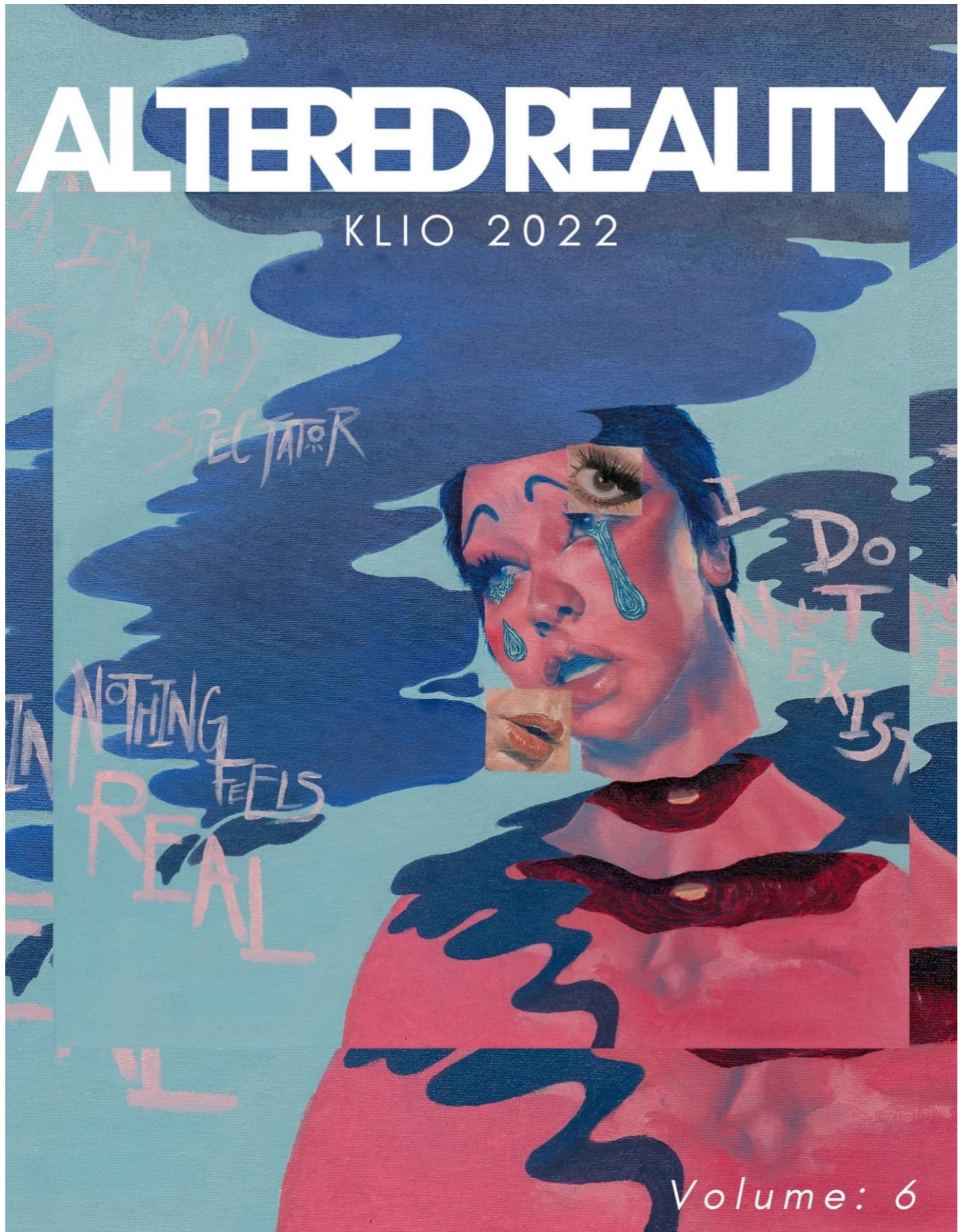


ALTERED REALITY

KLIO 2022



Volume: 6

OUR MISSION



As an online creative arts journal, KLIO encourages, amplifies, and celebrates a diverse range of literary and artistic media from Penn State creative artists.

Like our sister print journal *Kalliope*, we publish traditional creative writing and visual art intended for the page, but we also aim to use our online platform to share digital and cross-disciplinary works, including performance art, music, dance, and film.

KLIO seeks to showcase and keep a community record of creative arts from all Penn State campuses. We strive to provide an inclusive community to celebrate the creative and linguistic talents of emerging Penn State artists and writers. We pride ourselves on being a multimedia publication that represents diversity in art, perspective, and culture.

Both KLIO and *Kalliope* take their names from the Muses called upon by early Greek writers and artists for inspiration and creative guidance. The Greek word *kleô*, meaning “to proclaim or celebrate,” gives the muse her name and gives us our mission. Here at KLIO, we celebrate and offer a platform for all Penn State students to express their creativity.

MASTHEAD 2022

Julia Mertes – Editor-in-chief

Carmella Cocuzza – Managing Editor

Dana Lynch – Webmaster

Kate Irwin – Fiction Editor

Lauren Shovlin – Nonfiction Editor

Marissa Cruz – Sci-Fi Fantasy Co-Editor/University Park Outreach

Olivia Moukas – Sci-Fi Fantasy Co-Editor/Commonwealth Campus Outreach

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All contributions to KLIO 2022 are by Penn State University Park students, with the exception of:

- Ky Fantiago (Altoona)
- Leah Hutchinson (Fayette/Eberly)
- Katherine Joyce (Schuylkill)
- Awad Ulhaq (Lehigh Valley)

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear KLIO Readers,

Coming into KLIO 2022, many staffers had minimal experience with literary magazines—let alone ideas about how to produce one that would capture the “We Are” spirit Penn State is known for exuding. However, after four months of hard work and dedication, we proudly display the sixth volume of KLIO, putting a new spin on the magazine we’ve come to love.

The KLIO 2022 staff deliberated carefully about what to title this year’s edition. Some staff members liked the name *Daze*, while others highly advocated for *Cloud 9* due to the imagery encapsulated within the cover. However, we finally settled on the name *Altered Reality* because we felt the title recognizes the situation we’re currently encountering amid the pandemic but also the tone conveyed by many of the accepted submissions, especially those that take us to unfamiliar realms and unsettling spaces.

Recognizing an unmet need and market within the Penn State community, the KLIO 2022 staff decided to spotlight science fiction and fantasy works this semester. Inspired by the community’s love of dragons, monsters, aliens and witches, we curated a space for Sci-Fi/Fantasy lovers to thrive.

For instance, if you identify as a fanatic of Marissa Meyer’s esteemed YA series “The Lunar Chronicles,” head to our fantasy genre to check out the story “Electric Blood.” We have diverse selections that will appeal to sci-fi/fantasy lovers of all backgrounds.

Despite focusing our attention on science fiction and fantasy works this semester, that doesn’t mean we’ve deserted our focus from KLIO’s roots. We have an array of artwork, music, poetry and more for audiences to read and experience through.

KLIO 2022 contains an array of fiction works, not just in the sci-fi/fantasy genres, that would captivate the fiction lover. For instance, if you’re interested in the manner in which time passes or murderous storylines like those encapsulated within “Criminal Minds,” we have a selection for you, and it’s titled “The Timekeeper.”

Do you enjoy literature with captivating storylines, especially those filled with descriptive imagery that pulls you into a relatable, yet unrecognizable scenario? Then, you’ve come to the right place because the fiction piece “Girls! Girls! Girls!” may be an enjoyable read for you.

The nonfiction selections this year also demonstrate immense talent and contain genuinely intriguing storylines — some were emotional, some captured your attention immediately, and one in particular discussed the life of a crustacean. One standout nonfiction selection takes readers through a journey of

choices and possibilities in a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure narrative structure—one we wholeheartedly recommend you take a browse through.

KLIO 2022 received an array of poetry that stood out beyond the rest. From a heartfelt poem about one's father to a piece highlighting the rejuvenating nature of the morning hours and another emphasizing the transformative nature of a butterfly, our staff chose works to draw on readers' emotions and leave a lasting impact on one's mind.

In terms of visual media, the art committee received a variety of submissions this year that showcase the unique visions and perspectives within our Penn State community. You'll see works capturing the essence of nature, such as the piece titled "Roses," as well as portraits focusing on mental health scenarios, like the cover photo "Dissociation." There's truly a piece for every audience.

The same thing could be said about the music selections showcased this year. Make sure to check out our Spotify and SoundCloud accounts to hear the upbeat music submissions accepted this year.

We hope you enjoy the array of works we've curated for KLIO 2022 and take the time to appreciate the artistic talent within the Penn State community.

Acknowledgments:

*For the glory of those who create, we showcase the artists at Penn State.
KLIO will forever be a place of never-ending creativity.*

We would like to dedicate this edition of KLIO to the creators, the makers, the dreamers, and the trendsetters. To those of you who put your heart and soul into making artistic masterpieces for KLIO 2022—works that we now get to showcase, view and cherish indefinitely—we want you to know that appreciate the opportunity you've given us, the opportunity to see a small piece of your soul in the artwork and literary pieces displayed today.

For those of you who have followed our publication for years, we appreciate you and your consistent support for the creatives in Happy Valley and the surrounding Penn State branch campuses.

To our new friends, those of you who came across our organization while scrolling through social media or texting a friend on a random Tuesday night, we welcome you to the world of imagination and artistic talent. The Penn State family houses artistic genius in all forms, and our creative arts journal was lucky enough to capture it and share the collective masterpieces with all of you.

Julia Mertes
Editor-in-Chief
KLIO 2022

FICTION

The Timekeeper, *by Ben Margaryan*

I watched the second hand of the watch tick idly by, as my obsession grew stronger.

It was 10:27 p.m. New York local time, in the 20th year of the 21st century on the 203rd rotation of the Earth around the sun.

I was walking home from work when a sudden thought began to consume my soul. A burning need for vengeance, an urge to do something thinkable that would not go away.

At 10:29 p.m. I deviated from my usual course and began to walk towards the place that I knew that Harry would pass by. Weeks earlier, I had begun following the bastard home from work and had not only made careful note of his place of residence but also kept track within a margin of error of five minutes and 27 seconds his exact whereabouts at any given time. In fact, I already knew that between the times of 10:29 p.m. and 11:37 p.m. he would be most vulnerable. At some point between these two times, Harry would leave the safety of his apartment to go outside for a smoke, not wanting to set off the smoke alarm in the fancy building of the bourgeoisie.

I lay in ambush, a predator waiting for my prey. In my right inside coat pocket, I had a .380 Ruger LCP III handgun, and in my left inside coat pocket I had a pair of leather gloves and a Swiss army pocket knife. At exactly 10:33 p.m. Harry left the apartment building, and at exactly 10:34 p.m., I saw him light the cigarette.

It was 10:35 p.m. when I took the safety off the gun while keeping it tucked inside my coat. I had to be very cautious, as the neighborhood I was in was one of the wealthiest and heavily policed in all of Manhattan. One mistake, and I would be in handcuffs before I could ever let my finger slip ever so gleefully onto the trigger.

He smoked in innocent bliss in front of Four Park Avenue. Like a lamb, grazing in the fields, awaiting slaughter.

At 10:39 p.m., I remembered the time Harry yelled at me for not finishing my work on time. I remembered how angry I was since I had already gotten several days of extension. That was the week when my mother had died, and I had attempted to use this as an excuse, but Harry would not hear any of it.

“Anybody could come up with excuses. But not everybody can get things done,” he said.

Well, I’ll get things done, alright. I’ll give you what you deserve.

At 10:4 p.m., I remembered the pay difference between my boss and I. Why should he be paid so much, when I am the one who does all of the work? Why must I be complacent in this corrupted society? No, enough is enough. It is time for me to get what I deserve.

We were never equals, not once. There is no equality in this world, only those on top and those on the bottom. A rigid hierarchy of power, a food chain of our own creation.

I took out the gun at 10:32 p.m., just as Harry turned around to walk back into the building. At 10:33 P.M., I pulled the trigger two times. One bullet entered two centimeters to the right of his heart. The other struck four centimeters to the left.

Harry buckled to the floor as his legs gave loose. Red wine stained the chalk white sidewalk, like a bad accident at Olive Garden.

Judging by the absence of footsteps, I had at least one minute and 27 seconds before my identity would be in danger.

I drew closer to my victim.

“Well, old chap. What do you have to say for yourself now?”

“I...I...I never did you any wrong.”

“Is that so? Did you do me no wrong when you treated me like your slave for all these years?”

“I...I didn't mean to”

“What are your last words?”

22 seconds. The third bullet was ready.

“You...you...you...don't have to...do...this...This...won't...solve...anythi—”

But before he could finish, the trigger interrupted him. The third bullet, this time 10 centimeters below the heart.

“...is....a... better...way...”

I became a madman. So consumed with rage I could barely think, my heart pounded with adrenaline. There was no better way, there was no other way, this was the only way, all other ways led back to living underneath the Master's boot.

The fifth bullet found its target two centimeters below the waist, in the left thigh.

10 seconds.

I could feel every thump of my heart as it pumped with a new-found vigor, a newfound sense of urgency. Harry's heartbeat, however, slowed to a crawl, until it finally began to asymptotically approach 0.

0 seconds. A woman was walking by the street when she saw blood. She reached for her cell phone. I reached for the trigger.

Minus 1/2 second. The seventh bullet went straight into her heart. Unlike Harry, I did not feel the need to make her suffer.

Minus 23 seconds. The eighth bullet went into another passerby who got too close.

I had deviated from the original timeframe, but there was still time. I should have anticipated my inability to restrain myself from dragging the whole thing out. From bullying me in childhood to ruling over me in adulthood, I could never escape his tyranny. Until now. Finally, I am free.

I thought it may be best to dispose of the bodies, as covering up the crime any other way would be unfeasible in the long run. The probabilities flashed in my head, 21% that the police would trace my fingerprint, 84% they would give me a life sentence, 95% I would go to prison if they ever found the bodies. Fire would do nicely.

Minus 2 minutes 23 seconds.

A pile of 3 bodies. A small vial filled with gasoline and a match were all it took. The complete combustion of C₈H₁₈.

Minus 2 minutes and 59 seconds.

My getaway vehicle was a Lyft, the least likely to draw any kind of attention from the police. It would arrive 2 minutes 34 seconds before the police could ever get here from the station.

Minus 10 minutes 34 seconds.

I threw the gun into the murky depths of the Hudson, along with the coat. There was not a hint of remorse in my mind. No excuses, only results. No excuses, only results. Only results. Results.

I made it out, without suspicion, the numbers checked out, the luck I needed came through.

Minus 23 hours 23 minutes.

I came to work and was shocked to hear that my boss had died in a tragic fire.

My new boss came to the office and set down some papers I had turned in the day prior. He looked me square in the eye and beamed with pride.

“A job well done. Impressive. How did you manage to pull it off so quickly?”

I burst out into a fit of maniacal laughter.

“What can I say? I’m good at managing my time.”

“I think it’s about time you got a promotion, son.”

Ben is a computer science major at Penn State but has been a creative visual artist since a young age. He is from near Philadelphia, by King of Prussia, PA.

The Purple Geranium, by Katherine Joyce

New York City had never felt so dead. Alek stared out the window, shocked at the lack of cars in Lower Manhattan. If he squinted closely enough, he could just make out powder-blue surgical masks on the poor essential souls who couldn't find a taxi driver and had to hurry to work nonetheless because the world didn't wait for cabs. He rested his head on glass and closed his eyes.

It had been ten days since the world screeched to a sudden halt.

The cramped apartment was the best thing a 20-year-old could buy. There was no scent of cigarettes and beets. Then the music began to play on his misplaced phone. He didn't really like the Temptations or Franki Valli or the Beach Boys, but the lead singers sounded like his father. A candle was burning inside the room. His mother always had a scent of sweet cookies.

His parents were back home in Hawaii, too far away to even think about. So he didn't.

He detached from the windowsill and moved into the kitchen. A blue light hung over the laptop. The company was expecting a new advertisement in the near future, but every time he tried to work, his stomach turned. Alek simply shut the laptop and poured himself a cup of black coffee. Just like the rest of the world, they could wait.

The beverage slipped and fell on the cracked linoleum because of a knock at the door. *We are not supposed to see anyone*, Alek thought, his frown deepening. *I haven't ordered anything*. He approached the front door with the care of one tiptoeing around a sleeping bear. As his fingers brushed the handle, a folded piece of bright pink paper slipped under the door. He then looked through the peephole, but all he saw was a flash of brilliant red hair, and then an empty hallway.

It felt dangerous to bend to open the paper, afraid the COVID-19 would crawl up his arms like a hoard of tiny spiders. Fauci talked about the virus this way. He set down the coffee and discovered the cursive purple ink.

Dear Mr. 24C, Day 10

This might be the weirdest thing that I have ever done. I'm your neighbor to the

left. 22C. I moved to New York about a month ago. Not a good time to do so, apparently. You might remember all of the boxes, but you probably don't remember me. I remember you, though. You had a kind face. I only saw you for a split second. You were running down the stairs like someone had lit fire to the back of your jacket. Or maybe you just saw an ice cream truck.

Anyway — I'M BORED, MR. 24C. AND LONELY.

If you're half as bored and lonely as I am, wanna write back??? (If not, please

don't look down on me whenever this fiasco is finally over. Ten days feels like a lifetime, doesn't it? I have a new respect for animals at the zoo. Sometimes I think they have it better. They're not all alone). Also, have you ever watched "You've Got Mail?"

*Cheers,
Sadie, 22C*

Alek read the note several times to see if he understood it properly. What did she want? A pen pal? He walked over to his kitchen to their shared wall and knocked five times, feeling dumber by the second.. *Rap, rap, rap rap rap.*

Rap rap.

A smile slowly spread across Alek's face, the first true one since lockdown began. He stuck the bright pink note to his refrigerator door with an I LOVE NYC magnet and dug through his drawers for a spare piece of paper.

Sadie, Day 19

Would you like to hear a secret? I quit my job yesterday. No notice, no warning. Nothing. Nada. I'm free. I know this probably isn't the best time to do it, but I've always hated working there. I got my degree to be a political journalist, not an ad writer for a second-rate company. I enrolled in an online MA program this morning. Got to do something with all this free time (besides slipping letters under your door, which is as fun as it is unproductive).

*Unemployed,
Alek*

Alek, Day 24

Listen, I don't want to know what you look like. I think that sort of ruins the fun of this, don't you? It's more fun to imagine. Truthfully, I hardly remember that glimpse of you I got on moving day, so we're even. I personally like imagining that I'm writing letters to Tom Holland, only you're using the name "Alek" because you want me to treat you as a person, not a celebrity. I, of course, understand completely. I'm an understanding individual.

And as for me, I've been told I look like a really short Princess Fiona from Shrek. Whether that is her human form or her ogre form, I'm not sure. Make your own assumptions.

*Layered like an onion,
Sadie*

Sadie, Day 29

Can you believe the absolute clown show that is politics right now? Everyone in Washington's scrambling around like chickens with their masked heads cut off. The presidential race is a joke. Why do we have to watch two old guys in ill-fitting suits amble up to the podiums and insult each other? If I wanted to do that, I'd turn on "Grumpy Old Men," not Fox News. There's no good outcome in the upcoming election. That's starting to become a presidential trend. My MA program is infiltrating our letters, can you tell? I'm starting to become the Wall Street Journal.

Night,
Alek

Alek, Day 36

I don't understand why I'm not considered an essential worker. Honestly, who deems what is "essential" to a person's life?! I could argue that people need books just as much as they need anything else right now. I know I do!!! We're all trapped inside: books allow us to escape. If only the governor would let the bookshop re-open. I'm worried about Mr. Mortimer. He lives all alone as well. Everyone there was sort of like his family. I miss him.

I'm also starting to get concerned: my unread stack of books is getting dangerously low... Forget COVID. If I run out of books, THAT will be a nationwide emergency.

*Cooped up like Maya Angelou's caged bird,
Sadie*

Sadie, Day 41

You asked about my real name. It's a righteous mouthful — Alekanekelo. It's Hawaiian (I'm from Hawaii — did I ever tell you that?) for "protector." My mom picked it out. It was one of those names that teachers could never pronounce, my friends could never spell, and most tragically, there was never a little keychain or license plate in a gift shop with my name on it. It's just easier to go by Alek. I've known my best friend, Paul, for going on eight years now. We were roommates at Columbia. He still can't say it.

*Missing the tropical surroundings of my youth,
Alek(anekelo)*

Alek, Day 50

I ordered Chinese food today. The guy who delivered it was making eyes at me again. He got sweet and sour soup all over his face for his troubles. I'm thinking about switching to pizza for a while. If you open your door a smidge, I left you an egg roll.

*Pretty grossed out, but at least I have rice,
Sadie*

Sadie, Day 61

I just started my third re-match of "The Office." That should tell you everything you need to know about today.

*Season 1 is still trash,
Alek*

Alek, Day 68

What do you think it'll be like when we finally go back to normal life? When the masks come off? When there aren't rules about being six feet apart? When we both emerge from these prisons of brownstone and are forced to confront the fact that we've never said a word to each other without ink, what happens?

If I can be honest, and I think I can, it's the last one that scares me most of all.
Sadie

On Day 69, they wrote letters but didn't send them.

Sadie would sit on her purple couch to pen for the first time since they started writing letters. She wanted the note to contain everything—from song lyrics from her quarantine playlist, quotes from her most treasured books, receipts from a Chinese restaurant with the creepy Door-Dash guy, a pressed flower from the bouquet of purple and white geraniums he'd left on her doorstep for her birthday.

In the end she put that lavender piece of paper in her copy of “Six of Crows”. His heart ached because he'd learned about her through ink. He already knew her favorite book and her favorite flower. But, she didn't know his last name.

I think I might be falling in love with you.

Alek rumbled his brown curls as he sat down at the kitchen table, her last letter clutched tightly in his hand. Papers for his MA were scattered all over the place: quarantine had made him sloppy. *When we both emerge from these prisons of brownstone and are forced to confront the fact that we've never said a word to each other, what happens?*

Early in their letter-writing career, she'd asked him a question that kept him up all night. *What do you want, Alek? Like, really want? Get as philosophical as you dare. I won't judge.* When he searched his mind for a way to answer her letter to her satisfaction, he decided five words needed to be written with force. It was painfully honest and was not philosophical.

I want you, Sadie. You.

On Day 69, they both wrote a letter they didn't send.

Alek drew a deep breath as he jogged down the street in front of their building. He felt quite self-conscious. Spending so much time without someone looking at him was what led him to lose his self-esteem. He hoped not.

It was June, and summer had struck New York City with vengeance. Sweat dripped down the back of his neck like a leaky faucet. If the threat of COVID in a bustling crowd wasn't enough to drive people indoors, the ninety-degree weather dissuaded outdoor activity, but he had to get to Central Park.

And then he saw her, and all thoughts of pandemics and heatwaves and nerves melted away.

Sadie was sitting on the ground by the lake, her flaming red hair in a loose braid down her back. She wore a baby blue dress and she'd kicked her sandals off, opting to go barefoot. On the grass beside her was a worn copy of *Six of Crows*, a purple geranium sticking out from between its pages. Just like they'd agreed upon. It was her favorite book and favorite flower.

“22C?”

She looked up, and her smile was like a sunrise after spending years in the dark.

“Hi,” she replied, practically jumping up to meet him. There was no denying their height difference now: she barely reached his shoulders. “Thank you for not standing me up.”

He chuckled. “Was that likely?”

“It’s happened in every other iteration of this scenario. I thought you told me you watched the movie!” Sadie grinned, her freckled nose scrunching up as she did. “We, um... we left the brownstone, Alek.”

“Yeah,” he said, reaching to rub the back of his neck, searching for something to say. The words tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them. “You’re much prettier than Princess Fiona.”

She laughed. The sound was as beautiful as a summer night. “You’re much taller than Tom Holland.”

The world came to a halt for the second time in 2020 as their lips met, and for the first time, neither minded.

Katherine Joyce is a first-year English major at Penn State Schuylkill from a middle-of-nowhere town in Schuylkill County. She has spent the last year and a half ignoring the world to write a YA fantasy adventure novel that she plans to self-publish in the future. On the off-chance that she’s not writing, she’s probably rereading Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings” trilogy and Bardugo’s “Six of Crows” duology, or participating in Lion Ambassadors and Schuylkill Benefitting THON.

The Fence, *by Austin Allan*

A boy stood staring out at a field in the night. The cold night air beckoned him to walk across the twilight-soaked field into the black forest on the other side. All of his life he was told never to enter the forest, never to step over that pristine-appearing white fence at the end of the field, yet all his mind told him to do was to put one foot in front of the other and go.

In the past he was too scared to even go near it — it was just the rules, and he never dared challenge the rules. He stepped, slowly, closer to the bare trees. It was a cold winter night, but he wore a jacket that kept him warm well enough to be alright. The forest called to him, and he yearned to heed it. Slowly stepping closer, stepping towards that forbidden fence, stepping closer to his freedom. His parents slept in the home behind him, unaware of what he was doing, and they wouldn't support it if they knew, it was them who taught him the rules after all. A new, unknown world lay before him, an escape from his current one. To step into the forest would be something he could never undo, something he would never be able to turn back from. He would be tainted, for tasting that freedom is ravenously addictive, and people who haven't can never understand what it's like.

As he drew closer to the fence, so very close, a wolf called in the distance. The boy did not feel fear, he only felt welcomed by the wolf's melancholy howl. A single, lonely howl, from a single, lonely wolf, calling out to a single, lonely boy.

