead.

Later, he'd laugh and tell me "I wish that was the case."

But in the moment, all I could think was: "This is not how I wanted to start my morning. I didn't even have coffee."

He was on the floor, sandwiched between two mattresses, the room reeking of the detoxification from trauma I'd yet to hear and what I've since deemed "detox perfume"

and I kicked the edge of his mattress.

Once.

Twice.

Third times a charm.

The next time I saw him, his eyes went to my name tag first. Then my shoes. Then he introduced himself.

"We already met. You probably don't remember. You told me to go screw myself."

"Was I at least polite about it?"

"Oh, absolutely. I've never been more flattered."

He laughed.

"I planned to hang myself right before you came in."

"I'm glad you didn't. That's a lot of paperwork. (A smirk.) Plus, you seem like you're okay with being here now."

He told me he has a three-day rule. If by the 72-hour mark, he has to make a decision. "I've never made it the whole 72 hours. You came in on 71."

That's me, the flaw in all their plans, a regular Florence Nightingale to all their bad decisions.

"You're welcome, I guess?"

"We'll see."

The third time I saw him,
he was telling the group how he was born in the wrong era.
A time with no damsels to save, no great wars to be won.
How his blood called for ravaging but had settled on self-destruction
instead.

The room reeked of self-importance and pheromones, and I wanted to
roll my eyes until he told me who he was:

"But that's the thing. I'm not the hero here. I find these girls to save and
then I drain the dry. I know when a girl will ruin her life to save me.
And they always show up right on time."

Then he turned, seeking me out from his peers—

and winked.

There's no poetic way to say that. He winked. Both admitting to and
starting the con all at once.

And as much as I hated him at that moment, as grossly inappropriate as
it was, I had never felt more seen.

No pretense, no b.s.—
just two people locking eyes in full acknowledgement of who the other
was,
the roles we play outside of these walls,
the way our existence balanced the scales in a universe who couldn't
care less but has a cutting sense of humor.

And at that moment, I hated him.
But more importantly, I hated myself.
How apparent, what a wounded doe I must be—

that I am that easy to hunt.

The room smelt of shame and desperation and I looked away, mentally citing professionalism, but mostly because he was holding up a mirror and all I could see were the cracks.

In that moment, I did not see him, but the face of every man I have ever broken myself into fragments for—

I heard every voice that had ever told me in one raspy breath that I was everything they needed and nothing all at once—

I felt every hand around my throat, every knife in my back, every lonely night lying next to someone scared to breathe—

All to the cadence of the Serenity prayer.

Every day, when I hit the green button, I'd leave him behind, but he still followed me home:

I took him with me to every fight,

saw him wink at me through every slur thrown my way,

he sat beside me as I cried trying to figure out how I had let myself get to this point, quietly whispering the answer—

the ever-present truth in the room that I was unwilling to accept.

For the next 20 something days, I never met his eyes again. But I knew he was there. His presence intentional, his stillness in the crowd a choice—

But he kept his distance. He'd make a passing comment about my shoes, just to remind me I was seen—but nothing more.

He'd woo other girls, playing both the victim and hero in a way that I've seen so many times since and before—

But he left me alone.

Until the day he left:

“I'm glad you walked in when you did.”

I nodded, “I hope I never see you again.”

He laughed, then his face got still, his eyes to mine once again, tone firm: “Take care of yourself. I mean that. Take care of yourself.”
The emphasis on the last word was unnecessary.
So was the wink that followed.

But I hope you know, wherever you are:

I listened. It took me months and I’m still trying—but I am trying.

My floors aren’t covered in eggshells,
my words aren’t caught in my throat—

I still jump every time I hear a sound outside my door and when men
pace it makes me nervous but—

Thank you.

Because I don’t know how
you knew but I know you
did, and more importantly
you knew I knew you
knew—

That, the truth of it all,
the quiet part I never said
out loud:

I was on hour 72.
And thank you for coming
in when you did.



By Kaleyah Gilbert

Left of the Highway

By Sarah Robbins

Haze's mom always told her to stay on the right side of the highway when she walked home from school. "It's longer," she'd explain, "but you'll avoid the raiders in the cardboard block." Haze had done her best to listen to her mom all these months, keeping to the left as she made her mile-and-a-half long walk back home from Baekeland Middle School. This usually meant splitting off from her friends as they walked back to their houses. Today, they all agreed that it was time to shake things up.