He stepped away from a world strange and scary to him, a world full of pain and scrutiny, a world less welcoming than the foreign one before him, less welcoming than the bitter cold of the night which was becoming more and more bitter in the field. He stepped away from a world that hurt him and beat him down, a world that found amusement in pain, a world oversaturated with greed and sex, a world he would never find happiness in. He looked at the people that thought they had found it, but he didn't know if it was truly real happiness they had found or just a mirage, something they created to find some kind of comfort in the darkness they had lived in their entire lives. Maybe it was real, but he knew he would never find anything real for himself in such an artificial place. If anything real was left, it had all been found and kept hidden away, hoarded by those on the top. They didn't keep it for themselves, just away from everyone. He had to go where no others dared to in order to find it.

He felt the old, splintery wood of that fence he stared at from afar moments ago. He pushed against it to climb, but it fell away before him. He stepped over its rotted wood, hidden by a new coat of paint, and the field behind him fell away into nothing. The stars in the sky glared, growing brighter and brighter as he drew closer and closer to the twisting trees before him. Once he stepped into their dark shadows he would be taken, unable to find the cruel world he was leaving behind ever again, for he could see its evil clearly as he entered the forest. Such a place couldn't accept him ever again, for his mind was open and his eyes could finally see — if it let him peer into it, he would destroy it. The sex, greed and overindulgence that that place's people held so dearly would be lost to them, and they would never allow that.

He felt the cold bark of the dark trees as he walked into the forest's depths. He should have been scared, terrified even, for he didn't know where he would end up. He was trapped in a new land without anyone to

help him, yet he felt no fear. He wandered endlessly; his eyes finally opened but not sure what to see. Just as he began to tire, he heard a rustle of leaves and the snapping of twigs. He searched for the source, and his eyes found a wolf staring into his eyes, past them even, staring *into him*. The boy stood there frozen, not knowing if what he saw was real, but when the wolf ran the boy followed. He knew deep down that everything he had thought he had seen before that night was fake, but here he would never be lied to again. The wolf ran to a clearing where it stopped and stared at the boy, suddenly dissolving into nothing, just a cold wind that pushed the boy to his knees. He looked up at the stars once again, no longer as bright as they were but now slowly dimming and going out. The trees around him fell soundlessly, all falling towards him but none striking him, and he was surrounded by an unscalable wall of cracked logs and splinters. The moon was all that he could see in the sky, and it grew larger and larger, or perhaps drew closer and closer.

The boy cried, icy-cold tears silently rolling down an even colder face. He wanted to escape the world he was born into, the world that didn't care for him at all. He didn't know how, but he had to leave that place behind completely, and he still felt it nearby. All around him he suddenly heard screaming from outside the walls. He also heard scraping and the cracking of the sticks around him, and he knew his world didn't want him free.

They wouldn't let him live in their society with what he had now seen, what he had felt, but they wouldn't let him live apart from the disgustingly putrid evil that took everyone in his world. He saw no escape. Suddenly, the moon was all he could see in the sky, everything else covered by the tall walls around him. Its pale milky glow drenched around him, and a beautiful woman floated just above him. He had never felt so warm and safe in his life as he did when he gazed at her. He felt the darkness that he had been engulfed in all of his life retreat, and he only felt happiness. And not the fake happiness his world marketed to you, but real, pure happiness he knew not many would ever feel again.

As the screaming grew louder and the scraping was almost at the top of the walls, the stars tried to push past the moon. These weren't the stars he had seen in the sky when he would lie in the field and stare into the never-ending space, they felt artificial. A harsh fluorescent light that flashed in nauseating pulses. The woman held her hand to him, and as he looked around the scraping, screaming sounds were now descending the walls towards him and the flashes grew brighter and steadier. Hands reached for him from all around.

He took her hand and felt himself jerk violently up, and he saw the clearing, the walls, the forest, and his world speed away as he went into that night sky. He flew up past what he thought were stars, away from the evil he had been forced to live among all of his life. He looked at her smile, and everything went white around him, and he closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of real happiness, of peace.

Stepping on what felt like clouds, still with his eyes closed, he knew he was safe, and he would be for eternity. With his eyes closed, he couldn't see the woman, but he felt her all around him, for this was her world. He was a bright soul raptured from a cruel and sadistic place, taken into an eternal paradise.

Austin Allan is a computer science major at University Park and is from Pittsburgh, PA. As he said he does not have a lot of writing experience, this is the first time he has submitted any writing for something other than a class. He writes mostly for fun, and as it has become a bit of a hobby lately, he is excited to share his work. He can be found on Instagram @austin2102x.

Songbirds, by Leah Hutchinson

I pass by the same park every day before work. I used to take a detour through the park and feed the ducks my extra bread from breakfast, and every day at the same time sat an old lady. She was an elegant lady. Always dressed in a cream dress with an orange and blue broach. She would knit and sew while watching the birds feast on the seed she brought every day. I became familiar with this routine, became familiar with the sound of the birds chirping and the old lady carrying on her hobbies. One day, I decided I would like to give back to the old lady. I was thankful that she was always there, and she even began to remind me of my mother, who had passed away a few years back. My mom always had birdhouses and feeders around her house, and when I asked her why, she would just tell me to listen, listen to the song each bird sang. For this comfort the old lady gave me, I bought her a bag of seeds and left it on the park bench she sat on every day. The next few days, I watched the old lady become more generous with her feedings, and she even hand fed a few blue jays and cardinals. She would give seed by the handful, looking at the birds with love as if each was her child. She was the only lady that I had ever seen a wild bird nuzzling. Usually these birds are timid and skeptical, but with this old lady they became friendly and comfortable. I remember thinking, “this woman must be magic.” She was something so warm and memorable that I even watched her each day. I smiled and continued my walk. The next day I walked to work and did not see the lady. All I saw was two blue jays and a robin. A week passed, each day growing colder, and I asked a park officer dressed in blue if he knew of the old lady. He told me her name was Rosana Doffman. Her husband had passed away a few years back from illness. She believed the birds were the spirit of her husband. Sadly, the old lady has passed. She died in her sleep at her home.

I asked the officer how he knew this.

“She was my mother,” he said.

I heard the song of a bird that is not common in this park — the robin. I turned my head to see a robin perched on the bench where the old lady, Rosana, used to feed and hum with the birds. I turned to greet the officer once more but just saw a young blue jay sweeping above. The small bird landed next to the robin a moment later. Both the robin and the blue jay flew off, side by side, intertwining as if dancing to the song of the songbirds.

Leah Hutchinson is currently dual-enrolled at the Penn State Fayette/Eberly campus. In the fall, she will be a nursing student with an expected graduation year of 2026. She enjoys painting, writing, kayaking, riding ATVS and participating in performing arts. She was born in Palmer, AK, and moved to PA in the third grade. She plans to go into midwifery and stay active in the community and theater.

Paper Boats, by Lance Colet

(Robert, you can't make rent payments on time, you're not worth any job above minimum wage, and you can't even learn to fuck the right way no matter how many times I tell you to use your hips and stop wiggling back and forth like a worm. We're done.)

Robert blinked the thoughts away and grounded himself in the present. The park was pleasantly chilly and soothed away the harshness of life. He drifted through the calm coolness of the day with his hands resting in his pockets. The grass was a mellow and muted green, the sky a cloudy, whitish blue.

People — strangers — smiled at him as he walked. He nodded back at an elderly couple on a bench and wondered at their lives and their trials and their tribulations.

A soccer ball came skittering over and Robert turned, trapping it under his foot. He flicked the ball up to juggle it, failed with a laugh, and kicked it back to a group of teenagers.

He walked on, a slow, soft smile spreading across his face.

Rounding a bend in the path, his body airy with the freshness of the park, he paused and watched a boy set a newspaper ship afloat in a startlingly blue pond. *The S.S. New York Times* bobbed for a moment, then steadied and sailed along strong and stable. The boy clapped his hands, and Robert found himself clapping along.

A fiery flash in his peripheral made him turn. A pretty young lady had shifted an orange scarf around her neck. She was seated comfortably on a bench, watching the boat sail too, but her big doe eyes were distant and dreaming and she wasn't clapping.

There was a spot next to her on the bench — the only bench near the pond — and Robert took a seat a respectful distance from her. She seemed to take no notice. A soft smile splayed across her face and her eyes followed the boat.

“My brother and I used to sail newspaper boats,” Robert said, breaking the silence. “We used to call them whatever text ended up on the side, so we'd get names like *The S.S. NASDAQ Down 4%* and *The H.M.S. Five Guys Burger Voted Best.*”

The girl didn't acknowledge him. Not even a nod or a smirk. She was still watching the boat with lost and dreamy eyes.

“It was funny at the time,” Robert muttered, leaning back with some bitterness. The bench creaked and *that* was what seemed to startle the girl out of her stupor.

“Oh,” she said, looking at him and blinking once, twice, like she was clearing sleep from her eyes. Her mouth hung open just a bit, like she was going to say something else, then it settled into that soft smile again and she

looked back to the boat. The *S.S New York Times* had reached the far shore and the boy ran around to set it back on a return journey.

Robert frowned and turned from the girl. He watched the boat. It wasn't that fascinating. He found his eyes drifting back to the girl. *She* was more interesting. Rosy-cheeked from the cold, eyes bright and pensive. She had a small nose that Robert wanted to pinch softly between his fingers.

"Come here often?" he asked, trying to draw her back from whatever distant land her mind had floated off to.

She looked over again, surprised, like she hadn't noticed his whole opening spiel about newspaper boats.

"Come where?" she asked.

Robert gestured around. "Here. The park."

"Sometimes."

A silence ensued. Now she was watching him with that smile still splayed on her lips. It was playful and teasing, like she knew something he didn't.

"Is there something on my face?" Robert asked, suddenly self-conscious.

She shrugged. "No. You just talk a lot."

"What else is there to do?"

"Think."

Robert frowned. "About what?"

"Anything. Try it."

He leaned back. She leaned back. They both watched the boy and his boat, and Robert let his thoughts wander.

(All aboard folks! The S.S New York Times is setting sail once more for the west side of the pond.)

(You got two days, Robert, you little shit. Scrounge up the money or you're out. E-V-I-C-T-E-D. I got a whole lot of other tenants who want that room—and they all seem like folks who won't try and take advantage of an old landlord. Your mother would be ashamed of you, how many times you say you'll—

(We've reached the west shore, folks, last stop before the S.S New York Times sails east!)

(Four years at college and you're no better off at flipping patties than you were before all that ejub-mub-cation. What a waste. Could've learned to build planes or use computers, and you wasted your father's money on four years of reading about all these make-believe worlds and people.)

A creak brought him back to reality. He was gripping the edge of the bench and his knuckles were white. The girl was looking at him with concern flooding those big eyes of hers.

“Sorry,” Robert mumbled, letting go of the bench and flexing his fingers. “I was just *thinking*. That’s usually not what I do when I come here. I don’t want to think about...you know...my life.”

She giggled. It was musical, cutting through the air crystal clear. The boy with the boat looked up and started laughing too. Robert stayed silent.

“Why would you think about *your* life?” she asked, in the same laughingly confused tone as someone asking why you would put a leash on a rock. “You can think of anything.”

Robert shrugged and let a silence simmer. The boy went back to sailing his boat.

“What do you think about?” Robert asked.

The girl smirked. “None of your business, mister. If you tell people what you’re thinking about, then it ruins the thoughts. They’re not yours anymore.”

“So you just think and do nothing with the thoughts?”

“Yup.”

“You should write a book, then. Do something with them.”

The girl shook her head. “Same thing. If you take the thoughts from your head and put them on paper, then they don’t belong to you, and they don’t...flow. You’ll get embarrassed. But you can’t be embarrassed if it’s all in your head and it never comes out.”

Robert felt a lopsided smile grow on him at the peculiar girl. “You’re bizarre.”

“I don’t care what you say here.”

“What?”

The girl shrugged and turned back to the boy and *The S.S New York Times*, now a veteran of numerous trips across the pond. Robert settled deeper into the bench and watched the ripples in the water.

(S.S stands for steamship, Robbie. You know, the ones with the cool factory smoke coming out the top.)

A dark billow of smoke puffed out from the top of *The S.S New York Times*.

(Hurry, Robbie! Make it go faster! The pirates are gonna catch up!)

Two ships sailing and waving the black flag, one *The S.S Landlord* and one *The S.S Career-Path*, were in menacing pursuit of *The S.S New York Times*.

“Captain,” a deckhand told Robbie, “They’re gaining on us.”

Robbie was by the wheel of the ship, looking out through the bridge’s window and smiling at the sea. He adjusted his sailor’s cap and tamped his pipe. It was wonderfully sunny out, wherever they were in The Atlantic. The air was warm and soft, and the sky was such a clear and cloudless blue that it almost seemed fake.

“We can’t outpace them?” Robbie asked the deckhand. He lay a hand on the wheel of *The S.S New York Times*, veteran of a thousand sails.

The deckhand shook his head solemnly.

Robbie sighed and looked ahead. On the horizon, an armada of dark clouds loomed—vulgar and black against the rest of the bright weather.

“They don’t have the balls to chase us through that,” Robbie said, grinning the grin of a cocksure captain. “But ask the lady if she’d rather face the storm or the pirates—she’s our esteemed guest, she should have a say in how she gets home.”

The deckhand nodded and scampered away, leaving Robbie alone for a moment with his thoughts.

(Twelve hundred dollars by Tuesday.)

(Stop fucking up the patties, Robert. Three years in and you still overcook them to tire-rubber status.)
(Where are you gonna live when—

“Captain?”

Robbie turned and smiled at her. She was in a cream dress and flashed a smile back at him full of playful confidence, despite the pirates behind and the storm ahead.

“We’ve got a choice, Miss —”

(Should I ask her name? No. How about Morgan? Sounds nautical enough.)

“— Morgan. We can try our luck with the pirates, or we could full-steam it through the storm.”

“Cut through,” Morgan said, eyes alight with glee. “Cut through that storm, Captain Robbie, and bring me home. Oh, what fun.”

“It’ll be rough,” Robbie said.

Morgan took his hand in hers. Her palms were soft. “That’s just how I like it, captain.”

He smiled and pinched her nose between his fingers.

(Oh, that’s cringe-worthy.)

(You can’t be embarrassed if it’s all in your head and it never comes out.)

Robbie sent a telegraph order down to the engine room and, after a moment, he could feel the pistons of *The S.S New York Times* pumping furiously as the ship shot across the sea and into the heart of the storm...

The boy was done playing with his newspaper boat and he plucked *The S.S New York Times* from the pond. Robert let out a gasp. Besides him, the girl laughed.

“Sorry,” Robert said, blinking. The sun was painfully bright. His vision was splotchy with floaters.

The girl on the bench stood and stretched her arms up to the sun, yawning. “I’ll be going now,” she said. “I have... real things to do. Sadly.”

Robert cleared his throat. “Can I ask your name? I’m—”

(Captain Robbie.)

“— Robert, by the way.”

Amusement flashed across her face. “I was thinking of you as more of a *Roger*. It’s more rough. And rugged. Better fit for the high seas.”

She —

(Morgan?)

— gave one last smile before leaving. He watched her go, then stayed on the bench by the pond for a long time, thinking.

Lance Colet is an undergraduate student at Penn State pursuing a major in economics and minors in psychology and creative writing.

Meadow, by Katherine Joyce

When I was a little girl, I used to run to the meadow. In spring, the wildflowers were just beginning to bud, green sprouts braving the risk of frost. As the school bells rang for the last time, signifying the end of each school year, the blossoms would be in full bloom for the summertime, explosions of purple and orange and yellow and pink and white. By the time autumn came around, most of those flowers were long gone, but a few hardy survivors still shuddered in the chilly breeze. And then came winter, when ice would cover the barren fields and snowflakes would cascade from the bleak canopy of clouds above to pepper me in frozen kisses.

Now, it is October, and the gray sky is threatening to dampen my spirits further. I shudder in my Nittany Lions sweatshirt and pull my hands into the sleeves. It's not nearly warm enough to brave a Pennsylvania October, but I knew that before I pushed open the back door of my parents' house. I never made rational decisions about the meadow. It is a place of magic, for me, and logic does not have a place in wonder. When I was 12 my mother stopped following after me with an extra coat and earmuffs as I slipped out the back door.

Standing here at twenty years old, I feel slightly like the child I once was, and I hold onto that comforting thought as best as I can with my shaking hands. A weak laugh falls from my lips, though no one is beside me to hear it. The wind swallows up my mirth and sweeps it north. A pair of gloves wouldn't have hurt, after all. But I'll never tell my mother.

My gaze falls on a wimpy little cornflower a few inches from my boot, the exact shade of my eyes. I pluck it from the ground and twirl the stem between my fingers. For some reason, I have to fight the urge to drop it back to the frozen ground, like I'm unworthy to hold such fragile beauty. Instead, I tuck it behind my ear and continue on. Life is simpler in the meadow. The cold air stings my face, but it's a welcome pain, better than the dull ache haunting my every step.

"Your folks are looking for you, you know."

That voice stirs a million moments in my heart, many of them involving sunlit days playing games of tag and moonlit nights lying among the tall grasses. I don't turn around, but I do smile a bit as I cross my arms and shiver. "How'd they know I was here?"

"They didn't. I did." Archie appears at my side, and he's so familiar I want to cry. Because if I am tied to the meadow by years of interwoven memories with an unyielding string, I am just as tied to Archie. "I thought you weren't supposed to be back until December."

"I wasn't," I admit, shoving my hands into the pockets of my hoodie, the one he bought me as a graduation gift. "It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I just had to get home."

"Is everything okay?" he asks, his question more of a formality than anything. Currently, I'm radiating *not fine* like a buzzing neon sign. "What's wrong?"

Can he see my shame? I feel like I've been written all over in scolding red ink, doused in rejection, ripped to shreds, plunged into failure. Part of me doesn't want him to know at all. In my memories, Archie exists in rose-colored flashes, nostalgia bathing our friendship in gold. We ran through this crummy town together for

eighteen years, hand-in-hand, until an acceptance letter whisked me away, and he was left working alone in his father's garage. The thought of appearing as less than I am is terrifying. *Or maybe, this is exactly who I am. A girl of almos.*

I clear my throat. "I'm dropping out."

His eyebrows draw together, his face drawn into an expression I recognize all too well. He's calculating, sorting, desperately attempting to come to the answer so he doesn't have to ask the question. It doesn't work. I stay silent until he finally stares ahead and whispers, "why?"

"I don't know... it's just getting too hard." There's a lump in my throat and a tear slips down my cheek, cold in the winter air. "All my life, I've dreamed of being a writer, but my professor hates everything I turn in. By the time she's done with it, I can barely read my own work, there's so much ink. She's so scathing and critical. Every time I go to class, my stomach is in knots. It's just not worth it anymore."

I practically force the words out. I expect him to fight me, or maybe to wrap an arm around my shoulder. What he does is much, much worse.

He *laughs*.

He just stands there and laughs at me, clutching his stomach, leaning over, practically wheezing.

Anger roars inside of me like some vengeful beast of ancient lore. "Why do I even bother?" I mutter, scowling as I walk away from him, my boots hard against the frozen ground. He catches my wrist and I spin back around, refusing to meet his eyes. My gaze falls to the grass instead. It's so brown and brittle that I doubt my death glare can kill it more.

"What? Oh come on, Olive." He's grinning—how can he grin like that when I've just decided to give up my lifelong dream? "You're going to let one person scare you out of everything you've ever wanted?"

"She has it out for me. I have a big project due at the end of the semester, and she's hated everything I've been working on for it, and if I fail, they'll kick me out of the writing program. And then I'll have nothing, and I'll have wasted three years of my life on a dead-end dream."

"But if you quit, you don't stand a chance."

"It's not *quitting*. It's..." I blow a stray curl out of my eyes. "It's being realistic. No one makes it as a poet. My parents were right. I've been kidding myself all these years. I never should have left."

Archie doesn't say anything for a moment. His gaze falls from my face to our hands, loosely entwined. Car grease still coats his fingers. I wonder if he left work to come find me.

"No, you were right to leave. You don't belong here."

I scoff. "Right, because someone who grew up dodging potholes and dead deer on Route 61 belongs anywhere *but* here."

"No, really," he says, and there's a fire in his voice I rarely hear. Despite my desire to remain cold and angry, I meet his eyes. They're a rich brown, the color of soil after rain. "I'm going to live and die here. That's what my dad did, and his dad, and so on. My kids are gonna bleed Skook, and they're gonna be proud of it." He chuckles a little, a warm sound as the wind whips around us. "But you, you're different. You're smart, Olive."

You're ambitious and creative and driven. And you want to give up? If you waste all that and move back here because one professor was giving you a hard time, I'm gonna lose it."

My shallow breath materializes in little clouds.

"I needed to come home," I whisper hollowly. My hand begins to shake, and he grips it tighter yet, grounding me as he always has. "I don't feel like me anymore."

Slowly, Archie wraps his arms around me and I lean into his embrace. I can still smell the garage clinging to his clothes. He rests his chin on my head and I listen to the steady beating of his heart, recalling how many times he has saved me like this.

"I wanted to drop out," I breathe, my voice muffled by his sweatshirt, "because it would be on my terms. If I get kicked from the program, it'll look like I'm not good enough. Quitting is easier."

"If it was supposed to be easy, there wouldn't be anything special about it." He strokes my curls and speaks close to my ear, his voice soft.

"There's nothing special about me."

"You paint worlds with words, Olive. You're incredible."

I look up and give him a watery smile. "You know, you're pretty incredible, too."

He winks. "I know I am."

Archie pulls me close again. As I inhale the familiar scent of a frozen meadow and a boy from the garage down the street, my heart turns life to a fresh page and begins a new poem.

Katherine Joyce is a first-year English major at Penn State Schuylkill from a middle-of-nowhere town in Schuylkill County. She has spent the last year and a half ignoring the world to write a YA fantasy adventure novel that she plans to self-publish in the future. On the off-chance that she's not writing, she's probably rereading Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy and Bardugo's "Six of Crows" duology, or participating in Lion Ambassadors and Schuylkill Benefitting THON.

Marie, by Emily Logue

The pungent smell of smoke hung in the air. The ringing in Charlie's ears drowned out the groans of the dying scattered around him. He moved his hand and felt the cold mud his limp body was caving into.

"Is my uniform wet from the mud or blood?" Charlie wondered to himself. "Am I dead or alive?" A small pained sound escaped his lips as he forced himself to sit upright.

The battle was still raging around him as he dragged himself over to a fellow soldier. It was evident the young man was dying. There was no way to get him to a medical station before it was too late. Perhaps Charlie was dying, too. All Charlie could do was cradle the man's head while he slowly departed from the chaos of this world. Charlie didn't know the man well, but he was still unable to leave him to transfer over to the next world alone. The man reminded Charlie of his kid brother, Hank, who had also been deployed in France. Charlie wondered where Hank's division was — maybe further down the line. The Western Front stretched down through the French countryside into Belgium. Charlie would have liked to visit this land for other circumstances other than the untimely death of an archduke.

Charlie was raised Catholic, but seeing all of this destruction and senseless death made him wonder where God was. He mumbled a prayer quietly for the man's soul, and for his own soul, and for everyone tied to this "Great War" — Charlie's mother would be proud of him for remembering the words. A nearby explosion rocked the ground around Charlie, and he was thrust into unconsciousness.

When he awoke he was greeted by a dull ringing in his ears. Charlie sat up with a groan and got to his feet. He was alive — there was no way Heaven looked like this. If anywhere, this was Hell. The world had become ugly in Charlie's eyes. For many weeks he and the rest of his unit had been living in cramped trenches dug by hand into the Earth. Dirt and stacks of sandbags served as the brick and mortar of the space they called home. Flies hung over the trenches and rats were rampant. The soldiers were lucky if they could find a nook or cranny in the tunnels to shelter themselves with, briefly escaping the brutal conditions they were in.

As he looked around, he noticed that besides the dull ringing, it was silent. A light shower of rain was falling, but failed to wash away the blood shed here. The battle was over and his troops had gone. "They must've mistaken me for dead," Charlie concluded. He needed to find his unit soon. They would have moved forward with a victory or receded in a defeat. As the rain fell on him and poured off the rim of his helmet, Charlie trudged through the field toward the closest town.

As he neared the town, he saw the destruction. The buildings had been left abandoned, crumbling and charred. Walls were torn apart and the brick underneath was left exposed in some places. Faded posters for

carnivals and sports matches were pasted on the walls of alleyways. Charlie ducked under a collapsed entranceway and entered a pub. Shattered glass littered the floor and the building was only illuminated by the natural light. He limped over behind the bar and examined the liquor shelf, hoping at least one bottle of whiskey had been spared the carnage. Thankfully there was a bottle of *something* (Charlie couldn't make out the French), and so he popped the top and took a swig. With a heavy sigh, Charlie took off his heavy backpack and rifle and placed them on the counter. He sat up on a wooden barstool to give his legs a rest. He noticed his hands were shaking. He attempted to cease their involuntary rattling but to no avail. He took out a cigarette and lit it with a flick of a lighter, hoping to calm his nerves.

His efforts were interrupted by a small tug on the back of his uniform. Startled, Charlie got to his feet quickly and scanned the room. He looked down to see a small girl gazing up at him with round blue eyes. She had curly brown hair and a round, pale face. She wore a pale blue dress, torn at the bottom, and black shoes, lightly dusted with ash and dirt. By the looks of her, she was no more than four years old. Charlie crouched down to her height, not wanting to scare her.

“What're you doing out here all by your lonesome?” Charlie inquired.

The little girl didn't answer and remained staring at him with innocent eyes. Charlie glanced at the French inscription on the bottle and nodded to himself, “she doesn't understand.”

He looked back toward the girl, but she had vanished. Charlie straightened and spotted the girl darting out into the main road. He grabbed his gear and followed after her. The rain had started to let up and the sun peeked out from behind a gray cloud. The girl ran into a small apartment building which was heavily damaged. Charlie followed her up the creaking stairs and into a quaint living room. The girl had climbed up onto a wooden chair and was pointing at a painting. The painting was hanging crookedly on the wall and depicted a woman, a man, and the girl herself. Charlie walked over carefully and stood behind the girl perched on the chair.

“That's your ma and pa?” Charlie guessed.

“Maman,” the girl said, “Papa,” recognizing the “ma” and “pa” sounds.

Charlie nodded then pointed at the little girl in the painting. The girl looked at him and responded confidently, “Marie.”

Charlie nodded again and held out a shaky hand to her. “Pleasure to meet you, Mary.”

Marie corrected him firmly, “Ma-ree.”

“Marie, Marie, I got it, I got it.” Charlie motioned to the woman and man in the painting. “We better find your ma and pa. It's not safe for you to be out at a time like this — it's not safe for anyone really.”

Marie stared at him and blinked, not understanding. The tall blond man with a funny hat and uniform must be “*American*,” she concluded (she had heard her parents use that word before). Charlie recognized the blank look and resolved that taking her to the next town would be the best way to get her to relatives, perhaps her parents if they survived.

“Come along kid,” Charlie said as he turned back to the door. Marie saw him leaving and carefully climbed back down from the chair. Searching around the disheveled apartment, she grabbed a worn teddy bear and hurried out behind him.

In the center of the town was a stone cross, which was left standing. Water pooled around the base of the monument and a glaze of gasoline coated the surface. Charlie led the way out of the town and down a muddy path. He glanced back to make sure Marie was following, which she was. Marie trailed behind the funny American with her bear under her arm. The poor bear was in a chokehold and all the stuffing had moved from its neck to his tummy. Marie studied the soldier, a stranger in a strange land. She noticed his hands shaking despite his best efforts to calm them. His fingernails were embedded with dirt and his hands were stained from gunpowder. He had a few simple rings on his fingers. She remembered her father wore rings like that: one for his family name, one marriage band. Marie concluded that perhaps they were some comfort to the funny American who knew it was inevitable they would get dirty.

After a bit of walking, Charlie took his canteen of water from his belt and offered it down to Marie. She took the bottle carefully with both hands and drank.

“I’m Charlie by the way,” Charlie said while pointing to himself.

Marie looked at him for a moment then nodded like she accepted that was his name. She handed the canteen back and watched it return to its place on the uniform belt. Funny American. After Marie refused to be carried (which would have picked up the pace), they began walking again. Marie looked around at the once-bountiful farm fields now torn up and littered with barbed wire. At least there were pretty stones still scattered on the road. Charlie glanced over his shoulder and saw Marie had fallen behind and was scanning for pebbles. With a sigh of frustration, he turned around and marched over to her.

“What’re you doing, kid? Collecting rocks is only going to slow us down more. Besides, I’ll probably end up carrying them.”

Charlie brushed the stones from her hand which fell back into the mud and cleaned her hand on his sleeve. “Come along, Mary.”

“Ma-REE,” Marie corrected adamantly. She huffed and followed behind him. Her anger was fleeting when the next shiny rock caught her eye and she picked it up.

As the sun began to set, it was clear they were not going to make it to the next town. He still needed to clean his injury from earlier as well. Charlie glanced back at Marie clutching her bear under her arm and a fist full of pebbles. *Kids*. Over the hill Charlie spotted a little farmhouse with blue painted shutters. Perhaps they would be friendly and allow them to stay the night, or, better yet, maybe they knew Marie and could get her back to her family. Charlie wouldn’t be able to find out because no one was home. When there was no answer at the door, Charlie tried the knob — it was unlocked. Marie ran in under his legs and over to a plush sofa. She carefully climbed up and sat with her bear. Charlie searched their house to make sure it was safe. After scoping out the area, he went to the bathroom to tend to his wound.

After a little while, he returned to the living room and put his pack down and set his rifle against the brick fireplace.

“You hungry Mar- Ma-REE?” Charlie asked as he walked into the kitchen. “I know I’m starved half to death.”

Marie watched him go into the next room then climbed over to Charlie’s pack. She curiously looked through the bag and cast aside the boring items: first aid kit, a blanket, soap. Just as she was about to give up, she found an envelope of pictures. Quietly, she looked through them. One was of the funny American, *Charlie*, with a pretty woman. Her hair was done up in a twisted bun, and she had a flower tucked in her hair. Charlie looked a little younger in the photo, but he had a big smile on his face. *Charlie should smile more often*, she thought to herself. The next photo was of Charlie and the same woman again, but this time she had a round

stomach. *A baby*, Marie knew. The third picture was of a baby, tiny and cute. Marie smiled at the picture and turned it over. On the back was written some English that she couldn't read.

"That's my wife and daughter." Marie turned around to face Charlie when he spoke. "She was born a few months ago. I haven't gotten a chance to meet her yet myself."

He walked over and sat down beside her on the sofa.

"I have to admit, I am kind of nervous to go back to them. I left as a soldier, a kid, but I'll return to be a father. What if I'm no good for her? What if I can't protect her from things like this war?" Charlie knew Marie didn't understand, but it felt good to think out loud.

Marie pointed at the picture of the baby and looked up at Charlie.

"That's my daughter. Her name is Mary," Charlie said with a small smile. "Mare-ee."

Charlie read Marie the notes on the backs of the photographs. Though she couldn't understand him, she was comforted by it nonetheless. Charlie was comforted by reading to her, too. He glanced down at Marie as she curled up asleep against Charlie's side. Perhaps all this fighting wasn't for nothing. Perhaps he was fighting for this: Marie's future and his own future with his wife and daughter.

As the night crept on, the house was silent. The ringing in Charlie's ears persisted but was a slight comfort. With the dull ringing, Charlie knew he was still alive. No sudden tragedy had taken him, the roof had not collapsed on them, the ground had not crumbled beneath them. Everything was still, other than the persistent shaking of Charlie's hands and the light breeze outside. No sooner did Charlie feel a small, false sense of security than did the sounds of an approaching car echo in from outside. Charlie got to his feet quickly and extinguished the candle flames. Marie woke at Charlie's sudden movement and rubbed her eyes sleepily. Charlie put his pack securely on his back and clutched his rifle. Marie too heard the voices, slowly growing louder and closer. With a quick mental run-through of their options, Charlie scooped up Marie in an arm and headed for the back door. Before he could reach the exit, the floorboards of the front porch creaked with the weight of the men. Charlie ducked into a small closet space and closed the door leaving a narrow crack open. Marie clutched onto Charlie's worn down uniform and they both stared at the narrow slit of light which pierced the dark space they resided in.

Five men entered the farmhouse and made themselves at home. They spoke German and helped themselves to what was left in the food pantry. Charlie's heart thumped loudly, another sound from which he couldn't escape. This heart racing sensation was not the same as the giddy anticipation of kissing a girl. Nor was it the exhilarating excitement of riding a roller coaster at Coney Island, knowing you'd be sick after. This was dread. Not only was his life in danger but also the life of the little girl he'd taken under his protection. The only way out of the waking nightmare was through the weathered farm door at the rear of the house. The door led into the unknown, but for once that was more comforting than the horrific reality. After an hour of standing motionless in the closet, Charlie watched as a shadow of one of the men moved and grew bigger. He spoke over his shoulder to his comrades, heavy boots painfully growing louder. The footsteps ceased as a hand reached out and grabbed the knob on the closet. Without a moment to second guess, Charlie lowered Marie down and tackled the bewildered man.

"Run!"

Marie didn't need to speak English to understand the order. She ran out past the grappling men on the floor and darted toward the back door. The door swung open and Marie hurried out onto the creaky porch. She looked back over her shoulder as the other four men got up from their seats after hearing the commotion. Two of them went to help their friend while the other two ventured outside to see who had fled outside.

Marie was ducked down behind the vehicle they arrived in. Her bear and dress became even more dirty from the mud from the car's tires. The two men searched the farmyard and slowly moved closer to her hiding place. A shot suddenly was released from a rifle, and they returned back inside the house. Marie feared the worst but kept a vigilant watch on the back door, waiting for Charlie to appear. Shouts were heard, and the door was forcefully shoved open by Charlie's shoulder. He stumbled down the steps to the grass and scanned the dark yard. Marie ran over to him with a quick dash, Charlie lifted her into his arms and ran into the dark countryside. The German men ran outside and piled into their vehicle. They tried to start the engine to chase after them, but the metal beast refused to start.

"Rocks," Marie said in English as she looked up at Charlie.

Charlie couldn't help but grin when she spoke and he heard the engine fail behind them.

"Not bad, kid. Not bad at all," he said.

Marie smiled at the sight of Charlie smiling. She noticed the sweat coating his face and a trickle of blood from a fresh wound near his eyebrow. But he was alive, and so was she, and that was a miracle in itself.

Charlie carried Marie through the dark fields without a misstep. He didn't allow his legs to tire or his eyes to remove their attention from the horizon. They passed through a small forest of moss coated trees, a gurgling brook and a family of deer. As the sun began to make its much-awaited appearance, its golden rays enlightened a small town and military encampment ahead. Tents were pitched and there were several stations set up in a row. Charlie watched the buildings grow bigger and more vivid in detail as they approached the encampment. Marie picked her head up from Charlie's shoulder and looked around. The area was filled with soldiers — British, French and American, the injured being tended to and the able-bodied making their way over to greet the duo. A lone, weary American soldier cradling a small child, both in need of a sense of safety. Shouts came from the rear of the crowd, and Marie climbed down from her perch against Charlie's shoulder. She darted into the crowd, and Charlie sprang after her instinctively. The crowd parted for Charlie. At the end of the path was a man, a French soldier, kneeling on the ground, hugging Marie tightly. His features matched those of the man in the painting: a straight nose, brown hair and broad shoulders. The man, Marie's father, looked up from his embrace and rose.

"Thank you," the man said in English with a heavy French accent. "Thank you."

Charlie breathed a sigh of relief, knowing he had completed what he set out to do. As the relief washed over him, exhaustion did too. He fumbled over to a nearby tree and sat down in its shade. He leaned back against the tree's sturdy trunk and allowed his eyes to close.

Charlie felt a small hug and reopened his eyes. He looked down at Marie hugging him and returned the embrace.

"Thank you, Charlie," Marie said, mimicking her father's English, "thank you."

She placed a shiny stone in the palm of his hand. Charlie looked down at the rock and turned it over in his hand, as it shined in the sun's light.

Charlie let go of Marie and looked at her with kind affection.

"Thank you, Marie."

The both of them had learned a lot from each other in only a short amount of time. An undeniably unlikely duo, but profound nonetheless. With that, Marie scampered back to her father with her bear under her arm.

Marie's father picked her up and took her over to the town adjacent to the encampment, where Marie's mother was taken for medical aid.

Charlie watched the two distant figures reunite with the third. He smiled and shut his eyes, imagining his return to his wife and daughter. The ringing in his ears was replaced with the grand cathedral's bells ringing as he remembered his wedding day to his wife.

Emily Logue is currently a sophomore at Penn State and is seeking a film major and creative writing minor. She is from Levittown, PA where she lives with her mom, dad, two younger sisters and her dog. Emily loves movies, books, drawing and writing. Her favorite movies and tv shows are part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. She loves historical books, as well as science fiction stories such as Frank Herbert's "Dune."

Girls! Girls! Girls!, by Cindy Rodi

“Tessa Turner.”

“But what’s your real name?”

“That is my real name.”

“It sounds like a stripper name.”

“Then I guess I was meant for the job.”

He didn’t give her any preparation after he hired her. Once he deemed her boobs “big enough” and legs “dancer-like” enough for his taste, he instructed her to “just watch a couple of the others” and, between cigarette puffs, suggested she go out and buy herself some heels, “and a thong wouldn’t hurt, too.”

Tessa wanted to laugh, or maybe cry, or maybe scream, she wasn’t sure. But she knew this was her best option, and she was willing to take her chances. Anything she could do to get away from home, make some money, and have a real chance at supporting herself.

The club itself was laughable: maximum capacity probably shouldn’t hold beyond 40, as if they were ever able to muster up that big of a crowd in middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania. The tables creaked when any ounce landed on top of them — beers and fries were never safe, but at that point, it didn’t even matter; customers were too interested in the show anyway. Plus, the wobbly tables were good for business: the more spilled, the more refills sold, the more wallets dropped and loose change scattered. The whole building reeked of cheap cologne and Windex that at least kept the worker’s stations clean, never mind the grime where the customers sat.

They had some old costumes in the back that her new boss instructed her to look through if she couldn’t get something of her own before tomorrow’s first shift. Tessa was sure they had never been washed. Sorry, not costumes. Uniforms. This was her job, this was her performance.

Tessa rummaged through the hangers and bins of old shimmery fabrics small enough for a toddler. She almost missed the tight, revealing leotards she never felt comfortable in.

These heels didn’t quite fit right. She was so used to being *en pointe*, yet the angle of the shoe caused her toes to curl unnaturally, squeezing themselves inhumanly into the open front of her new sparkling platforms. Her toenails were never painted before, barren compared to her coworkers. She had never before been exposed. She was battered and bruised.

It was embarrassing. She didn’t belong here; she had potential, she had a future ahead of her, and she gave it all up for *this*. Suddenly her get-rich-quick scheme felt like a joke, she was in way over her head. Of course,

she could just go home and tell her parents the truth, that she couldn't return to the University of Arts because her leg didn't recover quickly enough, that she wanted to get a job to support herself, that she didn't even like ballet, she just did it to make Mom happy.

But she could never own up to that. She was in too deep, anyway. At least this way she could keep dancing and didn't have to live up to the potential everyone expected her to carry out.

Cindy Rodi is a third-year English major and music minor at Penn State. She is in Schreyer Honors College, and she is an active member of the Blue Band as a piccolo player. She loves writing, and even works at the Penn State Writing Center as a peer tutor. In her free time, she enjoys makeup, crafting, music and Netflix. She can be found on Instagram @cindyrodi.

Forlorn, by Leah Hutchinson

I awoke in an unfamiliar hallway. I sat up from the cold concrete floor below me and tried to get my head to stop spinning.

“Where am I?” I asked myself.

“I can’t remember anything.”

I looked around to see the narrow hallway I found myself in was not just cold and dark but was made completely of cement. The only light came from a single lit lantern that hung upon a metal hook. As I gathered myself, I tried to stand, using the wall as my leverage. I stumbled toward the lantern, trying to balance myself. I lifted the lantern off the hook and began my walk down the foreboding hall. With the new light, I could see myself better. I looked down to see that I was only wearing a long nightgown. The nightgown was ankle length and made of an off-white satin. This only confused me more. I held the lantern close to my body as if I were expecting to protect myself with the dim light that illuminated my face.

I continued to drag my hand along the wall as I searched for a way out. My mind ran wild with thoughts; I couldn’t even concentrate on one. I felt myself falling into the raging river of constant perceptions. Each conclusion crashed over my head, pushing me deeper into the water. I felt as if I was drowning. I felt my last breath of sanity leave my lungs with one last suspicion.

“I was brought here to die.”

I suddenly became frantic; I wanted to fall to my knees and lose all hope, accepting my fate. Then, suddenly with the last step I had strength for, I saw it — the end of the hallway, and the only thing at the end of the hallway was one large steel door. I brought myself to the door. The door spanned most of the wall; it was roughly seven feet tall and four feet wide. The dark steel frame mocked me as it boldly looked down on me. I reached for the door’s lever. As my hand grazed the surface, the ice-cold steel felt enough to make my hand burn. I tried to pull the lever, but I was met with yet another puzzling obstacle — a locked door.

I looked around, in the hopes of spotting the key, or even a tool with which I could open the door. I saw a large rock and, without a second thought, I picked it up and raised it above my head. I then hit the rock over the lever only to be met with the loud crashing sound of the rattling steel. I dropped the rock. Hearing the solid steel was unsettling and off-putting, but still fueled with the adrenaline of my discovery, I turned and walked back in the opposite direction.

“There must be something that I haven’t seen.”

I continued to limp and stumbled as I followed the narrow hallway back towards the place I found myself in. The dark space around me hid in the shadows only to be revealed by candlelight. My hands were sweating from both fear and anticipation. I began to think. I thought about the numbness I was feeling, but that numbness was met by hysteria. I wanted to laugh, and then I wanted to cry. I wanted to fall to my knees, but I ran instead. I could not think without being met with hopeless configurations. I wanted to know why, and

how, but I never asked myself who or what. *What was it that was making me forget?* I found myself running now, but I did not tell my body to run. I tripped, falling over a crack in the cement floor.

I sat myself up and looked down at my elbows and knees now painted red with the blood that reminded me that I was still alive. The blood was calming to me. Entranced by the ruby red river flooding onto the cold unforgiving rock below me, I recollected my thoughts. I reached for my lantern that had skidded across the floor as I fell. I picked it up, and something caught my eye. I looked up to the hook where I retrieved my lantern and saw a rusted key. I tore off some of the cloth from my nightgown and wrapped it around my wounds. I lifted myself and maneuvered the key off the hook. I clutched the key tightly between my fists, and with my lantern ventured back to the steel door. As the steel door came back into my sightline, I pulled the key close into my chest. One hand held the dim light against the ominous door as the other hand searched for the keyhole. Within one rotation of my wrist, the door opened. I lifted my head and pushed against the mighty door, where I unveiled a room.

I walked into the room and lifted the lantern to illuminate the new setting. The room was not just a room, but another puzzle. All around me were staircases, some upside down, some right side up, and all in various directions. There was no second floor or lower floor, just one room, and forty staircases, each with a different roman numeral engraved on them.

I sat down with the lantern in the center of the small room and began to look around. The room smelled of dirt and metal. The ground crunched and crumbled underneath me. The stairs cracked as I investigated each one. I looked behind, under and around each step individually in the hopes of finding the next clue. Some stairs were steep, some took two steps before reaching the next level. I wandered, searching high and low, investigating each corner of the unfamiliar setting.

Silence rang in my ears until a foreign sound broke the quiet imprisonment in my mind.

“It came from the far corner... right?”

I looked to the one corner that was the most unsettling. It was the only corner my lantern didn't completely light up. I lifted the lantern and walked so carefully that the sound of the dirt beneath my feet was completely muted. I mean, I had already searched this corner. It was the first one I checked. It was in the back right corner of the room. It was the closest to the door. My blood ran cold, and my heartbeat pounded against my chest. Each beat was another step, each one a racing thought, until I reached the corner. I raised the lantern where I saw a silver key lying perfectly upon the step. *I would have seen this. Especially out in the open.* There was someone, or something, else here with me. My only question was... *Is it friend or foe?*

I lifted the key and examined it. On the key was a small engraving. I squinted my eyes and read aloud the scripture.

“X-V-I-I...? That's seventeen!”

Within a moment I found myself at the staircase with the Roman numeral XVII on it. I was confused. How can a staircase have a keyhole? I pushed and pulled against the sand bricks that made up this large, towering staircase. Staircase XVII was the largest and most memorable of the staircases. “XVII” was written engraved two feet high, and each letter was centered on the front-facing wall. I was bruised and covered in cuts and gashes. I had painted both my skin and the ground with the red stain of blood. I felt faint, so *why did I keep pushing myself?* My thoughts were starting to become the most terrifying element of this experience. My mind was busy rambling, while my body forced all its weight into the action of finding an exit.

At last, I hit the keystone brick. It was the only loose brick, and while I pulled out the gritty piece of the staircase, others fell to the floor. My eyes became impaired by dust, but once it cleared, I saw a small trap

door on the ground. There was a keyhole. I took the silver key I had been storing in the lantern base and raised the small door, revealing a ladder. I held the handle of the lantern between my teeth and started my ascent. I crawled down to the small space, where I began to feel trapped. It was pitch dark and the sound of silence returned. I touched my foot to the ground and turned around to another, more terrifying room. I heard the breaking of the walls and then a crash, and the room began to fill with water. I was met with another crash. This one was of the small trap door above me being slammed shut. I hung my light on the ladder and fell to the floor feeling every inch. *There must be another key, but where?*

I tried to calm myself; I grazed my hands over the concrete floor below me, the rough surface now completely submerged underwater. I could feel the pain in my knees. The water was soaking into the makeshift bandage I had made. My bruised and torn knees expressed their anger. I recentered myself. I could not think about the pain when I was faced with a much greater threat. The water in the room continued to rise, and the visibility lessened. I crawled from corner to corner, slowly making my way back to the center of the room. I felt as if I was in a tank. *A fish tank.*

The water but a foot from the ceiling, I worried about losing the flame of the candle in my lantern. Within the moment of that thought, the flame was washed away. The room should have been completely dark, but it was not. I could see a small dim light coming from between a crack in the cement wall. I grabbed the lantern and dived towards the light. I brushed my hand against the crack, feeling the brittle surface. I used the lantern and tried to force enough of a bang that the crack would either widen or completely wither away. I tried once, but then there was not enough force. I would try a second time, and I would have no luck. I caught a glimmer from the corner of my eye. I saw the glimmering of a new object. I turned to where I could grab the small item. I brought it back to the small light and saw it was another key, but a gold key.

Running out of air, I looked back to the trap door that was slammed shut. I swam up, grazing my hand over the surface. There was a keyhole on the underside as well. I fumbled but got the golden key in hand. I used the key and threw the door open. I lifted myself up onto the floor with my last bit of strength. I opened my eyes where I saw I was no longer in the room with stairs, but I was on the sidewalk of a suburban street. I looked back to the trapdoor I had lifted myself out of, but it was not there; there was only a manhole. I only heard the overwhelming ringing in my ears. The only other sound was of muffled voices, but I could not tell what they were saying. I raised my head to see I was surrounded by strangers. They all had wide eyes. A man was on the phone. Another was holding my hand. I had no more strength. I felt sick. I now heard sirens. I could feel myself being moved and jolted, but I just closed my eyes. I dropped my head. *I wanted to sleep. I was alive. I did it. I made it. I was okay. I felt dizzy. I felt tired. I felt heavy. I opened my eyes once more. I was met with a light. I closed my eyes. I dreamed sweet dreams. I had no more to fear. I had help. I was hurt. I was dying.*

Leah Hutchinson is currently dual-enrolled at the Penn State Fayette/Eberly campus. In the fall, she will be a nursing student with an expected graduation year of 2026. She enjoys painting, writing, kayaking, riding ATVS and participating in performing arts. She was born in Palmer, AK, and moved to PA in the third grade. She plans to go into midwifery and stay active in the community and theater.

SCI-FI/FANTASY

The Watcher, by Kylie George

“Kafziel, please. It’s your turn.”

He just wanted to help; he was told it was the right thing to do.

It’s why he wanted to become a guardian in the first place. He would watch the others crowding around the portal he was stationed by, as one by one they disappeared into the light.

Kafziel rises, hesitant, and glides into the main room. The marble and gold decor everywhere is throwing him off. He typically doesn’t bother with the “finer things” that these head archangels tend to surround themselves with, and being encased in this bubble of delicate metalwork and stone arches is making him feel horrifically out of place on top of the anxiety that already comes along with a visit to the Judgment Hall.

Kafziel trained hard to secure his place as a guardian-in-training. All he really had to do was receive some (not much) instructions from previous guardians, visit Earth so he could see it with his own eyes, and take an oath, swearing that he would never intentionally harm anyone under his watchful gaze. He got the temporary wings that signify a guardian-in-training running their first trials (they sprouted from his back like they had always been there, just waiting to come out) and all the fanfare that came along with them.

The room he enters is spacious, but feels even bigger than it really is due to how much of it is empty. The gold-and-white theme continues, but without any of the intricacies. This is not a place created to look pretty. A council of only five archangels sit before him, elevated fully high-and-mighty. Kafziel must look up in order to make eye contact with them. They look remarkably human like this, with the exception of the massive wings marking their status stretching from their backs. It makes Kafziel long to return to the humans he met over the course of his trials.

The first time he traveled to Earth, Kafziel was overwhelmed by how much he wanted to stay. Autumn was thick as the layers of leaves he kicked around, settling over the Northern Hemisphere like a heavy comforter, and he was stricken by how strong his senses were. He could feel the chill of the wind on the back of his neck, smell the rain softly falling, taste what can only be described as *fall*. Kafziel had never experienced any Earthly season before, but as soon as he arrived and felt the crunch underneath his loafers, he felt he’d known forever. He decided then that autumn was his most favorite of all the seasons.

“Take this time to reflect,” one of the archangels orders, “on those you have served. We will discuss your abilities and determine what comes next.”

What a warm welcome, Kafziel thinks as he gives a curt nod, trying to squash his apprehension. As much as he doesn’t want to be here, he just has to get this part over with. Then he can figure out what to do next.

Kafziel loves Earth in part because of how stimulating it is to the senses. It’s nothing like the realm he comes from, where everything is dulled and somehow constantly, unpleasantly pleasant. Sterile. Uniform beyond perfection. But his desire to stay on the planet is really all due to the humans who inhabit it.

They’re so... fragile. But they’re so unafraid all the same, so fearless. It amazes Kafziel that, though any of them could perish at any moment, most of them seem to pay it no mind.

They aren’t particularly smart about it, either, which he found funny the first time he witnessed it. Crossing busy streets without looking, speeding down highways and weaving in and out between other cars, ingesting harmful materials for fun, slowly eating away at their own lifespans.