"I think your mom's paranoid," said Fox, one of Haze's classmates. He fiddled with his backpack straps, twirling them around his fingers as he talked. "Raiders don't even bother you if you keep your head down. You'd be safer just walking back with Gee and I."

"Gee and *me*," corrected Haze.

"Pssh. Smart aleck."

Haze shrugged. "Not my fault you failed the grammar quiz yesterday."

"You're right, it's Gee's fault." Fox elbowed the smaller boy beside him. "He didn't let me copy his homework Tuesday night, so I didn't get to study."

Gee scoffed, "Shut up! You gotta start doing your own work, man!"

Fox laughed and the two started bickering back and forth. Haze rolled her eyes and tuned them out. They were waiting in the cafeteria for the final bell to ring. A cacophony of shouts, laughter, and gossip swirled around her ears, but it was nothing she wasn't used to. Everything — and everyone — was loud these days. The assortment of overwhelming colors her peers sported only added to the noise, along with the distant stink of meals past. The food waste pit was only a few

feet outside the exit doors and could be smelled throughout the whole school. Everything in Haze's world seemed to be an assault on her senses.

Right on cue, the shrill final bell pierced the noise, and the tidal wave of preteens began their mass exodus. Fox looked at Haze with raised eyebrows, the question written all over his face: *You coming, or not?*

She grimaced and nodded. It couldn't hurt to try walking with them. *It's no safer being by yourself than it is walking through raider territory*, she thought. The trio began to dodge elbows and push past bodies as they fought their way to the door. Past the food waste pit, Gee gagged at the smell, and Fox commented on the urgent need to burn the offending garbage. They walked and watched as their schoolmates dispersed in all directions. Some went towards the bottle cap fields; some went towards the tire stack forest. Haze and company made their way to the edge of a metal scrapyard.

As they walked, Gee was droning on about something his dad saw on the news. Haze wasn't quite paying attention to her friend's rambling. She tuned out once more, preferring to take in the familiar sights of the scrapyard. Cars, lawn mowers, watering cans, buckets, and beams were abundant. Rust and decay dotted the mountains of garbage around her, each object a chance to slice herself and end up with tetanus. She kept telling her mom to take her to get shots, but had always been refused. Something about not trusting the nearby government doctors' offices. A vulture circled overhead, screeching into the afternoon sky.

The clouds it flew amongst were yellow and dour. *An acid rainstorm must be blowing in*, she thought with a shudder.

The scrapyard was relatively small, and so they made it through with ease. Fox did have to leap over a broken pipe which suddenly tipped over from its spot perched against a pile, but he did so with the agility befitting his name. They approached the edge of the highway and came to a stop.

Not a single car in sight. No one in Haze's neighborhood owned a vehicle, which she figured must be the case for everyone else around

here. Her grandma said that gas prices got so high at one point that people just started walking again. But then, the rich people in California had cars that they still drove. Or so she'd heard.

"You sure you wanna come with us?" Gee asked Haze. He looked up at her with a touch of worry. Gee was a true goody two shoes; even though he wasn't the one doing it, he still hated to see his friend doing something she wasn't supposed to. He couldn't stand to be around trouble, which made his friendship with the morally ambiguous Fox all the more curious to Haze.

"Yea. It's just one time. I wanna see what your walk looks like." She steeled herself, grabbing on to the straps of her recycled-plastic-bottle backpack, and stepped forward to cross the street. As her crumbling rubber soles hit the cracked, grass-dotted asphalt, a sense of finality swept over her. *No turning back.*

The three adventurers strolled across the deserted highway, hopping guardrails and avoiding potholes on their way. The sun's naked heat beat down on the back of their necks as the clouds parted, causing beads of sweat to accumulate. Haze huffed and took a swig of water from the metal canister clipped to her bag. Fox eyed the drink with envy.

"That filtered?" He asked.

Haze glanced at him suspiciously. "Yea. My mom bought me this new filtration bottle for my birthday a couple weeks ago."

"Wow. Must've cost a ton."

"Mmm. Maybe. I dunno." She quickly finished her drink and stashed the bottle.

Clean water was harder and harder to come by, and filters strong enough to make the water worth drinking were just as scarce. The school had recently switched to giving the kids exclusively fruit juice during lunches, and the water fountains were removed when Haze was in the first grade. When she was given the new filtration bottle, Haze immediately understood that it must have cost her mom and grandma a lot of money. She decided it was worth it to try and protect the gift. The trio reached the left side of the highway and stopped once more.

“It’s like a whole other world already,” Haze joked. She hoped Fox and Gee couldn’t see how nervous she really was as she picked at the skin around her fingernails.

“Wait till you see some of the stuff up the block,” said Gee. “Pretty crazy.”

From the edge of the left side of the highway, Haze could see what used to be a strip mall accompanied by various parking lots devoid of any shoppers. In place of commerce was a stretch of sun-bleached pavement leading to the infamous cardboard block. Each spot in the lot was taken up by some ragtag shelter or tent. It was claustrophobic, noisy, and worst of all, smelled of decay in varying forms. The kids strayed towards the amalgamation of humanity and garbage with great caution. A raccoon darted across their path as they went. Haze thought she saw a chicken leg in its mouth. It leapt into a nearby pile of trash and shuffled its way inside the makeshift den with a growl.

“Just stay close to us, and we won’t have to deal with those crazies and their guns,” Fox said. He indicated a couple of figures milling amongst the shelters. They were clad in mismatched armor that was salvaged from various junk piles, made of plastic and spray painted a tactical green.

“What are they doing here?” Haze asked.

Fox shrugged. “Dunno. They’ve always said this block is their territory, which, why would you wanna bother a bunch of homeless people?”

“My dad says it’s the government’s fault for not outlawing ‘exscreamists’,” Gee said, matter-of-fact.

“Extremists,” Haze corrected.

“Yea. That.”

All that was left to do was make it through the vast lot unscathed, take the unused service road down the street, and make it into their shared neighborhood in time to start homework. *Should be easy enough, and it’s a shorter walk than usual for me,* thought Haze. *I’ll probably get home before mom. I can surprise her.*

Haze was just thinking about how smooth the walk had been

when she heard a shout in their direction from further inside the block than they had ventured into.

“You kids! You there! Want to buy something? Anything?” Fox waved his hand in the general direction of the shout, dismissing the call. “We’re good!” He said back.

Haze craned her neck behind her friends and tried to glimpse where the shout came from, curiosity beginning to overtake her anxiety. “Can we look? I’ve never been here before.”

Fox shook his head. “It’s nothing worth anything. Don’t waste your time, this way’s gonna be faster.”

Haze squinted and saw the source of the noise: a thin old woman bundled up in a ragged tarp and surrounded by flattened garbage bags and wares lovingly laid out around her. She peered at the kids with hopefulness evident on her face.

“Come on, I’m just gonna look really fast.” Haze darted off in the direction of the woman. Fox shot out his arm to try and grab her, but it was no use; she was already deep into the rows of huts. With a huff, he yanked Gee along by the jacket collar and pursued his friend.

Haze came to an abrupt stop in front of the old woman, who was smiling through cracked teeth and glasses that clearly weren’t the right prescription. She squinted up at the kids and pointed at the menagerie of items before her. “Fifty dollars a piece for everything on this mat. Twenty for the things on that mat. Anything helps.”

She gestured to the hut she was huddled in front of, which was constructed of several discarded storage bins and had a layer of cardboard as flooring inside. The roof was just another series of mostly intact garbage bags, laid out over one another and bonded together with painter’s tape. Haze peeked inside and saw various personal belongings piled in the corners haphazardly; a hairbrush with most of the bristles missing, a few makeshift utensils and plates, a handful of bedding wadded up into a bundle. She felt a pang in her chest at the sight of everything. Her grandma always said that she was lucky to live in a solid house. Though she’d never felt particularly rich, her grandma insisted that she be grateful for what she did have - especially because

her mom had to work three jobs to make ends meet. Haze thought it would be good to help this woman in front of her, so that maybe she could have a solid house one day.

“Umm... I like this one.” Haze reached down and picked up a bracelet that was handmade from repurposed wiring and bottle cap beads. She admired the way it clinked in her hands, holding it up to the sky to get a better look at the vibrant reds and yellows. Gee hummed thoughtfully and shuffled through a few of the bags for sale, which were all woven from reused grocery bags into a sort of mesh. Fox overcame his haughtiness and, pulling his hands from his pockets, reached for a customized pin painted with some sort of ink. In bold black, the lettering declared, “SOS: Save Our State!”

“Do you take digital?” Fox asked.

The old woman nodded and shuffled inside of her tarp to produce a cracked tablet. Fox pulled out his smartphone and tapped it to the tablet, which confirmed the purchase with a cheery “Ding!”

Haze followed suit with the bracelet, quickly calculating how much birthday money she'd have left as she bought her new accessory. Gee awkwardly backed away from the merchandise, deciding not to buy. “I've gotta save more. My dad will kill me.”