But something about them is so adorable to angels. It’s why they want to protect them. They hold close bonds, care for each other when there’s nothing to gain; some even make careers out of it! They craft, they make things, they make *families*, they teach each other, they work, they make up stories, they cook, they play with each other, they assign meaning to things that didn’t ever mean anything at all, they puzzle over their own existence, they reach out and cry into the universe and beg for companionship, they call each other cute little words and made-up names, they hold each other in every way physically possible, they stay together even after they’re grown, they hold gatherings and set routines and have traditions and do silly little things for no reason, and, more than anything, they seem to love each other so much that it’s the only thing keeping that little blue ball spinning.

“Your first assignment,” the head drawls. “Xiao Jinghan.”

Kafziel nods again, sighs, and tries to remember.

When he met Jinghan, his first trial-run at guardianship, Kafziel was very new and not very good at his job.

She was a clumsy little thing, the only reason she really needed any guidance, and always looked around when Kafziel had helped her, like she knew. Like she could tell that it couldn’t possibly be her doing—that she didn’t have an ounce of luck to her name.

Jinghan didn’t do much. She mostly studied, got lunch out, took walks, called her parents. But everything she did, every step she took, the potential for a catastrophe was there. It was incredible, and it was unlike anything Kafziel had ever seen. She was a *disaster*.

The first time he stepped through the portal door and came out the other side in sweltering, mid-summer Sichuan, she was on her way to the Chengdu Museum of Contemporary Art to meet up with two of her friends. It appeared she had attempted to keep her hair out of her face, but severely underestimated just how much of it she really had, as half of it had already fallen out of the clip clinging to the back of her head. She pushed up her glasses with the back of one hand while typing hurriedly on her phone with the other, so focused on the small screen that she didn’t notice the woman with the stroller in front of her coming to a halt.

Kafziel flailed in place for a moment, unsure if such a small collision would warrant his interference, before hastily pointing at the woman and shifting her to the right, next to a bench and safely out of the way. Jinghan didn’t even look up.

He knew then, approximately fifteen seconds in, that he had his work cut out for him.

But Kafziel watched over Jinghan decently well. He watched in awe when she celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival with her family, his greedy eyes raking in every detail of the culture-rich holiday, when she took long walks through the city at night, following the slope of each neon sign and taking note of the way she situated her keys in between her fingers when anyone got too close to her, when she dropped by her favorite street vendor and left with her palms sinking into the soft bun of the *baozi* she was so fond of, unable to stop his smile as she moaned at the taste of her first bite.

Over the next few weeks, Kafziel got to know China. Through watching Jinghan—he may have been stupid, but he wasn't irresponsible enough to just ditch her—but also by heading out on his own when she was in the library for hours, safely tucked away into a corner, or once she went to bed. He quickly became enamored with the Yangtze River, Huashan Mountain, the Yuanyang rice terraces; but also downtown Beijing, the beach stretched across Sanya, the Hanging Temple in Datong. He loved listening to spoken Mandarin, too, loved the rising and falling of the syllables, the melody of its words.

And when he'd seen a decent amount of the country, he hopped around. He dropped by Hanoi, Osaka, Bangkok, Incheon, Manila, never staying long but dying to know what was there. He was a tourist everywhere he went. He hit every major landmark, every sprawling city, every "good side" of every place.

Though, to his surprise, he had the most fun when he was nowhere at all, watching humans live through mundane days. In the middle of the suburbs, deep in a forest, at the edge of a lake. Humans were everywhere, and Kafziel was obsessed with observing them. Family members treated each other so gently, friends threw taunts at each other, but their teasing was laced with care, even strangers would quietly dance around each other, trying to keep out of each other's way, but still affectionate enough to greet each other or wish them a good day. Kafziel couldn't stop the longing welling up inside him, the longing to be part of something the way that they were.

He spent two months there with Jinghan before it all came to a head.

She was hurrying (a bad omen in itself) to the library. Her old laptop had finally bit the dust a few days after Kafziel was assigned to her, so until she could put aside enough to buy a new one, she'd been taking down notes and writing her thesis in a scarlet notebook, then taking it to the library to copy her work onto a document. It was clearly tedious, her handwriting was god-awful, but it was really her only choice. The last time she'd had the chance to go and sit down and transcribe was a little over a month ago, and Kafziel could tell she was itching to get it copied down.

She was practically speed walking, her tote bag swinging back and forth, and bumped full-force into a man walking from the other direction who was cursing someone out via Bluetooth. The impact sent her sailing off to the side, colliding with another man standing in front of a bench, lighting a cigarette.

An apology flew from Jinghan's lips, but she was moving on before anything else could happen, clearly embarrassed, and trudged on toward the doors to the library.

To Kafziel's horror, she didn't notice the small flame from the man's lighter clinging to her sleeve.

There was no time to ponder what he should do. There was a fire feeding a little too close to her flesh for his comfort, and he needed to stop it before it claimed any more of her.

He reached out and sent force Jinghan's way, sending her tumbling right into the fountain she was breezing by, in front of the library's entrance. The splash made him wince, and Jinghan's confused cry didn't help his guilt.

She looked okay when she surfaced, just surprised, of course. Kafziel exhaled once he could see the flame was doused. He let relief wash over him, and even allowed himself to feel a little prideful. He actually did it. A real act of guardianship.

It wasn't until he saw Jinghan frantically digging through her tote bag, stifling a sob when she found what she was looking for, a flash of dripping scarlet, and pulling out her soaked notebook that Kafziel actually understood what he had just done.

He ruined a month's worth of her work.

She did it again, the thing she did every time he intervened—looked around like there was someone to blame. But this time, her eyes fell directly on Kafziel. She couldn't see him—he knew that, if anything, she was seeing through him. But her glare made a shiver run through his entire body, and before he could move, he was summoned back to his realm.

And that was his first assignment. Failed.

“Wonderful,” the head praises, moving right along with no regard for Kafziel struggling to reenter the world. “Your second assignment, Winston Todd.”

Kafziel takes one extra second to send an apology Jinghan's way, shuddering at the memory of the evil eye she gave him, and focuses on his second assignment.

Winston was much shorter, only a little over a week. Which was a shame, because Kafziel was very curious about the United States, having just come from China.

He was high risk, as most men like him are. Approaching sixty, he spent his whole life working hard labor jobs, smoked a pack a day, and seemed to be taunting death. That's why Kafziel was sent to him. Winston was like a muted daredevil, in a weird way. It was like those little risks he took gave him enough of an adrenaline rush to keep living.

When Kafziel first dropped in, he was in the middle of a work day, had donned in his bright orange vest and hardhat on and was waving forward a big machine that Kafziel could not possibly imagine the function of. Winston was chipper as could be, yelling to the other guys working with a big, goofy smile on his face, shrugging it off when someone else wouldn't return the same enthusiasm. He was great at his job, directing people where they were meant to go, giving orders, expertly controlling various vehicles and machinery. Kafziel was impressed. It seemed that Winston always knew exactly what he should be doing, exactly what was needed and how to fix things.

He'd make a great guardian, he thought. Better than me, at least.

Winston was just so capable. Kafziel didn't even have to interfere with his life, not at all. He just sat back and watched. Winston would get up, eat breakfast, head out, work all day, come home, have dinner with his younger sister, and watch television until he fell asleep. That was the brunt of it. He didn't take big risks that put him in immediate danger, or do anything that Kafziel could fix—it wasn't like he could just stop him from buying cigarettes. And he wasn't completely oblivious and careless, like Jinghan had been. He was always in control. Without it having anything to do with his abilities, Kafziel's second assignment was going smoothly.

He didn't explore as much as he did in China, but he made sure to hit one place that he had heard about again and again—New York City. He was so excited, thrilled to see a completely new group of humans and entirely different culture, eager to compare it with all that he had seen in Asia. It was there, in Manhattan, that

he found the strangest of all humans he had observed so far. He decided not to stay very long. New York made him... uneasy.

Nine days after he was assigned to Winston, Kafziel was watching from a few feet away. It was Saturday, Winston's day off, and he was digging around in the shed behind his house. Kafziel was taking it easy, content to watch the clouds and the people that lived in Winston's neighborhood float by.

When Winston emerged with a bright red ladder, Kafziel's interest was piqued.

He leaned it against the side of the house and started climbing with no apprehension, hammer in hand, undoubtedly on his way to fix something on the roof. Kafziel watched with bated breath as the ladder shifted under Winston's weight, swaying side to side as one leg lifted off the ground. Kafziel reached out and tried to adjust it better, get it on more even ground, but even as he moved it an inch to the left, it was still wobbly.

He dared a few steps closer, crouching on the ground to see where the best spot would be, but when he looked up, Winston was already gone. He'd scaled the whole thing and was skittering across the roof before Kafziel could even fix it.

Relieved and continuously impressed that he still hadn't had to intervene, Kafziel slunk back to his previous spot near the corner of Winston's fence, peering at his figure darting around ten feet above him.

But when Winston climbed back down, the ladder sank into soft ground on the left side, sending it and Winston free-falling in a flash of vermillion.

Without thinking, Kafziel made a scooping motion midair and plucked Winston from the falling ladder, letting it connect with the ground with a heavy clank.

And, like with Jinghan, he realized his mistake too late. Winston was hovering where Kafziel was holding him, still a good eight feet off the ground.

Humans can't float, idiot.

He pulled his hands away like he'd been stung, letting Winston fall just as he would've if Kafziel had never been there at all, connecting with the ground hard, knees first, and grunting at the sound of a crack.

Kafziel sprung up, ready to get someone's attention who could really help, but he was already being pulled away, back to his realm.

And that was his time with Winston.

Kafziel shakes off the feeling, the memory, and once again focuses back on the archangel before him. The head looks amused, like that last one was funny to him. Kafziel fights the urge to snarl. He may not have known Winston for long, but he still wanted to defend him if he could. He deserved it.

“And your final assignment, Vera Holm.”

The entire hall is deathly silent and painfully still. Kafziel feels the three damning syllables in his bones. Her name has wedged itself into his heart like a stubborn dagger that drives in deeper every time it's spoken.

Kafziel thinks that, if he were being judged on Earth instead of his realm, he would be able to feel it turning.

The first time he ever saw her, he was confused. Where was his new assignment? All he knew was that she was a human female, but the only person he saw in the room he had been dropped into was a tall, blond man.

The room was painted bright yellow, with a small bookshelf and a small bed tucked away in the corners. Upon realizing this, Kafziel noticed that *all* of the furniture was small. The bookshelf, the bed with the red polka dot sheets, the nightstand, the fuzzy chair beside the shelf.

Kafziel understood the situation the same moment that the sheets were tossed aside to reveal a much smaller head of blonde hair.

“Vera, kom hit,” her father lilted with a grin, beckoning her. She grinned, a huge one that took over her whole face, and hopped out of bed, running into his arms.

His new assignment was a child. A child who couldn’t be older than three.

The panic didn’t last long. *Surely*, Kafziel thought, *surely her parents will keep a close eye on her. I probably won’t even have to interfere much. I’ll just make sure she doesn’t choke on anything or run into the road. It’ll be the easiest yet.*

And he was right, until he wasn’t.

Vera was loved by her father, immensely so. But he was a very... easily distracted man. He had a terrible habit of taking Vera out, pushing her down the sidewalk, having his attention stolen by a street vendor, and just walking away from his daughter’s stroller. Kafziel had to try his very best not to scream in total frustration when it happened.

But he was good to Vera, her father, and despite being tired from working so hard and raising her on his own, Kafziel was right. He really didn’t have to do much.

And, God, Kafziel loved that kid more than anything. He didn’t travel anymore, not once he got to her, even though he wanted to see Europe and all of it was right there within his reach. Everything he needed to see was right there, in that tiny yellow room.

Children, he decided, were the best humans of all. They loved without restraint, spoke without fear, felt more than any other. At any given moment Vera could (and would) start crying for no reason at all. If she was hungry. If she was uncomfortable. If she was tired of being in her bed alone and wanted to be with her father. But, amazingly, it never lasted. She would be fed or moved or picked up and settled into a firm embrace, and everything was okay again in her world. Kafziel was amazed by how simple it was. Everything would be a lot easier if adults could do that, too—tell other people what they need and let themselves be helped. He might be out of a job, even.

His favorite moments with Vera were when her father was busy working on his computer and would let Vera roam around the living room as she pleased. Kafziel felt confident that her father would stay focused on his work and wasn’t watching his daughter with the keen eye that he often had for her, so he was free to play with her. He would make her little stuffed animals and toys dance around her, completely entranced by the gleeful giggles and babbled words that would come out of her. “Papa, papa, de dansar! Mina bebisar!” she would cry. *Papa, they’re dancing.*

All of her little friends had personalities, voices, lives. She made sure to take turns bringing them to bed with her so none of their feelings were hurt. She kissed them goodnight just as her father did with her and wished the house a good night’s sleep. She was concerned about the sleeping habits of the *house*. Kafziel, after

witnessing that, decided he wanted to stay there forever, with that sweet little human and her life strung together by love. He would be okay if this assignment never ended, he thought.

But, of course, it did.

It was sudden, too, in a different way than his first two assignments. Vera was fine, and then she was not fine, and then she was in the hospital, and then she was fine, and then she was not fine, the worst degree of not fine that a human can be, tucked into her bed and shaking and crying and asking her father what was happening to her, swathed so tightly in those red-dotted sheets that it felt wrong to leave her there writhing, and then she was gone.

It all happened within one week.

Kafziel couldn't understand. There was no warning, no answer. No way for him to make it okay. No way for him to guard her in the way that a guardian should. With Vera, he actually did everything right. He never messed up, not once, and she was still gone.

He tried his best, he did everything he could do. He put his soul into protecting that little girl. He would've done anything to save her. He didn't even get the *chance* to save her. Not like Jinghan, not like Winston, where he could've manipulated something differently, moved someone, changed it. Where it was clearly his fault. He thought Vera would be his redemption. The chance he got to make up for it. The chance to make his mistakes with Jinghan and Winston feel like they meant something.

Was he the problem? He had to be cursed. Doomed to fail every human he was meant to protect. Some guardian he would be. He's irresponsible. He can't think fast enough. He let a little girl die on him.

People *died* in his care.

"I'm sorry, Kafziel. I'm afraid we cannot allow you to become a full guardian. We appreciate your time spent dedicated to those you served, and encourage you to keep trying."

And though it's not what he wants to hear, he can't find it in himself to be disappointed. He's not even surprised.

He doesn't deserve it. He selfishly tried to make a life on Earth work for himself *and* help everyone he was assigned to, but he just couldn't do it right. He couldn't.

He doesn't deserve anything.

The head isn't finished. "If you decide not to continue with your guardian work, your wings will revert back into your body."

Kafziel must look disturbed by the idea, because the head chuckles. "Please, don't be alarmed. It's quick and painless. You won't even know it's happening." He pauses, considering the angel before him. "But we really do encourage you to keep trying, Kafziel. It's apparent how much you love it."

Kafziel almost laughs. How much he loves what, exactly? Because he's one-hundred percent certain that he never loved guardian work. Loves Earth, yes. Humans, naturally. But never failure after failure.

"Most guardians start out like this. It's why we pull those in training out whenever small things go wrong—they often do. It's not an easy thing to master. It's a challenge that only gets easier with experience."

Is it worth trying again? Is it worth hurting more people along the way? Worth more failure? Kafziel doesn't think he can go on living with more "experience" under his belt.

He thanks the head archangels and leaves the Judgment Hall without giving them an answer. His eyes and his feet and his back are stinging, but he trudges as quickly as he can to the nearest portal. He probably doesn't have much time before these wings start to retreat back into his body.

He reaches the portal before then, to his relief. He hasn't completely lost his status just yet. They're still extending gracefully from his back, two extra limbs marking him as something he no longer wants to be. He can still do this.

There is one way for an angel who is no longer a guardian to remain on Earth. He's heard of a few cases before. It's gruesome. It's the sacrifice you have to make. It's a purely selfish decision. Maybe, maybe he can go back, if he can remember how to do it right. Maybe, instead of helping, he can just *be*. Maybe he can track down Vera's father and apologize for not being able to save her. Maybe he can become as human as an angel can get.

But first he has to find something sharp.

There are a few other angels milling about around the portal, a few pillars on either side of its entrance, but that's all. There's absolutely nothing to work with. Weapons don't exist in Kafziel's realm. Most *pointy things* don't exist in Kafziel's realm. There's no reason for anyone to have access to things that can cause harm.

It's apparent, then. There's no easy way to do this. There's no easy way out. He doesn't have time to think about what he could possibly get his hands on to make this easier. He has to live with his failure forever, keep trying until he gets it right, or act now. *Now*.

Before he can feel apprehensive, he reaches over his shoulders and grasps a wing in each hand and pulls as hard as he can.

He's never been more thankful for this toned-down world than he is right now. If tearing his own flesh off is unbearable here, he can't fathom how it would feel on Earth. He wouldn't be able to do it.

He knows his body is going numb to try to dull the pain, but he can still feel it. And even if he couldn't, he would still be able to hear the ripping of his skin. It's even louder than his screams, echoing in his ears and sinking down into his stomach.

Kafziel's glance shifts back to his hands dripping with ichor, to the feathers smothered in gold falling to the ground beside him, to the smears of it painting the stone floor. *White and gold*, his brain supplies, like it matters, as he howls. It's hard to get a good grip on his wings when they're so slippery and flimsy, but he digs his nails in and pulls with all the strength in his body and wails with the force of five archangels. He can hear stilted conversation around him, but he's so delirious from pain that none of it makes any sense to him, just garbled syllables and high-pitched voices.

It's getting close, it has to be, he feels like he's been pulling for a hundred Earth years. Another harsh tug tells him that yes, his wings are only clinging on to his back by a little, and a few more rough pulls should be enough to do the trick. He has a horrible thought, then, a sudden and intense fear that the wings will stay fused to his skin and he'll just keep pulling and peeling until he's skinned himself and totally bare of any flesh.

To his relief, when he digs his heels into the floor and brings his hands down to meet them there, two horrifically bent and molted wings are resting in his hands. Serene looking. Still beautiful, even after the weight of his faults fell on them.

He tosses them to the side as he drags his limp body to the portal, not even glancing behind him at what he imagines is a crowd of horrified spectators before he crouches into himself like he's spring-loaded and launches himself through the threshold.

And Kafziel falls.

He didn't think he would. He thought he would step through and come out on the other side, wherever he was supposed to be, like all the times he shifted to Earth as a guardian. He doesn't know how long or how far down he goes, just that he wishes the wind was less like sandpaper against his skin, less like ice being blasted into his eyes.

When he hits the ground, he hits hard. He feels it in his shoulder and his hip. And he's *stunned* by how much he feels it. He must have a little bit of angel invincibility left in him (otherwise he doesn't think he would have survived), but every part of his body is stinging with sharp pain, intensifying with every breath, and the groan that slips from his lips is entirely involuntary. His physical form feels much more... real. He was unprepared for how much it would hurt to be here.

Kafziel manages to turn himself over and roll onto his stomach. His fingers shake as they search blindly behind him, running down his back from his shoulders until he yelps. Two matching gashes on either side of his spine. Mementos of his demotion.

He looks around. Everything is red, red, red. Almost intensely so. Red in the trees, speckled in between shades of orange and yellow, red on the ground, stomped on and fading into the dirt. Red all over him, spilling out from the wounds on his back, coating his fingers and dripping down his arms. It's much thinner than ichor, with a smell that instantly makes Kafziel feel sick. He struggles for a few seconds, but finds the strength to get to his feet and take a step forward, once, twice. The leaves crunch underneath his shoes, and he smiles.

Look at that, how lucky, he thinks. *My favorite season.*

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Planet EvOL, by Kira Soricelli

Content Warning: This text includes topics surrounding domestic abuse (and rape).

Do you ever feel like you were born in the wrong body? At the wrong time? In the wrong place? Everyday I wake up and I wonder how this world is my world, how I fit into it, and if I could ever change it. My planet wasn't meant to be this cruel, this profane, this unequal...or was it?

I went with my best friend, Charm, and our families to see the men that are offering to marry us. All marriages are set in February, so my family and I have to decide sooner rather than later which man is the worst fit and therefore, who I will spend the rest of my life submitting to. My mom hates when I say that. She always replies, "You aren't submitting, you are learning to love!" But why should I learn to love if it doesn't bring me happiness? I sure know mom has never been happy "learning to love" my father.

There were four men presented to me and seven men presented to Charm. Charm was so excited. She never liked having any sort of power or dominance — not in school and not in life. She liked being told what to do and how to do it, like most women on Planet EvOL. And like most women on Planet EvOL, she believed love was defined by the amount of punishment you receive when your behavior isn't up to normal standards.

Most days, I wonder how me and Charm became so close. We have such different ideologies, and she's always yelling at me for the secret feelings I feel safe enough to express. I pinpointed the beginning of our relationship to the same time school started becoming separated. Elementary school was easy because it was competitive, as we were all learning the same things. I started to struggle around middle school, when boys go off to learn the mechanics of engineering, teaching, law, etc. and girls start learning how to cook, do laundry and raise children. I suppose this internal struggle led me to Charm, because I thought her normalcy would rub off on me. It didn't, but her company did.

One of my men brought flowers...what an amateur. Everyone knows you don't bring flowers to a girl you are trying to marry. He was escorted off the premises immediately, leaving me with three men, and I'll probably never see him again, but the red flowers he brought made me smile.

My family and I intensely scrutinized the three men left. One came too put-together. He wore a suit and looked overall pretty clean and kind. Out. He didn't have what it takes to play the dominant role of a husband.

The two men left were named Cixot and Niap. They both had strong builds, mean faces, selfish personalities and all the other qualities that make up a good husband.

After some careful consideration, I went home with Cixot. He ultimately had a better job that my family believed would lay the best foundation to support a future family. To celebrate the engagement, Cixot chugged an entire bottle of alcohol he had in his car. When we got home, I tried to prepare myself for the typical initiation as I ran to hold open the door for my new fiance.

He beat me, as he should. One punch, and I could feel the black and blue forming at the surface of my skin. One kick, and all the preparation went out the door. I screamed for help, knowing none would come. I screamed out loud, hoping it would make me feel better. I screamed and screamed and screamed and worried that he liked it better that way.

It hurts. He hurts. My body hurts. My head hurts. It all just hurts. Is it supposed to hurt to love? I guess so.

The weeks before the wedding were anything but blissful. I barely had time to talk to Charm or my family and even if I did, I couldn't because Cixot would question why I had so much free time.

On the bright side, I found some old cookbooks in the attic. I learned a lot of the recipes, filling my time with memorization of different cups and tablespoons and spices.

I already knew how to do laundry, being that I have been taught about detergents and fabric softeners for as long as I can remember. Cixot's machine was a bit confusing, but I got the hang of it after some trial and error.

Cixot tested me every night about the methods of motherhood. Even though he wouldn't know whether it was right or not, he asked me questions like how many bottles I should have prepared each day and what the best reinforcement method of punishment is. Most times he would beat me whether or not I answered correctly, based on the books. It wasn't his job to know the material — it was his job to beat me when I wasn't performing to my highest potential.

I suppose Cixot didn't really care about the traditional "wait until marriage" notion. The first couple days, I tried to say no or make up an excuse, but this only led to more beatings. Once I understood this system, I just let him penetrate me without much fight. I knew this was what I was supposed to do. He would do this every night and every night, I would try my best to hold my tears back from his aggressiveness. I don't know why I felt this way, but every night I prayed I wouldn't carry his child. I knew that this couldn't last forever, but I just wasn't ready to handle raising a child in his household right now.

One day, when I was getting the mail, I noticed a pink letter squished in the middle of Cixot's stack. Out of pure curiosity, being that all cards are usually blue or white, I pulled it out once I was inside. Cixot was at work, so I had time to study the envelope. It was addressed to me, but it had no returning mail address. I never really get mail, so I wasn't sure whether this was going to be good or bad.

I opened the letter. It was from a man named Lance, the same guy who was escorted off of the property for bringing flowers to meet me. It read:

Dear Reva,

I know writing this letter could put a lot of what you have at risk, but I could tell something was different about you from the moment I laid eyes on you. You don't want a life with Cixot, because you aren't like the other women from Evol. You are independent, strong and resilient. You don't want to give up your freedom to a man for the rest of your days, do you? I can sense you long for adventure to ease your curiosity. I think you are searching for change in a world that seems so limited. This may sound absolutely insane, but I love everything about you. You aren't submissive, but you are helpful and loving and appreciative. You can see yourself accomplishing so much more in life than attending to a man. You believe in love, as an equal exchange between two people. I don't want you to live this terrible, crippling lifestyle, and I have a feeling you don't want to either. I know that there is more out there, even if people try to convince you otherwise. Things are not always as they seem. Reality is what we deem to be true. If I am right about my feelings, meet me at the abandoned soccer field at your earliest convenience. I know your family is planning your wedding right now, so your flowers and I will be waiting here until after the ceremony. The choice is yours.

With nothing but love,

Lance

I didn't know how to feel after I first read the letter. My wedding was tomorrow, and I was so confused and conflicted about sealing the end of my life with a ring. How did he know so much about me and my life? Should I feel flattered or fearful? Should I tell Cixot? Should I meet Lance to see what he has to say? Mom never prepared me for a situation like this, but I know she would remind me that my loyalties belong to my husband. Cixot is not my husband though, not yet at least.

As I was lost in contemplation, I heard Cixot's car pull into the driveway. I quickly stashed the envelope and the card in one of my cooking books and placed the book back on the shelf. Flustered, I tried to calm myself down before Cixot entered the house.

"Why don't I smell dinner cooking?!" he yelled as soon as his first foot hit the indoor carpets. I explained to him that I had prepared the salad first. "There's not much to smell," I joked, but Cixot didn't find it funny. After he had finished eating dinner, I paid for that joke with another beating.

Cixot could tell something was making me act weird. He traced the living room for evidence that would tell him what I was up to. I must have ripped the card open unevenly, because he found an edge of the pink envelope. He yelled and yelled, asking why I had opened one of his letters. I told him that Charm had sent me a letter congratulating us on our marriage that would take place the following day. He had a feeling I was lying, demanding to see the letter in the morning because he was too drunk to read it. He said goodnight with a strong right-hook to my thigh, alluding to what would take place before we left for the wedding ceremony.

I told him I would meet him upstairs when I was finished cleaning up from dinner.

Instead, I pondered what Lance had meant by "strong." Am I strong because I let Cixot control my life? Am I strong enough to deal with him for the rest of my life? What gives me strength?

Angered and impulsive, I went to the laundry room and packed all of the clean clothes I had into a small backpack. I went to the bathroom and packed a toothbrush and my hairbrush. I knew that if I ran now, I would never be accepted back into the community. I would never have a husband. I would never get any financial support. I could never talk to Charm or my family again.

I knew all of these risks and still I quietly and slowly walked out of my house and toward the soccer field.

When Lance saw me, I saw a genuine expression of happiness, unlike one I had ever seen coming from a man, let alone in regard to a woman. He ran up and hugged me. It was a bit unusual but still comforting nonetheless. He told me it was going to be okay as he pulled out two uniforms from a bag he had with him. They resembled guard uniforms that protected the government building. This was the only place that had access to travel outside of Evol. We were never told in school what was beyond Planet Evol, nor were we permitted to ask questions about travel, but I always imagined it as a child.

I trusted Lance. Although I barely knew him, it felt like he connected with me on a deeper level than I had ever experienced before.

The other guards let us pass through with no problem. We entered the government building, which seemed much smaller than I had always imagined. Lance instructed me to look forward and not bring any attention to myself. This wasn't the hardest task.

The ceiling was glass and see-through. It had thousands of different shapes and colors that made it hard not to look in awe.

Lance brought me up the stairs to a room with a sign on it that said "authorized access only." He pulled a card out of his pocket, swiped it, and the door opened.

Inside, on a desk, we found these papers with reports that alluded to ideas of equality. It had many familiar names, including Charm's and mine, with data and calculations. On the top it read "Domestic Abuse Study Statistics" and it was stamped from someone named P-murt.

Suddenly, we heard an abrupt knock at the door and just as quickly, guards were bursting in with guns and police enforcement. Lance grabbed my hand, and we ran and ran and ran from guards down a hallway. Once at the end, we trapped ourselves in a room that resembled a glass bubble. We barricaded the door with furniture. Lance brought me to the edge of the room to look outside. It was the highest room in all of Evol.

We saw the border. We saw couples holding hands, laughing, and loving through the glass. We saw unfamiliar people holding signs directed at the government building. Most had writing like "PROTEST THE STUDY" and "HURTING PEOPLE IS NOT SCIENCE. IT IS UNETHICAL." I didn't have a moment to question my confusion when the barricaded furniture started to move. The guards were trying to get in. We had to get out!

Lance broke the glass with a nearby chair. The people below started to cheer before realizing the imminent danger we were in. One of them ran to his truck to get a ladder. Unfolding it against a tree, the minutes that it took felt like a century. It reminded me of the beatings that felt like they would go on for hours and hours, even if they only lasted a couple minutes. One man got to the top of the ladder just as the door succumbed to the pressure of the guards. He reached out his hands, and Lance begged me to go first. It was scary looking down at the ground, but my adrenaline helped me leap to grab the man's hand. He angled me toward a rung, and I used my momentum to gain a steady stance. I could see guards' hands and legs starting to make their way inside of the room. I started to panic because Lance was still inside.

I wondered how Lance was going to jump to the ladder without forcing it to tip over, with both myself and the man on the same side. The man at the top of the ladder threw Lance a rope, which he seemed to be prepared for. He wrapped it around his waist and threw it back to the man. Rope in hand, the man looped the other end around a branch of the tree. I knew what Lance was going to do, since he had very limited time before the guards caught him and arrested him, but I wanted to close my eyes in fear.

Lance jumped out of the broken glass with enough force to make it over the border, but not enough to smash into the tree. His whole body was heavily jolted when the rope reached its length. He was swinging from side to side, hanging from the branch, when I reached the ground from the ladder.

Both the man and myself rushed to help him get down. I soon learned that my whole planet, everything I had accepted as reality, was a study from before the day I was born to the present. It wanted to experiment and find data regarding what they called "domestic abuse and the effects on female partners." I wasn't familiar with the term domestic abuse, but I learned to associate it with the mistreatment and inequality women experienced on Evol.

We joined the protestors for the next couple of months and eventually we were granted access by P-murt to visit my family and friends in Evol. I suppose this was because of the uprising, which threatened to shut down the experiment, if ethics were not proven. While I was scared to go back and face the community I left behind, I was motivated to tell everyone of the ruse.

To my surprise, no one wanted to come back with us, even when we begged to get the chance to show them a new world with more freedom and security. They liked their way of life, or at least, it was all they knew. I feel bad for them because they won't let themselves see the beauty of this new world. They're too scared of change because of the endless destruction, both mentally and physically, they have been subject to for so long. My mom and Charm wouldn't even go against what they thought was the law to talk to me.

I always knew something about Evol wasn't right. All I needed was to listen to myself. I wasn't learning to love, I was learning to hate. I was learning to stay, even when my gut told me not to. I am learning the proper ways to love every new day that comes with Lance, who was forced to leave the experiment after he didn't comply with the standards. When he saw how terribly the experiment had escalated, he made a plan to return to Evol and take me with him. As the sun rises each day, I feel happy to be a part of a team with him. He helps me, and I help him. He doesn't beat me, but he does bring me roses. And when I don't feel like making dinner, we order take-out.

I won't stop fighting until the Evol experiment is shut down. I am not back to normal just because I left Evol. I don't want to go back to their teachings of "normal." I have to learn a new normal and fight the psychological instincts Evol accustomed me to. However, this daily struggle is much better than literally struggling for my life constantly. Women deserve better, and I hope one day they will find the strength to see this too.

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Health Insurance Doesn't Cover My Lycanthropy, by *Josh Hicks*

"I'm seeking a professional diagnosis for lycanthropy. Any help is appreciated!"

The post was a few days old. Shirley had abandoned hope that r/Lycanthropy would solve her nightmare, but she was not quite ready to give up. That was when she saw she had a comment. Mind racing with wild possibilities, she opened it up, eager for advice, affordable referrals, offers of money, or hell, even just some words of encouragement. This could be the end of her suffering.

"Same."

That was all the comment said.

"I swear to God," Shirley leant back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling. It took three rings before she noticed her phone was ringing.

Glancing at the phone on her desk, she saw it was a call from her mom. She perked up in an instant and grabbed it. Maybe hope wasn't lost.

"Sweetie, you're going to hate me."

Hope was lost.

"Let me guess, they told you the same thing they told me." Shirley slouched in her chair, lazily holding the phone to her ear.

"More or less. They told me they could refer us to places, but they couldn't pay for an appointment because they didn't cover preventable, non-life threatening conditions.

"Ugh. That's such BS. What part of terrorizing small towns in the night and eating people isn't life-threatening?"

"I know this isn't the news you wanted-"

"And who cares if it was preventable or whatever." Shirley interrupted, continuing her rant. "My life's just ruined because I made some dumb mistake anyone could make?"

"Not to take their side, but this really didn't have to happen."

"Mom, I don't want to hear this right now."

“You went home with that guy, after all.”

“I was drunk at the time besides, how was I supposed to know he was a werewolf?”

“You did mention he seemed way too enthusiastic to bite you.”

“I thought it was just a bite kink or something. I’ve done way worse.”

“Look, honey, I know you’re unhappy, but maybe things aren’t that bad.”

“Not that bad!?” Shirley sat upright in anger, grasping the phone much tighter. “I can’t go out most nights, I feel like I can’t control myself half the time, and I literally ate a child four weeks ago!”

“Look, sweetheart, I love you, but...”

Shirley didn’t need her to finish that thought.

“You don’t believe me, do you? You think I’m faking it.”

“I don’t think you’re faking it, I just...” Her mother’s pause said a lot. My daughter is under a lot of stress and is imagining some things, she said. Come on, my daughter, a werewolf? It’s insane. This kind of stuff doesn’t happen to people like you, and with you being in college, I want to make sure you don’t waste any money on this fantasy. I mean, we don’t even have a doctor who agrees with you.”

“Because I can’t get an appointment!” Shirley took a sharp, deep breath. “Look, mom. I know I’m a werewolf. I keep getting hair in weird spots, I lose consciousness whenever I see the full moon, dogs on the street have been suspiciously friendly to me lately. I just need a diagnosis, cause I can’t get the medication without it. I need that medicine, or this will just get worse.”

“Honey, I really think you just need to take a step back and-”

Shirley hung up the call. She stood up from her chair, but there was nowhere she could bring herself to go. What she wanted was to march into the clinic downtown, right into the office of the psychiatrist, and tell them all her symptoms. She wanted someone to finally listen to her, to tell her that she was a werewolf, to help her get better, but she couldn’t afford that appointment. Apparently, transforming into a furry, monstrous beast during a full moon and mauling people on the street was just a “potential sign” that she could be a werewolf. Those symptoms were nothing but quirks without that doctor’s signature.

Knock knock.

She was snapped out of her thoughts by a punctual banging on the door. Answering it was the last thing she wanted to do, but if it was who she thought it was, she had no choice.

“I’m sorry, Connor. I don’t want to hang out today.”

Shirley swung the door open and spoke before he even had a chance to realize she was there, his fist still raised in preparation to knock again.

“Come on, babe, I haven’t seen you in a week.” He protested.

“I know, I know, and I’m sorry, but...” Shirley sighed and looked downward. “It hasn’t been a good day.”

“You keep on having bad days, babe.” Connor reached out his arms and grabbed both of Shirley’s shoulders reassuringly. She refused to look into his eyes. “You need to hang out with us. We can help you have a good day.”

“Us?”

“Oh, uh, I kinda told Diana we’re meeting her downtown in 10 minutes.” Connor removed one of his hands to awkwardly rub the back of his head.

“Connor!” Shirley glared at him. “I’m busy today! I’m nowhere close to getting that appointment, and I need-

”

“Appointment?” Connor interrupted. “Don’t tell me this is about that werewolf thing?”

“I would call turning into a bloodthirsty monster more than a “thing,” but yeah, it’s about that. Everything’s about that. I can’t just stop being a werewolf, and until I get that appointment without having to pay a couple thousand dollars, I’m just gonna keep hurting people.”

“Well, I don’t know how much you’re hurting people with this werewolf nonsense, but right now you’re really hurting me by avoiding me.”

Shirley raised an eyebrow.

“So, just come along. Diana misses you. You’ll make her so happy if you do this. Besides, it’ll be good for you. It’ll be good for us.”

“I...” Shirley sighed and trailed off, staring back down at the ground for a second.

“Fine. I guess it couldn’t hurt.”

“I feel like it’s been ages, Shir,” Diana said, staring wide eyed at Shirley, a large smile plastered on her face. They were getting lunch at some cheap diner downtown, Diana seated across from Shirley and Connor in a booth and leaning on a mysteriously sticky table, not caring.

“Haha, I guess it has been a while.” Shirley awkwardly chuckled and took a sip of her water, eyes intentionally wandering away from Diana’s face.

“Yeah, thanks for hanging out with us. I know it’s been a hard couple months for you,” Connor said, putting his hand on Shirley’s shoulder. She looked towards him and saw his warm smile, but refused to look at his eyes.

“It’s been a hard couple months for all of us, so I get it.” Diana absentmindedly twirled the straw in her cola. “Midterms absolutely *destroyed* me.”

“It... it was a bit more than midterms for me...” Shirley muttered, the sentence fading into nothing as she said it.

“Oh?” Diana perked up. “Was it relationship trouble?”

“Ahem.” Connor glared at her.

“Oh, wait, yeah, forgot you two are dating now or whatever.”

“Don’t worry, it’s alright, I’ve just been...” Shirley trailed off once more, considering whether it was worth saying.

“I have lycanthropy.” The words stung as they came out, but they still felt like they had to be said.

“Oh, Shir.” Diana softened her glance and reached across the table, holding one of Shirley’s hands with both of hers. “I can’t imagine.”

“T-thanks,” Shirley stuttered, unable to meet Diana’s glance, but still slightly smiling and tearing up.

“It’s so brave of you to open up,” Diana continued, tightening her grip and speaking firmly. “We as a society need to learn to not be scared to talk about things like this.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” Shirley turned her head towards Diana.

“I mean, we all suffer from stuff like this. It takes people like you to actually be brave enough to talk about it to help all of us.”

“We... all suffer?” Shirley had no trouble looking at Diana now, furrowing her brow. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean...” Diana’s confidence wavered. “I know I struggle with feeling a like a werewolf, but there’s so much stigma around it I just keep quiet.”

Shirley yanked her hand out of Diana’s grasp.

“What the hell do you mean?”

“You know, it happens sometimes,” Diana explained, “Like last semester, during finals. I was feeling a little bloodthirsty, but I kept that to myself. I got over it, but it was a dark time.”

“Oh my god, you have no idea what I’m talking about.” Shirley closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. “Can not one person know what the hell I’m going through?”

“No, Shirley, you’re misunderstanding me.” Diana began talking quicker. “I’m saying we all feel a little lycanthropic at times. I’m not saying you’re overreacting, I’m saying that you’re brave for speaking out about those dark feelings we all have. You’re not alone, we can all relate!”

“It’s not a freaking mood swing, Diana! I have a condition! I’m ill!” Shirley yelled, forcing herself to calm down when she noticed the other restaurant patrons staring at her, tears forming in her own eyes when she saw Diana staring at her in shock.

“Calm down sweetheart, it’s all right,” Connor cooed, wrapping one of his arms around Shirley and pulling her in and against him. Shirley attempted to look Diana in the eyes but couldn’t. All she could do was cry.

“I-I’m sorry,” she managed to choke out in between her sobs. “It’s just... everyone says they understand, but no one does. No one believes I’m suffering, and no one wants to help. No one cares that I feel like a sack of shit every time I wake up.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Connor whispered softly. “We might not understand the situation to the full extent, but we want to help you. You’re our friend.”

Connor grabbed a napkin off the table and gave it to Shirley, who blew her nose in it.

“I’m the one who should be sorry, Shir.” Shirley looked at Diana, who looked back kindly. “You’re right, I don’t understand. I can’t imagine how difficult this is for you, but let me talk this out with you and help.”

“Oh, um, alright.” Shirley blew her nose once more, before proceeding to scoot out of Connor’s grasp.

“Whenever I feel bad, I think about all the good things happening in my life,” Diana said, “So, let’s name some good things in your life.”

“Oh, uh, I don’t really know-” Shirley began.

“You’ve got awesome grades,” Diana interrupted, “you’re in, like, a gazillion clubs and rocking all of them-”

“You have an awesome, loving boyfriend.” Connor laughed as he interrupted Diana, playfully ruffling Shirley’s hair as he said it.

“Well, yeah, that’s all true-” Shirley attempted to butt in but was once again drowned out by Diana.

“Wasn’t it five months ago that you won that volunteering award for, oh, I can’t remember.” Diana’s goofy smile betrayed her lie.

“It... wasn’t for anything really.”

“For organizing an entire food drive for starving children in the area,” Connor interjected, “because she’s Shirley fucking Alcott, and she’s awesome!”

“Well, thank you guys...” Shirley trailed off, blushing slightly and smiling.

“Shirley, you’re great, and everyone around you knows it, so how about you admit it yourself.” Connor playfully punched her in the arm.

“Oh, I’m not going to...” Shirley bashfully rubbed her arm where Connor punched her.

“Come on, say it!” Diana pestered.

“Alright, I’m great!” Shirley beamed.

“Hell yeah you are!” Connor cheered and pulled her in for a hug in the booth seat. “All the werewolves I know are always slimy and creepy and lame, but you’re the most freaking awesome person on the planet.”

“I-I guess, but...” Shirley’s happiness faltered as she tried to talk, but she couldn’t compete with her friend’s boisterous attitudes.

“Yeah, Shir. Connor’s right. How can you be a werewolf if you’re this cool?”

Shirley wanted to object, but the words seemed to get stuck in her throat.

“Like remember Darrel Kingsley from last year?” Connor asked Shirley.

“You mean the guy who always wore the oversized jackets and never talked to anybody?”

“Yeah, that Darrel! He’s a werewolf, but you’re not a creep like him!”

“Well, don’t call him a creep. He was probably just scared and-”

“Shir, don’t tell me you’re seriously trying to defend Darrel Kingsley,” Diana laughed.

“Yeah, you’re so much better than that weirdo babe.”

“It’s just... I don’t really know what I’m trying to say.” That was a lie. Shirley knew exactly what she wanted to say about Darrel, but for some reason, the words refused to be said.

“Look, babe, you’ve just gotta shake this whole werewolf thing.”

Shirley looked at Connor with an intensity, a desire to reprimand him for his audacity.

But the words couldn’t form.

“Whenever I feel like a wearwolf, I’ve found that mindfulness and fresh air are great at home remedies,” Diana helpfully said.

“Yeah, babe, you have been a bit of a shut in. That’s been part of the problem. That’s why we’re doing this today. To help you get out and clear your head.”

“...”

“We’re not expecting you to feel better right now,” Connor said.

“And we’ll always be here to help and hear you,” Diana added.

Shirley wanted to talk, but it was like her vocal cords had gone numb, the blood rushing to her brain instead. Maybe she really was just overreacting. Maybe it was just a misunderstanding.

“We all have our down moments and those weird irrational thoughts we’re too scared to talk about. We understand. We all feel like you do,” Diana said.

Shirley couldn’t help but wonder if her friends were right. Who doesn’t feel a little loopy during a full moon? Who hasn’t had a bad day and mauled an innocent before?

“But most importantly, we see you, we hear you, and we love you.” Connor put both his hands on Shirley’s shoulders and twisted her so she was looking directly into his eyes, Shirley not strong enough to resist. “And what we see isn’t a werewolf, it’s Shirley Alcott. A Shirley who is going through a rough patch and is a little scared and confused, but is still the same smart, talented, and kind Shirley as always.”

“You know what?” Shirley finally said.

The waitress showed up at their tableside, setting down a plate in front of Shirley. It was a full steak, completely raw.

Shirley stole a glance at it. She was absolutely famished, the red juice pooling at the bottom of the plate looking so good she could drink it right there, the tendons and fats in the meat seeming to taunt her. It wasn't even about taste, she just wanted to devour that piece of flesh like she had personally killed for it.

She looked directly into Connor's loving eyes, and smiled.

"You're right. I'm not a werewolf. Thanks for snapping me out of it."

In one swift motion, she picked the steak up off the plate and shoved it into her mouth, digging her teeth into it and pulling it out viciously so that a piece tore off. She chewed and swallowed as if her life depended on it, not caring to wipe away the deep red drops of juice that ran down her chin and dripped onto the table. Heaving and taking deep breaths, she shoved the steak into her mouth and bit down again.

"Excuse me, waitress, where are our dishes?" Diana huffed.

"Your wack job friend ordered a raw steak miss. Your meals actually need to be cooked," The waitress deadpanned and walked away.

Diana turned to Shirley and Connor and crossed her arms.

"I don't like her attitude."

"So, you wanna go out for dinner?" Connor asked, sitting on a couch and looking at his phone.

"Go out?" Shirley laughed, leaning forward against the backrest of a chair opposite the couch. "We just did."

"Yeah, but I like going out with you." Connor lazily let his phone fall onto his lap and looked over at Shirley, giving her ridiculous puppy dog eyes.

"Nice try, bud, but I have too much of a backbone for that to work."

Shirley and Connor had gone back to Connor's apartment after they finished up lunch with Diana. The two didn't have any real plans, just lazing about and watching movies, not really noticing that they had nothing for dinner until it was 9 p.m.

"Well, we still gotta eat." Connor stood up from the couch and walked over to where Shirley was standing. She turned around as he approached her from behind, the duo playfully smiling as Connor wrapped his arms around her in a hug, gently swaying with her.

"I can cook us something," Shirley suggested. "Of course, if you actually have a single ingredient in your fridge."

"I don't have eggs one time," Connor laughed.

"Eggs and bread!" Shirley giggled, the two breaking up the hug but not releasing their grip on each other's arms.

"Thanks for earlier," Shirley said softly as she looked into Connor's warm eyes. "You were right. I was just all in my head and confused. The stress must have gotten to me."

“Don’t mention it babe, we all get a little lost sometimes. I’m just glad you’re back to normal.” Connor released his grip on her and playfully rubbed the top of her head. “Now, how about you actually make something?”

It was mostly a joke earlier, but Shirley was slightly concerned that Connor would not have any actual ingredients. Thankfully, he did end up having some milk, butter, cheese, and an open box of macaroni in a random cupboard. Mac and cheese might not be the most romantic dinner, but it was still dinner.

She rolled up the sleeves of her sweater and set up a pot of water on the stove and added in the macaroni, in the meantime searching for a colander somewhere in Connor’s barebones kitchen. Thankfully, she did manage to find one in yet another random cupboard in the kitchen, although she did have to quickly rinse off the layer of dust on it.

“I’m not convinced you’ve ever actually cooked in your life,” Shirley joked as she dried off the colander and set it next to the pot.

“That makes two of us,” Connor chuckled back.

“I should probably stir this,” Shirley muttered to herself, looking down at the cooking pasta. She went over to a nearby drawer in search of a utensil, finding just what she needed in the first one she opened, a large metallic spoon sitting amidst a mess of flatware.

Reaching in to grab the spoon, she whipped her hand back the exact second her fingers wrapped around it as the most intense pain of her life coursed through her hand. It was like every nerve in her fingers had been burnt in the sun simultaneously.

“OH FUCK!” She screamed, recoiling violently and falling backwards onto the floor, the sensation so overwhelming she could hardly think straight. All she could do was tense the rest of her body and try not to faint.

“Babe, what’s wrong!?” Connor barged into the kitchen, immediately crouching down to Shirley’s side when he saw she was writhing in pain. “What happ- oh my god.”

Shirley’s hand looked like it had a third-degree burn, her skin some awful shade of mangled red, bone just barely visible at some parts.

“Was it the stove, or did you touch something else?” Connor asked, grabbing Shirley’s injured hand by the wrist and inspecting it.

Shirley, teeth bared, barely managed to mutter her response. “The... spoon.”

Connor dropped Shirley’s hand, her moaning in agony as it hit against the cold linoleum floor of the kitchen. He stood up and looked in the open drawer.

Shirley watched in horror as Connor reached in and pulled out the spoon, holding it firmly in his hand.

“This spoon was a gift from my mother. It was a part of a utensil set she got me when I moved into this apartment.”

Connor looked down at Shirley, who briefly forgot the pain when she met his gaze.

There was no soul in his eyes.

“A silver, utensil set.”

Connor set the spoon down on the counter and stopped looking at Shirley for a moment, reaching into the drawer once more. This time, he pulled out a knife.

Shirley didn't need him to tell her that it was from the same set.

In one clean motion, she swung her arm at Connor's legs with as much force as she could muster. Connor, caught off guard, fell to the floor. His head slapped against it with an unholy sound as he yelled out in pain.

There was nothing but adrenaline in Shirley's blood. Barely managing to stand up, she tried desperately to flee. She couldn't even dodge when Connor swung the knife at her and grazed her ankle.

She howled in pain as she hobbled away from him, her ankle engulfed in the same burning sensation as earlier, rendering it effectively unusable.

“You dirty bitch!” Connor growled at her. He struggled to get off the floor himself. With the speed he hit the linoleum, he was almost certainly concussed.

Shirley didn't have time to ask her boyfriend what the hell was going on. She shoved her unburnt hand into her mouth and bit down, trying to do anything to overcome the all-encompassing pain the knife had done to her ankle so she could keep walking. Her bite was so strong that she broke the skin, drops of blood spilling into her mouth.

She didn't even have time to be terrified that she liked the taste.

Thankfully, Connor's bedroom was only a few feet away. Shirley barely managed to collapse into it, kicking the door close behind her and frantically reaching up to lock it.

It was only a few seconds later that the entire door shook, Shirley sitting on the ground and leaning against it.

“I'm going to fucking kill you!” Connor yelled.

“Connor, what the hell is going on!?” Shirley screamed, taking deep and heavy breaths. Instinctively, she shoved all her body weight forward and fell into a heap a few feet in front of the door. From the corner of her eye, she could see the glint of metal as the knife was thrust under the door.

“You *are* a fucking werewolf!” Connor barked through the door. It buckled again a few seconds later.

“I literally told you!” Shirley screamed back, wincing as her ankle brushed against the floor. “You're the one who told me I wasn't!”

“You're the one who listened! Why'd you go around thinking you weren't you asshole!”

The door was hit again. It bent slightly this time.

“Do you know how shit it's all been for me?!” Shirley protested. “Nobody believed me! You told me all those nice things after I'd spent months thinking I was worthless! I guess you made me believe everyone was right about me faking it! I wanted to believe I wasn't a werewolf!”

“Well obviously everyone was wrong!”

“But why do you want to kill me?!” Shirley wailed, choking on the last few words as tears formed in her eyes. “I’m just a werewolf?!”

“I know your kind.” Connor’s voice was calmer, but more authoritative. He became silent for a second, before the door buckled more severely. “You want to ruin me! You want to kill me! I’m not going to be the guy who dated a werewolf!”