They walked away from the shop in the opposite direction that they came in, thanking the shop owner as they went along. Fox muttered something about how this way would probably be faster anyways, and Gee chastised him for being a hypocrite. Haze took her time now, the positive interaction in the supposedly dangerous neighborhood making her step a little more boldly. She peered into shelters as she passed them by, eyeing the people inside. Some stared back listlessly. Some nodded or raised a hand in greeting. One woman flipped the bird in her general direction, which made Haze recoil and Fox laugh. Gee pointed to two cats wrestling between tents and the trio stopped to watch.

A large, yellow cat appeared to be the instigator. It yowled and hissed as its opponent, a scrawny gray cat, swiped at it with unsheathed claws. They screeched at one another with great passion. Fox indicated

what their fight must be about; the black cat was protecting a chunk of unidentifiable meat, which lay forgotten as the cats battled.

Crack!

A loud pop pierced the air and the cats darted off in different directions, disappearing into the jungle of shelters. Haze jumped and fumbled behind her to grab her backpack, pulling it in front of her chest instinctively. She hugged the bag tight, wary of more shots being fired, and started to drop to the ground and curl up when an open hand presented itself before her. She looked up and saw a tall figure before her, wrapped in green plastic armor.

“Sorry to scare you. Those damn cats have been fighting ‘round here all day long,” the man said. He lowered his hand a bit more. “Let me help you up.”

Shakily, she reached for the stranger’s hand and allowed her weight to shift as she was pulled back to standing. She glanced around and quickly saw her two friends emerging from behind another shelter. Fox was wide eyed, staring at the strange man with clear distrust.

“Haze! Get away from him! He’s a raider!” Gee called. The man laughed and pointed to himself. “Me? I just helped your friend here get off the ground. I’m not gonna do no harm.”

Unsure, Haze took a slow step backwards and continued hugging her bag. Her grandma had insisted that she own a bulletproof backpack before going anywhere by herself. Haze always thought it was a little extreme, but now she was thanking the stars above for the extra safety net.

The raider laughed again and shook his head. The rifle he used to scare the cats away was still in his right hand, which did nothing to ease Haze’s nerves.

“You help someone out and this is the thanks I get - a bunch of stares from some ungrateful kids.” He gestured to the group, who huddled close together.

Gee whispered something to Fox, whose eyes began to dart around, looking for an escape route.

“Look at you all,” the man continued, “walking around our

territory, where you clearly don't belong – and what's this?" He stalked forward, coming close to Haze and examining her bag with interest.

"Looks like you've got a nice filter bottle here."

The raider poked at the metal canister that was clipped to her bag. It caught the sun's reflection and glinted in the man's eye almost tauntingly.

"I feel like we could put this whole thing behind us. The disrespect. The trespassing. I'll leave you be, alright. Just as long as you give me this bottle."

"No," Haze said, pulling her bag in tighter. She hastily tried to unclip the bottle and stow it in a zipper pocket, fumbling as her hands began to shake.

"No? You'd deny me this one little thing, after all you did?" The man advanced a step and the kids retreated equally as much. "Can't a guy even get a drink?"

"Haze," Fox whispered, "Follow me. Run!"

Fox inhaled sharply and sprang forward, pushing past the startled raider. He rounded a corner and disappeared between two tents, melding into the chaos of the cardboard block. Gee took off after him, and Haze followed suit. She cast a quick glance behind her to see the raider finally gathering his wits. He started to hasten in their direction, hoisting his rifle higher up to give him room to run.

"Intruders! Get back here! Don't let them get away!" He roared to any of his comrades within earshot.

The hunt was on. Fox was fast, and Haze was having a hard time keeping up. She could feel the breath in her chest growing tighter as the kids wove around corners, ducked under overhangs, and leapt over debris. Gee knocked over a vase sitting outside someone's shelter, which shattered and gave them away by the noise. Haze could hear the raider's ragged breath close behind them, and she didn't stop to find out how close he really was. She just ran.

Up ahead of her, Fox turned a corner once more. When she did the same, she realized with growing panic that her friends were nowhere

in sight. They had outrun her.

Think fast.

Haze scanned her surroundings as she ran and made the snap decision to duck into one of the many tents around her. She slid into one at random, and silently thanked the heavens that no one was inside at that moment. She crawled into a corner and yanked a nearby blanket over her head.

So she waited. For what seemed like hours, she waited. Her traitor breath seemed as loud as a train. She hoped it wouldn't give her away. Minutes passed, and slowly, she emerged from under the blanket and crawled to the tent's entrance. With small, deliberate movements, she stuck her hand through the opening and peeked outside. No one.