“What are you talking about!?” Shirley coughed roughly, watching as drops of blood sputtered out of her throat and onto the carpet. “I don’t want to hurt you!”

“You deserve this!” Connor growled through the door. Shirley could see the brief flash of silver as he stabbed underneath the door again. “You’re dirty! You aren’t awesome, talented, kind, or whatever BS I said to make you care! You’re just like them, but I won’t let you make me like them!”

“You’re making yourself the victim!?” Shirley yelled in disbelief. “I’m literally the werewolf! I’m the person whose life has been ruined and who everyone acts like I’m just being dramatic! I did *nothing* to you!”

“You lied!” A small fragment of wood tore loose from the door and fell to the carpet below. “You let me think you were someone you’re not!”

“You knew who I was from the very start!” Shirley had all but forgotten her pain, now fully enveloped by rage. “Who was it I called when I got bit? Oh right, it was your sorry ass! I cried to you, and you let me into your arms! You made me feel like maybe someone could actually care about me like this!”

“I thought my friend was asking for my help! Not *you!*” The door buckled once again, a more sizable piece of wood falling off. This apartment was cheap. Putting faith in that door was not something she wanted to do.

Looking around, she noticed a dresser along the wall next to the door. Barely managing to hobble up, she jumped on one leg over to it and stood at its side. With every ounce of strength within her she threw her body weight against it. It refused to budge.

“I’m not gonna date some dirty werewolf!” Connor continued yelling. “I’m not gonna be known as the guy whose girl played him and ruined his life!”

“I never wanted to date you!” Shirley continued to protest, not even yelling, just sobbing out the words. “When you told me I was all those good things, when you made me believe I wasn’t who I knew I was...”

Shirley choked on her own air halfway through, looking in horror as she noticed a thick bush of hair forming on her arm. She grabbed her pushed up sleeve with her burnt hand, gutturally crying out but still pulling it down to cover her forearm.

“You made me feel like maybe I was still worth something like this!” Shirley continued to sob and scream. “When you asked to date me, you had me convinced that maybe that would fix it! You made me feel like I was loved, like maybe I could have someone who still wants me like this! Maybe I could get better!”

The door buckled once more, this time the upper hinge ripping off and falling to the floor with a thud. The upper part of the door was now splintered and bent, loose from the frame.

“CONNOR PLEASE!” Shirley wailed. “You don’t have to do this!”

“Oh yes I do!”

Frantically, she threw her entire body weight against the dresser once more. It still did not move, but a box on top of it fell off and broke, its contents spilling out. She looked down at the box and recognized it. It was an antique, a hollowed out music box made out of wood that was rotted and splintered. She was the one who had bought that box for Connor. Two months ago, she got it from an antique shop for their anniversary.

Next to the box were its spilled out contents. Assorted coins and dollar bills, paper clips, pins, and other small, loose objects. Right next to all of that laid a small, metallic cylinder.

A silver bullet.

Shirley stopped pushing on the dresser, she stopped paying attention to the door, she stopped caring about the searing pain in her hand and ankle.

All she did was take a step back.

In the corner of Connor's room was a large window that had a great view of downtown, the kind of sight that could relax you after a long day. Unfortunately, the curtains were drawn close, the moonlight emanating from the edges of the frame and taunting Shirley as she used both feet to walk over. With her unburnt hand, she grabbed onto the curtain.

The streets looked absolutely beautiful tonight.

It was thirty seconds later that the door finally gave out under Connor's weight, and it was two seconds after that when the knife was flung out of his hand, falling onto the floor behind him with a metallic ring.

Connor didn't have time to reach for the light switch as he was knocked off his feet and pinned to the ground, but thankfully there was no need. The room was moonlit and beautiful, bathed in shadow and silver light. How fortunate that it was a full moon tonight, the pale incandescence bleeding into the room through the window seemed to fluoresce in midair.

The creature was nine feet tall, awful and jagged, like a statue crudely pieced together from shattered marble. Breaths refused to escape Connor's lips as he stared directly up at the beast who had him trapped face to face on the ground. It was furry and monstrous, slobber escaping from its maw and falling onto his face.

There wasn't even a chance to scream as its claws slashed into his sides and pierced his organs, no conceivable way for him to do anything but to stare into the creature's red, beady eyes as the blood poured out from him and congealed on the carpet, what little life that was ever in his eyes fading away into nothing but a memory.

Shirley would have to bring Connor to her next meeting with the insurance company. He could definitely vouch that her condition was life-threatening. She might even finally get that appointment and get diagnosed as a werewolf.

But it was best to not get too ahead of herself.

Josh Hicks is a member of the class of 2025 at University Park and is majoring in astronomy and astrophysics. In his free time he enjoys staring into space, staring up at space, writing, writing about space and wasting absurd amounts of time on farming video games.

File #0046.8 – Report on the Events of Site 16, by Declan Crowley

The smell of a high strength cleaning agent fills the air of the sterile corridors in the low security containment wing of Foundation Site 16. The pale gray concrete floor tiles glisten from their recent polish. Slowly, blood begins to run through the grout between the tile grid. Sirens and orange emergency lights blare in the otherwise brightly lit corridors. Sitting on the floor on one side of the corridor, a middle-aged man leans on the wall while gasping as he clutches his neck at the site of a deep gash. His purple badge marked with the number 4 indicated he was a senior researcher part of the Metaphysics department, in charge of understanding and determining means to better control reality warping anomalies and events. The man keeps his head angled towards the floor, trying not to stress the cut in his neck any more than he needs to. Slowly, he tilts his head up, hoping to catch a glimpse of what was starting to unfold around him, but then, he sees it. Casually walking towards him, a cloud of dark black fog pooling around the entity's thin, gray-skinned feet. Their appearance resembled much like that of a human foot, except for the fact that the skin looked as if it belonged to that of a centuries-old mummified corpse. Its skin was stretched thin over the bones and tendons, coupled with an inconsistent thickness in other areas to create faint impressions of burn marks. Unable to look any higher he studies his surrounding area in hopes of finding a way out, but the voice in the back of his mind is right. *Hush, it's too late for that now.* Wait, that wasn't the researcher's own voice in his head. Not even a few minutes now with the entity and he was already starting to lose his mind, he thought to himself. It was only around 15 ft away now, and its shadow already began to cover him from the corridor's white fluorescent lights. Bit by bit, it gets closer. His heart beats heavily now, ba-bump, the darkness of the shadow growing to surround him, ba-bump, his vision growing darker, ba-bump, catching a quick glimpse of the entity. Wait, it's stopped right in front of him. It kneeled down to face him, its joints creaking and cracking like a tree blowing in the wind. He tilted his head up, trying to steal a glimpse, but all he felt was a puff of cold air

...

"Approximately 72 hours ago the entity designated SCP-8526 breached its low security containment cell on Site 16," said Junior Researcher Dr. Jean Marshall as she presented her report in front of the O5 council. The room was dark with the only light sources coming from the projector displaying her presentation slides and a spotlight shining directly down on the researcher. This shrouded all but the silhouettes of the council's 13 members, who sat on one side of a half circle table that curved around where the researcher stood in the center.

"Following this, the entity proceeded to rampage through the facility, indiscriminately damaging crucial infrastructure and at numerous times actively sought out and ... consumed numerous foundation personnel." The council remained silent. Marshall feigned a cough, then continued. "It must be noted that the entity had never exhibited many of the numerous abilities it displayed during the breach."

She paused again, waiting for any reaction from the statue like figures. Again, there was no response.

"The damage incurred to Site 16 was ... severe." The slides switched to reveal a photo of a massive spherical crater, carved deep into the surrounding snow-covered tundra. "As you can probably already tell, the onsite nuclear warhead was detonated as well following the failure of all prior recontainment measures."

One figure seated in the center slowly leaned forward and spoke in a deep, heavily distorted voice, “Dr. Marshall, your report specified that a Mobile Task Force supported by 2 squadrons of attack helicopters and a tank division had been dispatched to assist with on-site security personnel. The report, however, omits any mention of their status nor effect on recontainment efforts. Explain this.”

Marshall thought back through her memories of the events she had witnessed that day. Quickly, she glanced at the official report she had filed to make sure her near-death experience didn’t cause her mind to leave out or exaggerate key details. The last thing she wanted right now was for the council to think that her stories didn’t line up. She thought that if that happened, they’d think she was incompetent and probably the reason why this event happened in the first place, or worse they’d think she might have possibly helped it escape in some way.

“The omission is ... uhm ... correct. Shortly after the mobile task force and its accompanying support arrived onsite, they began to engage the entity. A live feed and radio contact was maintained with a mobile command station established just outside the blast zone. But this was before unknown interference began to block communications and stop most electronic devices from functioning. Staff on the ground reported numerous explosions and repeated gunfire. Approximately 4 minutes after the first shot was fired, witnesses reported seeing all helicopters simultaneously falling to the ground coupled with the sound of all gun fire stopping at once. The Scranton Reality Anchors positioned around the command center still showed high levels of reality distortion. It was 30 or so minutes after this that the warhead detonated; we think this might have been activated by some of the surviving operatives or site personnel in a last-ditch effort.”

“Why were the entities’ effects over electronic systems never discovered through routine testing?” responded the shrouded figure.

Marshall winced before hesitantly replying, “We were quite thorough when we first started our testing and no abnormal abilities ever showed up ... This was the main reason why we thought it needed only a ‘Safe’ object classification. It was also pretty docile and seemed harmless overall when we first captured it ...”

“Or, perhaps,” the figure interjected, “it had deliberately deceived your predecessor in order to access the classified information kept on the site.”

Marshall paused and blinked. *Wait what did that mean? Did that mean they thought this ... mindless thing they picked up was actually a lot smarter than it let them know? But how could they not have caught this? This thing was watched 24/7. It must’ve slipped up once, and they would have caught it.*

Her thoughts raced, “I’m sorry?” she blurted out. Instantly, she cringed out of the fear she had for questioning the council’s authority. “But ... but Site 16 was a low security research site, Foundation protocol prohibited valuable information from being stored there.” She added tentatively, trying to justify her previous remark.

For a moment, the figure was silent. Slowly, it turned to look at the other members seated to its side. Briefly, some words are exchanged, too faint for Marshall to hear. Another figure nods, before it turns back to face the junior researcher. “The information in question is contained within a specific artifact recently moved to the site at the request of the now deceased Dr. Alekzey Nowak. As his assistant and protégé, you are familiar with this.”

Marshall paused for a moment, she shuddered at the thought of Dr. Nowak’s disappearance early on into the breach. A tightness gripped her throat at the thought of what fate worse than death might have awaited him given the strange and abnormal nature of their field. At best he would have been killed quickly. But that was

rarely the case for anyone caught up in a containment breach. At the same time it reminded her to be afraid of the Foundation too, as they could also be just as cruel to any researcher who broke standard protocol.

“Y-Yes... I am. It was designated as SCP-6198, ‘The Book of Chernobog’. The deity in question, Chernobog, is also known as ...” She paused, composing herself as she read the second name listed on the file. “‘The Black God’ was the Proto-Slavic God of Chaos and Darkness. Dr. Nowak didn’t believe the entity was the deity itself, but he thought there was a link somehow between physical attributes it shared, as well as the few effects it exhibited that closely tied them together. He thought that by maybe bringing the two together, it might explain the origins of 8526, and perhaps help us translate more of the book...” She trailed off.

Oh...Oh no. The realization suddenly hit her. It was on that same day that the artifact was brought onto the site that 8526 broke out of its cell. Oh, no no no no. She was one of the few surviving people who supported Nowak’s original idea. *What had she done? And if that went down on record it could...*

The figure shifted its posture slightly. “The level 4 clearance accompanying the artifact entails it be stored with specific protective measures. Remnants of its protective housing recovered from the blast site indicated it was physically damaged *prior* to the detonation.”

“But...” Marshall composed herself, alarmed by this new information. “But even if it took the artifact, there was no possible way it, nor the book could have survived the nuclear explosion.”

“We believe that to be quite the contrary, increased activity was detected in the remote Polish village where SCP-6198 was initially recovered. Satellite photos confirmed that SCP-8526 survived and is likely in possession of SCP-6198. Indications point to this having a possibility of leading to an Apollyon class threat.”

Marshall froze, her stomach dropped and face whitened.

An Apollyon class threat? That means the council thinks that whatever that thing is planning to do has a possibility to either end the world, or irreversibly change it for the worse. How did they know this for sure though? She thought to herself. But they were the O5 council after all, it seemed like they could see and hear just about anything that ever happened. Heck, some of its members were probably anomalous entities themselves.

“Dr. Marshall,” the figure called out, noticing that Marshall had physically reacted to the information.

“Yes,” shocking herself from the monotone of her voice.

“Armed response teams have already been dispatched with the sole objective of preventing SCP-8526 from achieving its end goal. 5 MTF teams will be deployed with assistance from the Nu-7 military corp. You’ve been given this information because you, Dr. Jean Marshall, have been appointed to lead this mission.” A second light from above illuminates a small spot on the desk in front of the still shrouded speaking figure. From the shadows, an enclosed file slides out stamped with the words ‘XK-CLASS SCENARIO’. Resting on top is the same purple bag that Dr. Nowak wore except this time it was branded with Marshall’s name.

With that the figure sat straight, regaining its stoic position and sat still in the center of the curved table. “Good luck Dr. Marshall. We’ll be watching closely.”

Declan Crowley is a first-year student majoring in mechanical engineering. Declan writes, “As an avid Dungeons and Dragons player, I’ve always loved world building as well as creative writing because it allowed me to bring to life some of the characters and scenes I’d come up with in my everyday life. One community that I quickly became infatuated with was the “SCP Foundation,” one of the largest online collaborative fictional writing projects. I wanted to take the leap into adding my own piece as part of this fascinating universe.”

Fiery Legacy, by Jarod Yu

When the embers glow,
Does the emperor know
That soon the hammer will fall
To crush every bone?

Can he see that his truth
Is lit by lies
Perpetuated by fools
To stifle the dreamers?

When the blaze rages
Do rebel rampages
Cleave his head
In the revolution's end?

Can he see that his lie
Is stroked by faith
In love and cruelty
To condemn the honest?

When both are blinded by smoke and fear
Do they not see the mirror?

Jarod Yu (he/him), is a current undergrad, set to graduate in 2022 with a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Classic and Ancient Mediterranean Studies from University Park.

Electric Blood, *by Josh Hicks*

He could not say when she had first arrived. Time had lost its meaning long ago. There was no need to count down the seconds when one's demise was never a worry.

Something was strange about her. She was stubborn and imperfect, still a human, presumably just out of spite. At one point he had been just like her, born a cacophony of flesh and bone strung together by nature's careless hand. Like all others, he had chosen to be born again, this time with a mechanical heart and electric blood, breathing in perfect rhythms and free from the blemishes of skin and soul. Yet she was unlike the others. A fool was what she was, to turn down the opportunity to be eternal.

It was when she left that he noticed that time, in all of its irrelevance, had ticked slower when she was there. Perhaps it was the way she walked, the way she stood and stared at him with that expression of disgust and pity. Perhaps it was the way she spoke so crudely, saying the same words he could, but yet, they meant something different when she said them. Something so intrinsic was buried in each syllable, as if she was speaking for herself and not to be heard.

He could not say how long it had been since she left. Seconds, hours, years, it made no difference to him, but she was fleeting. That was why she was beautiful, he suspected. It is only the temporary who wish for it all, and it is only the temporary who ever get close to having it. When she spoke he could hear that desire for more inside of her, but despite all her wants and flaws, the only thing she refused was perfection.

He could not help but muse about how long it would be until she faded. He should not have cared, but he wished to see her again. It was a cruel bout of irony, the perfect wanting the flawed, but she had answers no other could provide. It was a question he had never thought to ask, but now, knowing only she could answer, he had no choice but to wonder.

To what purpose was each breath if you know there will never be a last?

Josh Hicks is a member of the class of 2025 at University Park and is majoring in astronomy and astrophysics. In his free time he enjoys staring into space, staring up at space, writing, writing about space and wasting absurd amounts of time on farming video games.

Breathing in Stardust, by Josh Hicks

I had always thought death would be black, but I saw violet.

I could not say where I was as it did not have a name. To describe it as succinctly as possible, I was in a void at the edge of the universe, but not the end. Someone back on Earth had told me the universe was infinite. I had always found that idea foolish, but now, I can see the truth in it. My error was believing infinite meant it had no end, when in reality, infinite meant there is always something beyond.

It was by error I ended up here, some cruel dice rolled by an uncaring and omnipotent hand. It was a routine teleportation, but it wasn't until we were being pulled into the manufactured hole in spacetime that the warp drive started screaming and flashing red. I do not know where the others are, but if I had to speculate, they were now floating at the other edges of the universe.

I had undone the latch on my helmet long ago, allowing it to slowly float off my head. It was a death sentence, of course, but I did it anyway.

Yet, I did not die. I simply remained, breathing in stardust and suffocating on gravity.

As I took another deep breath of primordial excess, I saw some cool stream of nebulous gas materialize from the space, coiling around my partially exposed body with deep shades of blue and violet, moving as if pulled by an invisible string. Without even thinking, I found myself willfully coaxed into moving with it, following the steps of some galactic dance.

The rest of my body came free of the spacesuit as I gave myself over to the universe's spontaneous rhythms, and soon, I was nothing but a body surrounded by stars that had yet to form. I did not know how I was moving, I did not know how I was breathing, nor did I care to know.

As the universe's song came to a close, and I fell into starburst, I saw a brilliant light coming towards me. It enveloped me in an instant, washing over me like a desultory current from a river flowing for the first time. I had thought it would be white, but it was blue like a friend's final embrace and violet like the sweet smell of spring rain.

This was all a fluke, the way the universe pulled itself together and gave itself over to invisible forces. Stars formed and died like the seasons, but its beauty is endless. The way I too was dying and the way the universe continued on the same regardless, as for every end in this world, there was something beyond it.

It was the silent scream of a star forming that caused that light, rush through space in torrents that people like me drowned in. It happened so fast it was not feasible, but it happened anyway. I am its only witness, even if for only a brief glimmer of time. As I lie here dying, I am infinite.

Josh Hicks is a member of the class of 2025 at University Park and is majoring in astronomy and astrophysics. In his free time he enjoys staring into space, staring up at space, writing, writing about space, and wasting absurd amounts of time on farming video games.

An Artist, by Charles Cote

Jean's body shivered, even in the heat of his workshop. Sweat beaded on his face and he felt a chill down his spine. His breathing was painfully arrhythmic. He blinked an errant tear away and stood up from his chair, faster than he should have. Jean felt terrified but, he didn't have the slightest idea why.

Thirty minutes before his sudden panic Jean had unlocked the door to his shop, *The Immodest Necklace*, before locking it behind him again. He had passed the display cases of the jewelry he had either made or replicas of ones he acquired. Before entering the workshop in the back of the store, he checked a photo he took of the store from the night before to make sure the store did not change.

Twenty minutes before his panic, Jean had sifted through the different orders he had accrued over the last few days. Most were simple enough to fulfill. He'd just needed to email the buyers that their orders were ready for pickup. He decided to do those later in the day, after he had had some time to put towards the more interesting orders. He started to prepare for a few standard repairs, a thankful lack of appraisals, and one custom commission.

The commission was for an intricate sterling silver ring with an embedded red gemstone and two small diamonds. The client had provided the red gemstone that kept drawing Jean's eye every time it was on the table.

Five minutes before his panic, Jean delicately arranged his tools and materials on his workbench, getting ready to start working on the ring. There was no sound as he put his instruments on the black felt. The green gemstone wasn't easily disturbed when placed down. Jean had raised an eyebrow and pushed it back very gently. It didn't make any noise at all.

One minute before his panic, Jean had sketched the blueprint for the ring and measured out his silver. He worked the excess silver into a simple ring, and plastered it with an ovular red dot. He looked at the object with a frown. It was just a demo ring, and nowhere near the complexity or quality that he was planning for the commission, but he couldn't help but think it was strange to look at.

Jean picked up the red gemstone out of curiosity. When he examined the stone, he thought of how the silver clutch is different from the dark crimson oval. Jean suddenly became extremely afraid.

Jean forced himself to jump out of the chair as he ran out of the workroom into the store. He accidentally knocked into a display case while doing so and watched it fall backwards, the glass shattering and the plaster it contained spilling onto the floor. He ran over to his door and tried to open it, but he didn't leave *The Immodest Necklace*.

He left the key in his workshop. When he looked at the reflection in his shop window. He did not see anything but himself through the mirror of his door's small circular window. There were no people outside on the streets, and no streets. Just a reflection of his own face, his sharp features and dark hair, his bright red eyes. Red eyes?

Jean took an involuntary step back before leaning back towards the window so he could look at his eyes again. Surprisingly, they were green, as they'd always been. He blinked and forced himself to take a deep,

shuddering breath. He saw the display case and plaster replicas he destroyed. He gave a deep breath. He had to deal with the broken glass — it would take a day’s work to remake them all.

He laughed at the idea that he would remake the plaster replicas — it seemed suddenly absurd. Why would he even bother when he had such important work to do in the back? He laughed again and walked towards his workshop before pausing.

“That was a strange thought,” he muttered out loud, looking back to the shattered display case. He realized someone might cut themselves on the glass from the display cases, and he would have to make actual items to put on display.

“That thought wasn’t strange at all, it made perfect sense to me,” said the customer. Jean slowly nodded and turned back to his workshop before walking inside it. There, sitting on his workbench, was the demo ring. Lying next to it was the gemstone.

He felt another chill down his spine as he regarded the two objects. His lips curled into a smile as he gazed at the red oval. They curled in disgust as he regarded the demo ring he’d made. It was so crude and inelegant, entirely the wrong way to display the glimmering beauty of the stone. Jean scoffed in sudden disgust at the client who had abandoned the red gemstone in his care and who had presumed to know the shape that it should take. A ring would never be enough for it.

Jean did not recall sitting down, but he started working on the blueprint. It will be more bold and beautiful than the ring itself. A bracelet would be perfect for the gem instead of being restricted by the ring.

He shaped his silver out and worked it into two shapes; a clutch and a clasp, for the front and back of his masterpiece. The gemstone would be happily nestled in silver, held and loved in riches and shining splendor. Jean glanced down at his workbench and frowned, noting that he’d use most of the silver for the front and back. He realized he’d need more to continue working, but soon nausea filled his stomach and he felt sweat bead at his temples and between his eyes. The gemstone needed something else to hold it together. A different type of material is required. He was wondering what could be better.

Jean’s hand was suddenly holding a cluster of bone shards, still wet with blood and he was in shock. However, his surprise wasn’t because of their sudden appearance nor how strangely familiar the sharp bone felt against his skin. He was amazed that he hadn’t thought of using the material sooner. Silver for one side to represent wealth people want, while the other half will be bone, that wealth that people despair to keep.

With a skill he hadn’t even known he possessed, Jean lovingly formed the shards into strips, the same as he did with silver. He folded the bone and attached it to the clasp. He wasn’t sure how long he worked, but he didn’t want to stop.

His head grew lighter and his breathing grew unsteady as he worked longer, longer, and still longer, fervently creating perfection. Jean knew without a shadow of a doubt that making this bracelet would be his masterpiece, his significant work, the validation of his existence. And then, finally, it was done. He looked upon it with loving red eyes.

The fear returned as suddenly as the pain came into being. Jean cried out wordlessly as he looked at the beautiful and terrible thing he had created. His soul resounded with pulsing waves of *evil, evil, evil*. He raised his hand ready to throw the object on the desk, but could not bring himself to destroy the object. The fear reasserted itself after he placed the piece on the felt. Jean then bolted from his chair.

He fell to the ground as he tried to balance on improper footing. Then, Jean looked at his right leg and realized where the shards of bone on his masterpiece come from, he screamed and clutched at the blood. The

denim and skin were cleanly split down his shin, where torn muscles were peeled back and spilling out of him. There was little left of the bone under the meat.

Jean scraped his way along the floor of his workshop, trying desperately to get out, to find help, to get rid of what he had so terribly accomplished. In a pathetic crawl, he clambered forwards, trying to support his weight between his trembling hands and remaining leg and accomplishing little past lodging discarded tools into his body.

The customer stepped over his struggling form and picked up the bracelet. Their nonexistent eyes roamed over the gem, and a smile formed on their face. They placed it upon their wrist and walked out of the workshop, to watch as Jean struggled to cross his storeroom floor. The jeweler felt his hands come to ribbons as he dragged them through broken glass, making his way to the door, to outside and safety. He tried desperately to cry but found he had no tears to shed, his sight fast fading, the sounds he was making growing dimmer even as his thrashing grew more spasmodic. He didn't make it to the door.

The customer watched Jean's last breath with growing anticipation. They waited a heartbeat, then another. As soon as they were sure he was dead, the customer looked again to the bracelet upon their wrist. The flawless gemstone shone a bright and brilliant crimson.

"I was right about you, Jean. You really are an artist."

The customer smiled at the corpse, their loving gaze not leaving the gem as they walked out through the locked door.

Charles Cote is a current undergraduate student, double majoring in supply chain & English. He's an avid reader of Junji Ito, Brandon Sanderson, and Robin Hobb. While he writes all kinds of fiction, he's drawn towards making sci-fi and horror and loves Dungeons & Dragons style adventures.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

A Half of a House, A Whole of My Heart, *by Jaden Parker*

When we are little, we tell ourselves we are invincible. We can do and be anything we set our minds to. I was always an imaginative child and teen. I could create impenetrable impossibilities...until I woke up to the real world. My childhood home on Bella Street is where I dreamt wide awake. Floors were lava there, and bicycles were just rocket ships in disguise. Today, I have had to suffocate this wild energy inside me, be “more appropriate for my age.” I can only let it out when I sit down to write.

I can't conjure up any bad memories from that house, whether by honed skills of intentional forgetfulness or otherwise; so, I've always allowed my childhood to take residence there, making the house on Bella the nucleus of my joyous youth. The house was built with a wall down its middle, cutting it in half. We Parkers were nestled into the left side and adopted the street number with the “½” attached to it. Across the street was a Sheetz, since Hollidaysburg, my hometown, was just a few minutes outside of Altoona, the birthplace of the Sheetz industry. This Sheetz was the same one my father ran to one morning to get a coffee, while my mom waited, in agony and disbelief, for him to drive her to the hospital because she was in labor with my brother.

If you looked directly at the front of the house back then, you'd see a porch with green flooring and a small yard along the left-hand side, our side of the house. There was a small gate that used to block off the yard from the outside world, but it has since been removed. On the road in front of the house, a red car was always parked. It belonged to our neighbor, a curmudgeonly old lady who always banged on the wall shared between the two halves whenever Dad's videogames got too loud or we kids got too rowdy. I recall that she would *always* wear tacky red lipstick. I'm pretty sure she still lives there.

The yard was not big whatsoever, and there was a sliver of cement separating the house from the grass, a small walkway to the back door. I would give Jaran, my little brother, a ride on the back of my red Radio Flyer tricycle, him balancing on my training wheels, as we flew up and down the thin patch of sidewalk. It was more work to pick up the trike and turn it around at the end of the path than it was to tow Jaran back and forth, since the path wasn't wide enough to turn around naturally on. If Mom was in a good mood, we were allowed to ride around the Sheetz parking lot under her supervision.

The front and back doors were similar: both had metal door knobs painted black that creaked when you twisted them; both had a pane of glass positioned at the top to see in and out of; but both led to different places. The front door led to a poor excuse of a foyer, where you were met with three options: stairs leading to the second floor, a left turn into the living room, or down the hall to the kitchen at the back of the house. The back door led directly into a mudroom for coats and dirty snow boots; then, it opened into the kitchen with a tiny dining room on your right that connected to the same living room from before. Very quaint.

I remember Mom and Dad chasing me around and around in circles in the kitchen as my tricycle sped along the floor, tires leaving behind streak marks. Bubbly giggles erupted from my soul in those days, the world seeming to revolve around my happiness.

In the hallway leading to the kitchen, there was a door under the stairwell going down to a basement I can't remember. I had to text my mother to fill in some portions missing from my memory:

mom. the door under the staircase. was that a closet or a stairwell leading down to a basement?

Basement. Attic was upstairs.

yes, I remember the attic. just didn't remember the basement.

Remember there was a door connecting to the neighbor's house? Washer and dryer down along the wall.

yeah, none of that rings a bell to me.

Oh. Why are you asking? Writing a scary story?

1. just was writing about that house. have a lot of good memories there.

I'm glad. I tried to make it a happy place for you.

I'd never stopped to consider that maybe everything wasn't as simple as I'd imagined. It never even crossed my mind that maybe, just maybe, I'd never had a "perfect," healthy, and happy childhood. I never wanted, nor want, to believe that things weren't amazing in my family from the get-go.

On the second floor was the room my brother and I shared, a spare room used as a voice studio for Mom, my parents' room, and a small bathroom. Mom's voice studio doubled as a room for Dad to detox in. He's always needed alone time after work, alone time that doesn't ever end. He was never the type to rejoin the family once his stressful day had worn off. Because of this being who he was (and is), most of my memories, the good ones, don't include him. Anytime something bad was happening, he was involved. He never wanted to know what was going on, unless it was "important." Importance was only weighed by his standards not ours; what was important to us was never even remotely important in his eyes. Do I hold any resentment toward him for it? Not really, because I think he doesn't care how I feel about the matter.

Luckily, I had a loving and supportive mother to bandage up all my booboos, mental and physical. With a bobbed haircut that always set a trend for every other female in our town, my mother did it all. She took us to and from school events. We'd accompany her on days she spent at her high school working on their musical. Back in those days, her production of *Footloose* was something to see, and Jaran and I always loved the McDonald's hash browns that came our way if we complied with the tasks she'd give us throughout the day. She doesn't do shows at her school anymore because of their lack of respect for her and her position, but I'll never forget how fun it was to see the shows come together. Jaran, Mom, and I undoubtedly became very close because of all this quality time we shared, creating a familial subset.

The attic was one of my favorite places to spend my time in. Dark and dingy like any good attic, it was always hot up there. There was a black leather chair our cat would lounge on and a mysterious, small door at the end of the room. I felt some sort of magnetic attraction to that place. Even writing about it now, I feel a hypnosis coming over me. I can't recall if I really spent as much time up there as I think I did, but it stands out in my

memory as a place my brother and I frequented. As a child, it felt like a secret part of my house, even though the entrance to it, a green door across the hall from my parents' bedroom, wasn't a secret whatsoever.

"Aren't you going to write about all the times you spent watching TV with your dad when you were little because he stayed home to take care of you? What about the time he put you in the laundry basket and had you ride it down the steps?" my mother offered after reading over my rough draft.

"Those aren't *my* memories, Mum. They're just the stories I've been told."

Unfortunately, my brother passed away in 2017, a suicide that shook the world. Now I'm at a stage in my life where I crave my freedom like a baby craves attention, but I'm barred by this playpen set up around me after his death. Furthering these unfortunate circumstances, I have slowly distanced myself more and more from my parents, which isn't so bad when it comes to my dad.

My mother, on the other hand, is a totally different story.

When one eventually leaves home, it is only natural to feel some mix of guilt and relief. Because of how things are in my house now that Jaran is gone, the moving-out part of my life has been disrupted. As days tick by following his death, I long more and more for those days on Bella Street. Petty arguments always ended with a stern "kiss and make up." Timeouts sitting in the rocking chair always ended with a mutual understanding of wrongdoing and a hug from Mom. The end of the night always ended with taking flouride for our teeth and hopping into bed, awaiting to be tucked in by her.

So what do you do when you have to leave that all behind? What do you do when there aren't any more blow-up McDonald's playhouses in the attic or Sundays at church or little brothers falling asleep behind the baby gate at the top of the staircase or scavenger hunts with old antique jewelry? What do you do when you *have* to be an adult now? What does it mean when you have to sacrifice your own happiness to be what others expect of you? When is enough ever enough?

If anything has stayed the same from those days, it's my imagination. These days, I find myself imagining what kind of person I'd be if I'd never been conditioned to walk on eggshells around my father. I wonder what would have happened to us as a family if Jaran were still here. If my dad had guided us with more patience, love, and understanding, would things be different? Better? Happier?

I'd like to think so.

I believe that everyone in the world has their own little house on Bella, a place where nothing goes wrong, an epitome of happiness. Some of our houses on Bella are made up, places we hide in when the world gets too tough. Some of us still get the privilege to live in our houses on Bella. Today, I wish for the day when I'll get to be in a house on Bella again.

But until then, I will imagine.

Jaden Parker writes: "Hello! I have been writing since kindergarten. Back then, they were just stories of princesses and knights in shining armor. Today, I've found my voice in memoir writing. I enjoy telling my experiences in a way to help people feel emotions they may not be familiar or comfortable with. I want to create a dialogue on subjects that were once taboo."

Bastard Monkey Boy, by Awad Ulhaq

“You’re good.”

My hands curled up into angry adolescent balls. I wanted to tell the counselor how wrong she was. *I’ll tell you exactly how good I am.* Better yet, I’d show her. I wanted to upturn her bowl of sweets, evidence of ersatz benevolence. Their unsympathetically colorful existence was at odds with the raging torrents within me. The very sun mocked me the same way; it shone bright, happy, and without a care. A cheery air seemed to hang over the school premises.

Perhaps she noticed my tremulous lip, or perhaps this was a reaction she had anticipated, but she let me know that I could take a moment on my own if I’d like. The gall of the woman, to act as if she knew me; to tell me that I’m good. *I’ll take exactly as many moments as I’d like, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.* The seat outside of her office next to the door was the only one that I felt confident approaching without upsetting my mental map, and I left the door open on my way—a rebellious victory, but an inconsequential one.

It had been six days since I had last seen my parents, the six worst of my life at the time. That blazing rage within me directed at my own circumstances had been invalidated by three words from the counselor, however well-intentioned they may have been. My resentment directed itself towards her instead. *She* did not cling to her mother a week ago, pleading to not be made to leave. *She* did not glance at the only apartment she had ever known for the last time. *She* did not lose the opportunity to say goodbye to the only friends she had ever known—no, *she* was good. I wasn’t.

As I reached to wipe away the tears—that I would have then so desperately attempted to convince you were the result of an exotic condition (and of course, you wouldn’t know it)—I glanced at the impressions my fingernails made upon my palms. I was acutely aware while I clenched my hands of my doing so, but that caused me to only intensify my efforts then. However, now it seemed like a foolish course of action; there was no audience to share my pain. As a 15-year-old stumbling through his first real experiences of isolation, though, it was enough to know that it was there. I needed to channel those emotions into something that existed. I needed to argue with the counselor’s words. I needed to prove to myself that I was, in fact, not good. For the emotional little kid that I was (and still am), it was no challenge.

Despite that, if someone were to ask me today how I got to where I am and which people have had some of the most positive impacts on me overall, the counselor would be damn near at the top of the list. Regardless, had I known that then, my response would have hardly changed. I had never been called “good” before, not even when it was most justified. This was the least good I had ever felt. But that phrase hadn’t existed in my universe before this. Even if it did, I wouldn’t have felt the need to contest it. My hands would remain unblemished.

As my tears left, the human blessing of critical assessment returned. Perhaps her saying, “You’re good,” wasn’t a reference to my childhood. Maybe it had something to do with my apology for not speaking clearly enough that preceded the fateful sentence. In hindsight, my response was entirely unwarranted. Hindsight, though, unlike critical assessment, is not a human blessing we have while events occur. My school counselor had learned of my existence less than two hours before, and my mind was already portraying her as the main antagonist of my story, my tragedy. She had not conspired to bring me here or have me kidnapped against my will. Perhaps I should have factored that into my pubescent assessment of the lady. After much internal

debate, charity prevailed while teenage angst lost, and I succumbed to the all-too-familiar feeling of shame. It was a somber epiphany, and at that moment I understood the dread Nicolaus Copernicus must have felt; perhaps indeed I was not the center of the universe. The only lasting effect was that I'd obtain a new phrase, one that would help me communicate with my American fellows. Or so I thought.

“You're good.”

This time, it was not my kindly sophomore-year counselor speaking. I felt that same familiar tremor in my hands, the desire to clench my fists, the urge to disagree. Three years of growth since that day with my counselor had clearly not been enough to stamp out my knee-jerk recalcitrant reaction. This time, however, the circumstances were wildly different. It was still a markedly older woman saying it to me, and I was still on the brink of tears, but the difference was that I had brought these circumstances upon myself. I had driven to the restaurant on my own, and I had decided to order the highest spice level they offered for my meal on my own. It's funny how remarkably difficult it is to feel sorry for yourself when you have no one to blame but yourself. What's funnier still, though, is I'd find a way. But I digress.

Between my general distaste of the curry and the overwhelming savor of the peppers from hell (evidence of some sort of superiority complex, or perhaps my masculine ego—I was trying to one-up everyone at the table by “out-spicing” them), lunch was proving particularly difficult to swallow. What was even more infuriating was that my proclivity to make bad decisions had chosen the absolute worst moment to surface. I was in the company of my college advisor, English professor, and my textbook author; in short, people I was desperate to impress. My sputtering red face and injured ego did little to that end, though, and I felt an apology was in place. The author's gracious, “You're good,” was in response to my equally ungracious excuse of an apology, and though one would assume three years would be sufficient to overcome any misgivings about the phrase, I've never properly shaken them off.

But for the brief moment that I did my nod of appreciation (words were certainly beyond me at that point) and we locked eyes, a realization swept over me. This was a woman whose book centered around being a product of multiculturalism, about feeling the need to blend in and assimilate into society. Even though she didn't mean it that way, if anyone would understand me, it'd be her. She would perhaps understand the sentiment of feeling like an alien living amongst humans that would communicate to each other in phrases that sounded like coded language of the enemy with all their innocuous sheen. That fleeting meeting of our eyes though was an unspoken thrill for me. While surrounded by the enemy, a fellow spy had recognized me. This simple pleasure was enough to steer me into finishing my food, and at the end of lunch, my masculine ego was satisfied—I was the only one at the table to empty their plate.

My internal voice giddily repeated that phrase the rest of that day. *You're good. You're good. You're good.* I had finally understood what had left me so perturbed that morning with my counselor, and what caused me to experience the same feelings—albeit to a much lesser degree—all these years later. It was not the simple answer of adolescent lamenting that I thought it was, nor was it as trivial as a “bad day.” The phrase, however subconsciously, reminded me of my own upbringing and the stark differences between it and a regular American youth's. All that time I believed that this was a surefire indication of me not belonging here, not with other teenagers. No matter how many times more I hear it, that phrase will always cause me to remember both of these aforementioned fateful days. It reminded me of my mother's thick accent and my father's dark skin, it reminded me of the religion I was brought up in that I could no longer connect with. It reminded me of snowfall I hadn't ever seen and of dances that I'd never attended.

But that look with the author caused me to reach another more subtle conclusion. It informed me that, no matter however much I saw myself as either an alien or a spy, that essentially meant nothing. My fellow alien, my fellow spy, the author had been able to reach where she was irrespective of the need to hide. She too was alone in who she was, she herself had struggled with the conflicts any product of multiculturalism has. In spite of this, she is an accomplished writer and teaches at the same university I go to—she even has her own

Wikipedia page! If she could, then why couldn't I? I still have the vigor and passion of a teenager, and more importantly, all the time in the world. But it would be of no help if I dwelled exclusively in the moment that I last hugged my mother, or the apartment that I lived in the first fifteen years of my life, or with the friends that I hadn't spoken to in years. And I recognized at that moment, finally, that it was time to tell myself that I'm good.

Awad Ulhaq is a first-year English major at Penn State-Lehigh Valley, headed for a career in the law. Born in Florida and a 2021 graduate of Quakertown Area High School, Awad has resided in Saudi Arabia and has roots in Pakistan. His creative nonfiction piece "Bastard Monkey Boy" was originally developed for ENGL 30 during the fall 2021 semester.

Glass, by Peter Hassett

Each day, upon waking up, I spend a decent portion of time getting dressed in front of a mirror that is placed directly on the inside of my dorm room door. Getting an outfit that matches and is warm enough for this terrible Penn State cold (still not sure why I did not go to Clemson), is a tall task. I am just glad I am able to even look myself in the eyes in the mirror, as that reflective piece of glass used to serve as a constant reminder that I was not enough.

Being skinny is harder than people realize. I have always been on the thin side, probably either because of genetics or because I am not a huge eater. As a result, I would always have doubts when looking into the mirror. The mirror would say, “Put some muscle on to get that girl,” or “How are your friends so much bigger than you”? I think looking at myself in that light was not exactly my fault, but more so the people around me. 117 pounds. 117 (Don’t worry, I am around 145 now). That is how much I weighed as a 5’11” male in February of 2020. The doctor said, “If you were to get very sick Pete, I am nervous about what would happen.” At that point, I hit my lowest. What a failure I had become, so sad at my own self image that I could not even look at myself in a mirror.

The other piece of glass that I became synonymous with has been the large pair of spectacles that I place upon my face daily. Glasses have always been a part of my identity. I remember picking out a pair in third grade, after my teacher had told my mom that I was unable to see the chalkboard. I was proud of my glasses, they made me unique and stand out. I would wear them every day no matter the occasion. They have become a part of me. To this day, when picking out a pair, I always look at myself in the mirror at the Eye Gallery, the place in which I buy my glasses, and see if I like the shape, color, and overall aesthetic of the pair. Glasses are now synonymous with my identity, to the point that if I put contacts in, which I do for sports, my friends and family hardly recognize me. I think that people that have judged me in the past for wearing glasses are just jealous that I actually now accept the difference that I possess, and my glasses represent who I am -- an individual.

Glass, whether the mirror in my room or the glasses on my face, represents who I am. Glass itself symbolizes new beginnings, and each day for me is a new opportunity to better myself.

Peter Hassett writes, “This piece is a self-reflective draft about self-image and the importance that it has had in my lifetime. I think that this topic, for some, is taboo, but I am hoping that I can enlighten boys especially to be able to talk about this issue.”

I'm Catholic! Who Are You? A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Story, by
Beatrix Stickney

Page 1

It's middle school, and you're the Smart Kid™ – a big fish in your tiny Catholic school pond. You didn't do anything in particular to gain this title, it just sort of happened that way.

You go to Mass every Sunday because in your family, it isn't optional. You're a little bored. As you get older you learn more about what's going on, but that doesn't make it much more engaging.

And now you're in high school. You have your Confirmation and take the name of your patron saint, Bernadette. You join your church's youth group. People there are on fire for their faith, and you can see that they have something you don't: they're in love with God.

And you want that.

Soon, you're a senior – that happened fast. And you have a choice to make.

If you take Calc II and College Chemistry because they're the hard classes and you're the smart kid, go to page 2.1

If you take Business Calc and Intro to Art because you want to enjoy life your senior year, go to page 3.

Page 3

You love art class, and it's preparing you for when you'll study Costume Design next year as a freshman in college. And speaking of college, it's almost here. Penn State is your first choice, as long as you can get enough scholarships. They have an amazing theatre program, more clubs than you could attend in ten lifetimes, and get this – *daily Mass*. There's an active Catholic Student Association – the Newman club. Your youth group has become like family to you, and you've started to enter into your faith with your heart as well as your mind. You hope that in college, you'll find a similar community of faith.

You get the grades. You get the scholarships. You get the offer of admission. Now all that's left for you to do is...

If you cry yourself to sleep because you're sure you'll never fit in with your theatre classmates once they find out how religious you are, go to page 4.

If you trust that God wants you in theatre for a reason and everything will be okay, go to page 5.

1 It was suggested during workshops of this essay that perhaps I could include speculative “pages” regarding the paths I did not take. After reflecting on this suggestion, I decided not to implement it. I have no regrets about the choices I’ve made, nor do I think it worth distracting from the focus of this essay with mere speculation about could-have-beens. If you would rather have read a different path, consider making a similar choice in your own life and see where it takes you on your wonderful adventure!

Page 4

They’re going to hate you. They’re going to *hate* you. Irrational? Sure, but everything seems reasonable when it’s late at night. So, you get ready for college, convincing yourself that you really won’t fit in.

Because when you were in grade school, middle school, even the beginning of high school, your faith was take it or leave it. And then, somewhere along the line, things changed. You had an encounter, or many little encounters – with Love itself – that changed everything.

Your friend praying over you and speaking wisdom to a struggle that you hadn’t even told him about. Receiving the Eucharist – the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ – and getting the most delightful and surprising sensation that your hand had been touched by a living person. A priest asking if you’d ever thought about becoming a nun, a thought you’d had tucked in the back of your head for months and, again, hadn’t told anyone. And hundreds of sunny days, hugs from friends, doors held by strangers, and plans or situations that worked out in the best possible ways. All saying, God is real. He’s looking out for you. He loves you.

Now nobody could tear the Catholicism out of you no matter how hard they tried. You’ve realized – and you’re realizing every day – that religion isn’t fundamentally about rules or moral positions (though those are important, to be sure). Religion is about encountering God in a real way every day, seeing what He’s done in your life, and learning about how much He loves you.

The problem is that people who haven’t encountered or recognized the love of God really don’t get the point of religion. And when you’re in college, surrounded by people who “aren’t really religious,” it’s hard to feel like you’re investing your time and love into something that matters – no matter how much you know that it really, really does matter.

Now, if trying to find your place in college wasn’t hard enough, you’re staring political turmoil in the face.

If you bury your head in the sand and ignore the Supreme Court justice confirmation and the presidential election, because you can’t take that kind of stress right now, go to page 6.

If you stay abreast of the news because, well, it’s important to know what’s going on, go to page 7.

Page 7

You're keeping an eye on politics now because you're growing up, and by now, you know what issues are important to you. You know what causes you would fight for or fight against or lay your life down for. There are people in government that you respect, and people you wish gave you more reason to respect them. There's Amy Coney Barrett. And there's the 2017 quote spoken at her 7th Circuit of Appeals confirmation hearing, one that resurfaces now as she's considered for the Supreme Court, that you hadn't heard before now: "the dogma² lives loudly within you. *And that's of concern.*" Senator Dianne Feinstein, emphasis added.

² Dogma: according to Merriam-Webster, "a doctrine or body of doctrines concerning faith or morals formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church."

It makes you wonder why Sonia Sotomayor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg are praised as strong women, role models for young women to look up to (which they certainly are) but Barrett is torn apart by those claiming to stand for the interests of all women. Because certainly her detractors must not be thinking about how it might hurt a young Catholic woman to see someone who shares her beliefs and values get dragged through the mud in front of an entire nation.

But Barrett gets that seat on the bench.

If you lean more into your faith more than ever, go to page 8.

If you quietly start distancing yourself from Catholicism, go to page 9.

Page 8

You don't really *fit in* with most of your theatre classmates, but you didn't expect to. You get along, and they don't hate you for your faith. You're learning how to work with and love (love: willing the good of the other for the other's sake. A choice, not a feeling) people who have radically different worldviews than yours, and you're growing.

By now, going to Newman Catholic Student Association events feels much less like attending a club meeting and much more like hanging out with friends – friends who, over the course of the year, have become like family. You've found a place where you belong. Now it's February, and they're attending a virtual retreat, and you decide to go. Granted, a virtual retreat doesn't sound as great as an in-person one, but if you get one or two insights out of it it'll be worth it.

It's worth it.

Believe it or not, Zoom manages to facilitate real connections with your friends in State College or their respective homes, and the retreat is amazing. You take pages and pages of notes, but the recurring theme is the same: you are loved. God loves you. You are his *beloved*. Yes, you. You. Sure – it might not feel like it, but feelings are finicky. Sometimes they lie to you. Sometimes they change.

The only thing that will never, ever change is God. And you think back to your middle school self and how your identity lay in what you *did*. When your hobbies, your music tastes, and your class choices changed, your

identity shook. But *now*... Now you are beloved, and you know it, even if you don't always feel it. Your time in youth group, the retreats and mission trips you've attended, and the friends you've encountered along this adventure have all played a part in bringing you to this realization. You are beloved, and nothing else really matters because that is your identity.

You. Are. Beloved.

If you keep this realization to yourself because you're a little nervous about what your classmates might think if you wrote an entire paper about your religion, go to page 10.

If you decide to share your heart because maybe there's somebody else out there who needs to know just how infinitely loved they are... get writing.

Beatrix Stickney is a sophomore theatre design and technology major focusing in costume design; she's from Pittsburgh and has been doing creative writing since middle school. Besides sewing and writing, she loves spending time with her family and friends, doing activism work, and running her Etsy shop.

Orange Baby, by Margaret Matous

It was only when I got to college that I realized how strange my family was. Ever since I was a kid it was always a race to see who could shove the most straws in my aunt's purse before she noticed. On birthdays you would see presents that were given last month to another member of the family, especially old and unpopular records that my Uncle Chris bought for a dollar at the community thrift shop.

My cousin Sol and I were champions at hiding little cartoons of people professing love only to be rejected in an immaculate way and then throwing themselves into space. We would make fake political ads for terrible politicians who were just *trying their best* and hang them around the houses of our aunts and uncles to bring awareness to their campaigns. Washington was practically begging us to become political advisors.

By the time we reached the second grade, we wanted to be world class business tycoons.

“I've got it!”

“What?” asked Sol.

“Our big idea! We can make books—you do the illustrations and I'll do the writing!” Sol was the family artist.

“What are we going to make the book about?”

“Ummm... start drawing, I'll just make it up as we go.”

We sold five-page novels stapled together on computer paper to make our profit. Sol would draw some befuddled creature while I tried to narrate what mayhem had befallen them. It wasn't much, but it felt like we were millionaires in the making. At least, that's how I felt. I never really understood how to get there, but I knew I wanted to make it big when I grew up (which essentially meant I wanted to live in a castle with an alligator-filled moat surrounding it).

We were children, and children are strange, but my memories tell me that our strangeness was an inherited trait, something that seems obvious now. Nothing proves this more than the Orange Baby.

Thinking back on it, I can remember the day Sol and I found Orange Baby in my Aunt Karen's basement. We would go down there to have the privacy every tween needed when the upstairs was filled with adults talking of adult things during adult birthday parties.

My aunt's basement was only half finished. Walking down the stairs you were met with the two halves, the finished, with a bean bag chair and bathroom all to your left, and the unfinished, with the washer, dryer, and creepy, cool darkness on the right. Naturally as children we only ever ran into the latter half for two seconds to fulfill a dare, but as we grew older, our timidness in the face of an unfinished basement dissipated (especially when we found the string to turn on the lightbulb).

The unfinished half of the basement had stacks of extra chairs (my aunt was an entertainer) and books piled where bookshelf space ran out. The blue painted floor sent cool, sparking chills into your feet even through socks. It was a tantalizing excitement crossing the threshold into that half of the room for the first time.

That day Sol and I began rummaging through boxes eager to discover the secrets of my aunt's past. What books had she bookmarked? What treasures would we find? What decrepit skeleton was in her closet? Behind a box in the corner of a wooden cabinet in a wicker basket is where we found him.

Or rather, it. It was a bright orange pool floaty shaped like a pill and roughly the size of a baby. The straps were stained with age and the body worn in places where it was chipped down to white styrofoam.