Haze exited the tent and looked around. She realized she was totally lost. Worse, she was alone. Dread filled her chest. *I should've listened to mom*, she thought. Her eyes threatened to spill tears, so she squinted hard and swiped at them. She had to think, to come up with a plan. Standing there and crying wouldn't help anything.

She decided it would be best to just start walking in one direction. Maybe if she kept calm and tried to look inconspicuous, no one would bother her. She prayed that the raider had forgotten about her and was elsewhere in the jungle of shelters. With a shaky breath, she began to walk along the alleyway.

Haze kept her head down as she walked. The pathways were lined with paper and plastic that had long been trampled flat, becoming one with the pavement. She couldn't make out what was printed on the debris, it was all so dirty. The crunch of her footsteps was comforting as she fell into a steady, rhythmic pace. *Just keep your head down. Just keep walking.*

She felt her smartphone buzz in her pants pocket. Warily, she pulled it out, expecting a text from her mom or grandma demanding where she was. When she unlocked it, she saw that the message was from Gee.

Omg where did you go???

Haze stopped abruptly and messaged her friend back.

Idek!! You guys went too fast! Where are you now???

Hold on a sec.

A few seconds passed, and Haze received a shared pin on her phone's GPS system. She opened it and to her delight, was able to see exactly where Gee was in the cardboard block.

Stay there, I'm coming your way!!

She began walking again and quickened her pace little by little, referencing her screen as she went. She turned corners, skirted between tight corridors, and avoided rats and garbage heaps. Gee's pin steadily grew closer and closer. Haze was just beginning to wonder how much further it could be when a familiar voice met her ears.

"Get lost, smart aleck?"

She looked up from her phone to see Fox standing ahead in an alley with his arms crossed cockily. Haze smiled and jogged to meet him, stopping to catch her breath.

"You... run way too fast," she huffed.

Gee appeared behind Fox and gave Haze a tight hug.

"Come on, guys," he said. "Let's go home."

Together, they navigated their way through the maze of a block. Once out of there, the remaining walk to their neighborhood was smooth and uneventful. When Haze's mother arrived home from work a few minutes after Haze got back, she asked how her day had been. She answered in ways that were completely ordinary, hoping that she wouldn't be found out. She had just begun to sneak away into her bedroom when her mom gently grabbed her arm.

"So, where'd you get this, then?"

She pointed to the bracelet made of bottle caps.

Crap.





By Icie Wallace

Checkmate

By Tina Olsen

I can only see it out of the corner of my eye. I feel its hands on me, dry and cracked, deciding what to do. They dance across my neck in a flutter. My face tightens only slightly, but otherwise I remain completely still and composed. But they know. They have to know that my heart is beating erratically; and I know that if the hands had a face, a smile would be firmly fixed on it.

My hands rise from my lap and flatten on the table-top, a way to silence myself. The fear is there deep inside, starting from my gut and clawing up into my mouth. There it is strained and caged, a black-tar

monster cutting into my teeth. It's contained but just barely. One day my restraint won't be enough. The day my life ends and then continues in a white padded room.

The clock in the room ticks on, the short, gray carpet continues to look ugly, and a pen clicks in a hand over and over like a metronome. My co-workers all look anxious to start the weekend, and I can't blame them. The board meeting wasn't supposed to run over, but our manager decided he liked the sound of his voice and is now "motivating" us. He eyes all of us excitably, pounds his fists passionately over the board-room table, and he moves his lips – but they say nothing. He quickly looks around the room to try and find someone with fire in their soul, someone inspired. He gets nothing.

He then continues his fervent speech, although I can't say on what particularly-- I'm too distracted by the pair of dry, cracked hands running heavy over the back of my neck. Only the sound of the pen clicking furiously seems to bleed over to where I am now. The hands begin to glide over my face, and I struggle to not quicken my breath in panic. *Calm. Calm down.* I fidget but do nothing else in fear of drawing attention to myself.

They sense my resistance, my urge to not break and lose it, so the only rational thing for the hands to do is to simply start peeling my skin. They dig their dirty, blunt nails into my cheeks and slowly peel off a piece of my face like the skin of a boiled tomato, ripe and destroyable. The pain is almost unbearable, but I bear it. *Today will not be the day.*

Unsatisfied by my reaction, the hands continue to languorously strip my skin until my entire face is made of red, fat stripes of pulsating muscle. Its fingers then decide to start digging into the stripes of muscles, ripping into the seams and tearing apart the thready, elastic tendons. I move my hands to grip the edge of the table and my knuckles turn white; Jonathan moves his eyes over from the speaker to me. He leans over to whisper,

“Hey, are you okay?”

I don't answer right away, I can't possibly do anything but grit my teeth. Jonathan seems to be more worried now, my silence obviously

unnerving him. He places a hand on my shoulder. The only thing I want to do is ask him if my face is okay, but I know I can't.

“Midori?”

He says this quieter. No one else in the meeting seems to notice us and that seems to be the only good thing in this situation. I intend to keep it that way.

My eyes slightly bulge out of my face as I turn to look at Jonathan, my (would be) eyebrows raise, I glare, and then I track my eyes back to the presenter. Jonathan takes this as his cue to mind his own business and slightly flushes, embarrassed. I give a breath of relief only to be ambushed.

They now pick at my scalp, bit by bit, until they can pull out clumps of skin by the long strands of hair attached. I grind my teeth together and try to bite my bottom lip in an attempt to distract myself, only to find that I don't have one. They dig out my eyes, chunk by chunk, and I'm left with bleeding sockets and black. In the dark I can't distract myself and I feel every bit of my pulpy face, the slow raindrop trails of blood. I try to focus on the click of the pen but nothing's working. I'm close to breaking, to giving in to them when I hear the pen clicking stop, hear my co-workers getting up, and hear them shuffling out of the room. I jump up out of my chair, gather my materials, and force myself to casually feel the way out the door. Soon my vision returns, and I chance a small glance at myself in the glass window, relieved to see that my face is whole again. I head to the bathroom where I lock myself in a stall and sag, gently palming my face to reaffirm that my skin is still there. I have to stay in the stall for another fifteen minutes to calm myself. Then I was gone.

I can't remember what happened next. My mind has taken over completely again, memories and time vanishing all at once. As of now, I'm at an empty bus stop. It's midnight and streetlights blink a dim path for me, and although I don't know how I got here, I don't panic. I can't panic and I can't scream because someone might notice me.

Someone might put me in a white box; wearing only threadbare,

white clothes; lock me in; and throw away the white key. I'm alone in every variation of that nightmare, and that's the only thing that truly seems to scare me.

I flip the brim of my coat to avoid the cold wind as I walk off to find my way back home. My shoes are gone, so my feet crunch on the unruly gravel and concrete of the sidewalks. That's when I hear another crunching noise, another *thing* walking on the same sidewalk. Whether this is another person or just a play of the mind, I don't take my chances and speed up my pace. Despite instinct, I don't turn back to look at the noise behind me.

It walks slowly behind, at a crawling pace, and just for a minute I feel like I'm safe. Like it's just paranoia and that whatever's behind me would've done something by now. Then it stops, then for some reason I stop, and then I turn around.

A gangly, pale, man with blown pupils stands. He's sweaty and his hair is matted to his forehead. The odd movement of his head and body makes him look inhuman, bobbing and swaying back and forth like a snake being charmed. His arms, trailed with track marks, are stuck to his sides and in one of his shaking hands, he holds a shard of glass. The man stares at me, almost frothing at the mouth. He says nothing and I say nothing. I do not feel the prickle of fear.

No, I feel removed from everything, like a third-party stranger witnessing a play. A man and a woman. A man with a weapon and a woman with an unkind mind. A fight between who's the most unstable. The third-party stranger in me says that I'll win that one.

The gangly, pale, man slithers over to me, never once blinking, and I can't move. I'm frozen. He's close to me now, inches from my face, and I can smell his gangrene breath – see the rotten teeth of his mouth begging to fall out.

He looks at me with his snake eyes, considers me, and takes pity. He sees the tears rolling down my face and he brings a shaking, dirty finger to wipe it away. He cups my face. His hands are dry and cracked. He smiles as he drags his dry, cracked hands across my face, the glass framing my jaw. Slowly, he takes the shard and stabs me in the stomach.

I don't scream, I don't cry; It doesn't hurt. *Why doesn't it hurt, it always hurts?* I don't care though, I know it'll be okay in a few moments, everything will be fine in a little while. He drops me to the sidewalk, and we stare at each other as blood gushes out. He smiles and I smile back, he takes my wallet and what's done is done. He leaves and I get ready.

I will not scream— I won't let them have the satisfaction. Black blood trickles out, tasting metallic and staining my teeth; but, my smile doesn't falter.

There will be no white rooms



By Gabrielle Jent

~83~