We took the floaty out of its wicker cradle and held it up to the lightbulb. Morning broke on the beautifully blemished sight. The orange as blazing as a traffic cone was enough for us to know this strange object was to be the subject of our next totally funny and not-at-all-expected prank.

Unloading all the contents of a box and leaving them on the floor, we placed the floaty in, using its wicker basket and a towel from the laundry to make the floaty more comfortable.

Sol wrote the note: "Mama, please love me – Orange Baby," it said.

In a flash we were blundering up the steps, skidding suddenly to a stop to sneak into the unoccupied dining room with the box, and setting it on the table for our family to discover.

Later we would find out that the floaty was actually what our grandma used to keep her children from sinking to the bottom of lakes. She had twelve children and four available eyes (this calculation includes my grandpa's eyes), so the floaty came in handy. Wearing that weird, orange styrofoam *thing* was like a rite of passage, my mother would tell me.

When my grandma sold her house, with all the twelve grown and her husband passed long before, my Aunt Karen took the floaty for **sentimental reasons**. The thought of the orange floaty in the garbage went against her gut. *Why throw it away and never see it again when I could put it in a cabinet in my creepy basement and almost never look at it?* But there is logic in that notion when you don't think about it logically, at least I think so. Moving on is sometimes spurred by a reminder of where we came from. It sounds backwards, I know.

One day when it's time to clean up and go we find these little surprise memories from our lives. Insignificant objects that somehow mean something. It's strange. Meaning can keep us afloat when we feel we are about to drown.

A few summers ago my family decided to travel down to the Outer Banks. We set off in five or so cars, all packed in like sheep with blankets. I always found that funny— it is so hot outside so you turn on the A.C. in your car, but then get too chilly so you pull out a fuzzy blanket and call it a day.

What no one knew was that my Uncle Chris had brought the Orange Baby in a duffle bag. Right before we left the first rest stop, he called Sol and me over.

"Hey," he whispered, "I need you two to put this in your Aunt Peg's car." He handed us the bag as if it were full of drugs and moved to close his trunk.

"What's in it?" I asked.

“Just give it to her and tell her that a good mama should drive her baby.” Sol and I did not need more explanation than that.

With our parents calling us to our cars so we could “get a move on,” Sol and I quickly ran over to Aunt Peg’s car and put the bag in her backseat. She, of course, saw us doing this, but before she could ask questions, we were gone.

Sitting in the back of my mini van I could not stop smiling, especially when I heard hoots and hollers coming from my aunt’s car. I looked out the gray tinted window to see her jogging (remember this is an aunt, they do not run) toward our car with the Orange Baby in her hands. My mom was turning the ignition key, but on seeing her sister coming near, she paused and rolled down her window. I followed my mom’s eyes in slow motion as her gaze fell to the object in my aunt’s hands. Mom’s eyes widened and a grin broke out on her face.

“Go away!” she laughed. She jabbed the key in the ignition, put us in drive, and sped away, leaving Aunt Peg in the rest stop parking lot waving around the orange floaty like a madwoman.

The Outer Banks is a wonderful place. The lull of the waves as they push and pull the ocean like the hand of God kneading bread. The ocean wind brushing over your skin, sweeping away thoughts of your normal life.

It was something we all needed. My oldest brother, Oscar, was about to start college and leave our clan for the first time. Sam (next in line of my siblings) was more into chess than Apples to Apples then, and I thought that reading Young Adult novels was scandalous at my early middle school age. The coming years would be like a wave washing into shore in a rush before leaving in a peaceful recession.

The house was gigantic (it did have to fit all of my extended family). I would describe it as modern simplicity with its gray and white color palette, blue runners going down the halls, and seashell decor. There were three stories, with the kitchen and dining room on the third floor (for a valid reason, I’m sure), and the wall facing the ocean was made of glass. You could see the entire ocean from up there.

In the kitchen was the high chair where Orange Baby lived for that week. At dinner I would set a plate for him, putting only the finest of edible foods and drinkable beverages on his tray: napkins or dominos or whatever was lying around that day. Sometimes Orange Baby was in charge of watching over the fruit bowl or keeping everyone’s keys in one neat spot. He was a great help.

Everyday we went down to the beach, nay, ran. The sand was like white fire and filled with tiny bleached crabs scampering around.

My brothers made for the water in a flash. I was on their tails, but Mom stopped me because I needed to put on sunscreen. Once covered in a fresh layer of white, I darted to the water, careful not to think of the fish that lurked beneath the blue blanket ready to eat my toes.

Uncle Chris and Uncle Tom were already out there helping all us children get up on the air mattress we used as a raft. Sitting on top of that air mattress in the ocean was exhilarating. I pretended to be a shipwrecked explorer trying to find my way to land. Uncle Chris would yell “JE SUIS JACQUE COUSTEAU!” before throwing himself off the mattress and into the water with complete abandon.

I remember my dog jumping in the ocean and paddling around with my mom and brothers. I remember my family getting fish for dinner, a dish I choose to not partake in to this day, and me sitting at the restaurant awkwardly with my chicken tendies. And I remember coming home. Without Orange Baby.

I could have sworn someone packed him up, that he was thrown in someone's car at some point in time, but when we got home, he wasn't there. The car ride home had been a long one, I was too tired to think, to care. One of my aunts or uncles had him and were just pretending not to know his whereabouts to add to the mystery.

But Orange Baby did not show up at the next family birthday party nor Christmas nor the Fourth of July, his favorite holiday. Orange Baby disappeared.

There were, and still are, times I wish I could join him in the realm between this one and the next. I felt it when I watched my mother walk down the steps of my dormitory at college for the first time. When I realized Orange Baby was now something my family would only ever talk about in the past tense, I felt it, too. The desire for none of it to have happened.

Then I slapped myself. Who was I to be so lucky as to have a thought like that? Thinking it would be better to have never experienced an innocent childhood just because it hurt to see it go? Thinking it would have been better to have never grown up?

Time passed, Sol and I grew up (reluctantly), and before I knew it, Oscar was finishing college and Sam began focusing on school and work and what he wanted out of life. I chose to spend my time at school rather than in an empty house, and I grew bitter. I hated how everyone had their own avenue to walk on. What was mine? I wasn't ready to walk so alone.

Talking with my family changed: *Where do you want to go to college? What do you want to study?* Of course I shot high, choosing only the most prestigious schools and lucrative careers for my answers. The truth was that I had no idea what to do with my life. Those ideas of "making it big" were more of an alternate personality than what I wanted in reality.

The thing is, I was dreaming for the future before I had completed childhood, and I blamed all those who raised me for growing up before me. I guess I just didn't realize it until I took the exit to Adulthood. Once you are there, you can't turn around; there is only forward.

But it is so, so tempting to go backward, even though that option is next to impossible. Life is linear, as my high school Algebra II teacher would say. The wheel rolls on as we drive down this road, picking up dirt and rocks before losing them. Some are gone for good as if they left this physical universe for something greater. Some stick and become memories we dust off every once in a while. Either way the sun still rises.

Now when I think of my family's stranger moments, I am overwhelmed with dysphoria. There are things in this world that we just can't control. Where we were born, in what time, how we were raised. I wonder why I should have been placed in the moment that I was. Perhaps, as I once wished, it is in this time that I am meant to make it big. Or, perhaps "making it big" only ever meant making my *life* big. And I would say that sounds just as good as living in a castle surrounded by an alligator-infested moat (but maybe that's just me).

Margaret Matous is a University Park student majoring in political science with a minor in anthropology. She hopes to graduate in 2024.

Salon Days, by Emmanuela Eneh

I used to get excited about salon days. They were always weekends, and that meant no school. I would wake up early on Saturday, put on my best dress, and wait for my father to take my hand and lead me to his car. It would have been my mother, but this was that one thing: you know, the one thing a person thinks their partner can actually *do*. When we arrived, and I was secure in the eyes and arms of other people whose names I didn't quite know, he'd leave with a loving smile. I sometimes wondered why he needed hours away for single hour hair styles. One time, a man with nice eyes picked me up after he'd left: I giggled as he told me how pretty I was and spun me in front of the mirror. Salon days with dad ended sometime after the affair. Years later, when I told my mom about the nice-eyed man, she told me they'd never happen again.

Emmanuela Eneh writes: "I've spent my entire college career trying to figure out how to tell my own story. I avoided non-fiction my whole life, but now I'm using this genre to give life to little, fragmented memories that I set aside a long time ago. My hobbies include gaming when I should probably be asleep, scrolling through fanfiction, and wishing that the bending from Avatar: The Last Airbender existed."

The American Lobster Tale, by *Josh Tillman*

Have you ever been enlightened with the spectacular tales of the American lobster? I sure have, and it is quite the nailbiter. The lobster's indeterminate battles with villainous predators that prowl the reefs beneath the waves. The unfortunate and short-lived encounters with humans and their metal pots of boil. But most ironically, the lobster's inevitable demise ergo its anatomy's constantly growing frame perpetuating a self-inflicted death. Whether these circumstances come unbeknownst to your previous knowledge of America's renowned crustaceans, or has occupied your awareness prior, there is no question that the story of the American lobster in most peoples' eyes is limited to that of an evening's mouthwatering entrée.

Imagine your family takes a trip to the coast, fiending for a seaside dinner accompanied by a seafood delicacy. You're surrounded by pointed strip lights hanging from the aesthetically pleasing false-wood ceilings. Endowed with dark oak benches as seats, and circular plastic surfaces, hidden by bleach white cloths as tables. Where there lies, beneath your anticipating hands, a crispy red lobster tail, basted in a whisked concoction of butter, garlic, and herbs. This meal did not come without a cost. The cost of a long and adventurous life of an American lobster.

The lobster is born into his larval stage amongst his one-hundred-thousand brothers and sisters, and there he encounters his first quest of life. As his thin and microscopic body floats to the warm surface of his deep blue home, his life is at the hands of an endless array of predators. A bloodbath commences as his defenseless brothers and sisters are eaten left and right by menacing monkfish and cod. And after those tumultuous four to six vulnerable weeks, surrounded by bloodshed and war, he remains with only three other fortunate souls. As the lobster and his scarce siblings venture forth in their mission for survival, they approach the juvenile age where, one-by-one, they are kidnapped by menacing traps of mesh rope, and placed on your family's dinner plates less than a week later. But if the lobster can hide and evade the deathly grasp of humans, his quest continues down a path of unforeseen fulfillment; a journey of a new frontier, if you will.

It is a widely held misconception that lobsters are immortal. Though, it is true that the great American lobsters possess a predisposed gift when they enter this life. Their holy grail strands of DNA are capped with an infinite supply of telomeres, sections of DNA that protect from cell degradation. With most animals, their telomeres degrade through the process of aging, ultimately leading animals to age and die from that point forward. Since the American lobster holds an infinite supply of this aging defying quality, they never stop growing. Considering they hold this rare and seemingly impossible solution to biological immortality, people assume lobsters would keep growing and could theoretically live forever, but that's not exactly the case.

After the lobster escapes the dooms of humankind, he carries on with his pursuits of continuation. He shares his coral habitat with numerous enemies. Eels creep into his den at night, but undiscovered to them are the lobsters constantly growing claws, ready to snap any heathen in his path. His long-lost crustacean brothers, the green crabs, often seek shelter from the dangers of the open, and the lobster will undoubtedly skulk and slay any crab that crosses his territory. The lobster will continue this journey of war and security for decades

on end. Protecting his kingdom with full effort. At this point in the lobster's life, he is massive in size, strong in build, sharp in mind, and old in age. And just as his body and mind are in their prime at a ripe age of one hundred, he has one last quarrel to endure: his own skin. As his enormous size grows due to his gifted genetics, the effort it takes to molt grows with it. He is so massive that the exhaustion to escape his own skin is too much, and he meets his inevitable end, being trapped, and suffocated by his own exoskeleton. Mother Nature will always find a way to kill off the seemingly impenetrable, whether it be at the hand of another, or that of your own skin. Nevertheless, at least this American lobster lived a life of adventure, not limited to a boiled feast for the unappreciative.

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Josh Tillman writes: "I am an intended finance major at Penn State, and I am from outside of Philadelphia. This semester I took my first creative writing course, and it sprouted a great interest in creative writing for me. Outside of writing, I enjoy participating in IM sports leagues like football and soccer, I enjoy working out at the Penn State gyms, and I enjoy hanging out with my friends."

Thought Control, by *Emmanuela Eneh*

Sitting in class should be easy enough; even if the teacher's tumbling over words with caffeine-sprung jitters or it's winter and a snow day prayer is lining everyone's lips. Under a light blanket of December's pale finest, with a low drone of heat billowing somewhere in the background, ninth grade history goes on. I, sandwiched in a middle row, keep my eyes so focused on Mr. C's sloshing coffee mug that, even amidst an apocalypse, I'd know which drop was spilled when. Focus is important when there's buzzing in your skull, but I'm not thinking about the mosquito flitting through brain tissue and slurping up mementos to spit them onto my eyelids. I begin to think about my blinking, and that's always perturbing, but it can't be helped—every single shut of my eyes comes with a smackdown flashback to a class that is far less easily acknowledged. And because I've admitted to it, the memory comes in ripples first, then waves. This must be drowning: falling face first into depths of inky-

Hands.

Hands on my thighs pressing in with their yellowed nails and prying for something that isn't theirs.

Hands leaving an eternal ache everywhere they drag themselves.

Hands scratching at my skin because it's blocking them off from tearing me to shreds.

Hands.

I squeeze my knee and turn back to counting coffee drops.

Emmanuel Eneh writes: "I've spent my entire college career trying to figure out how to tell my own story. I avoided non-fiction my whole life, but now I'm using this genre to give life to little, fragmented memories that I set aside a long time ago. My hobbies include gaming when I should probably be asleep, scrolling through fanfiction, and wishing that the bending from Avatar: The Last Airbender existed."

POETRY

Seeds of Nature, *by Jarod Yu*

The whaling sun falls to the sea of wrath
The sky burns gray and black
Krakens and monsters alike spread their tendrils
The thunder a cry for lost sailors

Ships of rain sail for the earth
They hunger for the lands salvation

Some find their home
The safe harbors of blue
Some find towering titans of green
Snapping their vessels in twain

One ship feeds the pink dancers
A peony.

*Jarod Yu is an anthropology and classic and ancient Mediterranean studies major graduating in 2022 with a Bachelor of Arts.
Jarod writes: "Hello I'm Jarod. I enjoy writing what's on my mind."*

I Hope You've Got Corn, by Kira Soricelli

For my Grandfather

I imagine you
Picking me up from school
In that old, gray pickup
You used to tell me could conquer the world.

I imagine you
Pulling over to the side of the road
Next to the vast, bright cornfields,
Smiling at me like I was about to be embarrassed.

I imagine you
With fresh corn crumbles
Dribbling down your face, stuck in your beard,
Your open mouth splashing spit.

I imagine you
Laughing at old westerns,
Tickling me 'til my tummy hurt,
And fascinating us with your fun facts.

I imagine you.
To keep you with me.
Because what else am I to do?

Remember you
As the man in the wheelchair
Who couldn't form a sentence
Let alone offer up advice?

Because at the end of the day,
Disease doesn't care
Who you are
Or happily were.

That's the thing about it:
All the fun facts and fresh corn in the world
Couldn't save you from fading
Into a simple, imagined memory.

Kira Soricelli is an English and criminology major in the Schreyer Honors College at University Park campus. She is from New Jersey, has published works in Penn State's Communities in Crisis: Student Voices on Climate Change, and hopes to become a criminal justice prosecutor.

Confession, by Devon Bogucki

On my way to school that day,
I ran over a baby bird.
His little bones crunched like dry spaghetti and
I back-pedaled to see the corpse

Oh, to flagellate myself a thousand times
for what I'd done!
Inconsolable wailing in the morning
and a blotchy face in PE.

The dead thing rested
all day in my back pack
in the little front pocket, a shameful
hearse.

Back at home we put him in
an empty can of diet coke,
The furnace in which he would be cremated,
I prayed for his soul

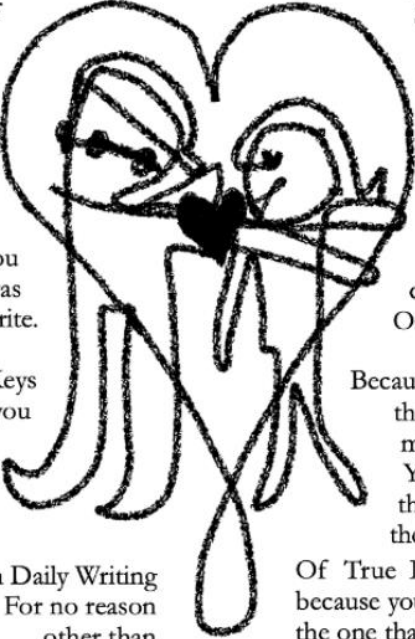
Covered in kindling, the little can blazed.
I tried to honor his memory, but
The smell made my mouth water and
I sobbed hard with guilt

Devon Bogucki is an undecided first-year at Penn State University Park, interested in pursuing an English major. Originally from Northern Virginia, her interests include reading, playing sports, watching movies with friends and writing short stories and poetry. She would describe her writing style as charmingly morbid with a focus on unique imagery. She is honored to be featured in this year's edition of Klio.

For My Father, by Brittany Fisher

For My Father

The smell of fresh
bacon still reminds
me of
You.
Even though
you'd rarely eat
much yourself,
Every Sunday
You'd stand in line
of that grease Fire
just cause you
knew it was
my Favorite.



I couldn't possibly name
every place I see your
Sweet Smile,
since I seem to find
it anywhere
I look.
frozen to muddy
trails, and Cemented
to jagged Sidewalks
You are forever
crusted to the
curves of my
Oatmeal Bowl.

Computer Keys
Remind me of you
too.
Tapping
and
typing

Each Daily Writing
For no reason
other than
Yourself
and I.

Because You're
the One that gave
me These Words.
You're the One
that showed me
the meaning
Of True Love.
because you're
the one that
Always
Stays.

It's funny really,
how so many things remind me of you,
And yet No One has ever come close.

Brittany Fisher is a second year student at University Park studying corporate innovation and entrepreneurship. Her biggest inspiration is Shell Silverstein who inspired her black and white hand drawings alongside her poems. Alongside poetry writing she is a facilitator for World in Conversation at Penn State and is an avid connoisseur of music and cuisine.

Writing Instagram: @ourtakeaways

I Am Enough, by Emmanuela Eneh

Do I terrify?
You may kill me with your hatefulness.
Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I think I know enough of hate.
Some keep the Sabbath going to church;
But I, with silent tread,
I celebrate myself.

[Sylvia Plath
Maya Angelou
Maya Angelou
Robert Frost
Emily Dickinson
Walt Whitman
Walt Whitman]

Emmanuela Eneh is a third-year English major at University Park. She writes: "My hobbies include gaming when I should probably be asleep, scrolling through fanfiction, and wishing that the bending from Avatar: The Last Airbender existed. When I write poetry, I try to use tidbits of my own experiences as a jumping off point for all the words."

Return to the Earth, *by Liria Burgos*

Covered in soil, hidden in the meadow.
With my shovel and flowers
seated in the shade of the Ginko.

I wipe my hands down my torso.
My shovel lies amongst the grass,
Covered in soil, hidden in the meadow.

This is life's quid pro quo.
What was taken I have returned
Seated in the shade of the Ginko.

Upon the wind's whispers dance the crows.
The swoop towards my flowers
Covered in soil, hidden in the meadow.

The land is gorgeous, and the sun is high. Although,
I am not at peace today,
Seated in the shade of the Ginko.

I must clean the red stains on my patio.
I'll take my shovel and leave the man
Covered in soil, hidden in the meadow,
Seated in the shade of the Ginko

Liria Burgos is a second year majoring in secondary social studies education at University Park. She writes: "I find the most enjoyment in participating in winter sports, namely skiing and snowboarding, as well as hiking and enjoying nature. I greatly enjoy writing, though I don't have much time for it, and hope I can incorporate it into my life as much as possible in the years to come."

The Ones Above, by Corey McQuade

Air sweet like tanghulu,
Wind still like metal rods beaten into the ground.

Large jagged birds circle above,
Their wings glisten in the warm sunlight.

An omen.

Mothers gather fresh water from the little stream flowing through town,
Kids play in their broken shoes and dirtied pants.

Bright pink symphonies surround us,
Sprouting cherry blossoms that smell oh so pleasant.

A crack comes from above,
It breaks the serenity.

The birds don't look like themselves,
Something is falling.

Like an angel it descends,
So graceful.

It has writing,
All eyes are focused on it.

It reads,
"Little Boy"¹

It falls so fast,
Time is so slow.

But,
But I'm not ready yet...

¹"Little Boy" was the codename for the atomic bomb dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 during World War II.

Corey McQuade is a current student at Penn State University Park who is pursuing his PH.D within the English field. He is originally from Philadelphia and came to Penn State in hopes of becoming an English professor.

Shanghai Bookstore, by Brian Liu

My hands on half-turned pages,
my shoulder hugs the plaster side
of the endless hollow hallways
luminous with fluorescent light.

Just outside the sun's embrace
in this empty insulated space.
It's so late that even rain
comes tapping at the door,
wandering, looking for
a warmer place to stay.

I open the windows,
and let the poor thing in

Looks like it has nowhere else to go
but here, at the edge of the world,
under a sky without stars
on a night dark as crows

Brian Liu is a senior studying computer science at University Park. He writes: "I have always been a bit interested in creative writing, but I truly got into the hobby when I joined the Creative Writing Club here at PSU. I'm a big fan of dark fantasy, supernatural fiction, and stories with happy endings. But don't let me start talking about shows or games that I like; the conversation could last for days."

A Lament on a Summer's Day, by Andrew Roland

Though the sun does shine
Its warm rays upon my back
And the larks and doves
With chirping voices sing
Still, I toil in the field

A mellow, refreshing zephyr
Threatens to carry me away
On some flight of fancy
Or lull me into a gentle sleep
Still, I toil in the field

Cotton ball clouds invite me
To lay myself on the grass
To watch as they dance
Shifting their shapes
Still, I toil in the field

A nearby brook tempts me
To swim in its cool waters
Carrying away my cares
As it babbles on its way
Still, I toil in the field

Dapper-dressed rakes and
Garland-crowned girls
Call out for me to revel
Beside them in the village
Still, I toil in the field

The Summer's Day strolls
With carelessly indolent step
As I with weary and tired legs
March off to the Moon's respite
Tomorrow also, I shall toil in the field

The Summer's sun is for the children
For the many frivolities of youth
Because the young have no idea
That the Winter's wind is not so forgiving

For a shred of its mercy, I must toil in the field

Andrew is a junior in the Integrated Master's of Accounting program from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He is the THON Chair of the Newman Catholic Student Association and a member of the Tau Phi Delta Fraternity.

Short Circuit, by Alexis Altimont

Dark blue night life.
The rusty glow of the streetlights.
Grimy, musty, icy
Until the warmth from your basement
Melts me.

It takes me until I am liquified
To notice my drumming heart and-
I'm crowded.

Will they see
Me as Phony
Like the smile I'm wearing.

You ask me something
My heart thumping distracts me
You ask me again
I freeze.

Your eyes are darts,
That strike mine,
Dim and smokey and gorgeous
I feel ill. I am dazed.

Not thinking.
Stares from the crowd,
But in the protection of,
Your gaze.

Why am I here
Again?

Alexis Altimont is a fourth-year media studies and film/television major with a minor in digital media trends and analytics at University Park. She enjoys to read and write as well as watch and analyze film. Her hobbies include doing stand-up, improv and sketch comedy as well as freelance videography and photography.
Instagram: @alexisaltimont

Morning Bells, by Leah Hutchinson



Bring the bountiful beauty of a new day,

As the light bestowed upon me, I rest.
The butterflies billowing in the breeze,

As to sample some sweet nectar, they hope.
The sky but a bright baby blue,

As if rebirth is to be promised.
Bring back these blissful memories,

As to my heart, I hold them close.

Leah Hutchinson is currently dual-enrolled at the Penn State Fayette/Eberly campus. In the fall, she will be a nursing student with an expected graduation year of 2026. She enjoys painting, writing, kayaking, riding ATVS and participating in performing arts. She was born in Palmer, AK, and moved to PA in the third grade. She plans to go into midwifery and stay active in the community and theater.

October Nostalgia, by Masy Arnoldy

silhouettes of branches mock the sky,
and they block the pinks and oranges from eyes' view.

air is bitter, not cold.
it takes breaths away and doesn't allow you to inhale new.

october is a time capsule.
its smell is one that is familiar and learned.

withering corn fields and crow calls give you joy,
for you know that the old memories will soon return.

your smile was permanent,
like the candy apples that stained your teeth.

plaid jackets covered your shoulders,
and the crimson leaves crushed beneath your feet.

you run like the children that fall in the gravel,
a single band aid fixes all.

trickling tears are wiped for them,
for they are pitied for being small.

the sweet melody sung by the sparrows
is now drowned by the sound of null.

your taste buds no longer desire pleasant sugar,
for they are now just motivated by being full.

reminiscence is your source of youth,
it's why you are alive.

and you remember what they always told you:
the grass is not always greener on the other side.

Masy Arnoldy is a current first year at University Park and is majoring in secondary education, considering a minor in creative writing, and is an avid member of the Penn State University Park cheerleading team. She is from West Grove, Pennsylvania and aspires to be a high school English teacher.

The Warmest Tone of Blue, by Thiago Rego

Here I am about to jump,
The water, flowing through my toes,
down the waterfall,
A gentle, chilly, touch
As the water covers my feet
Crashing over the rocks and down the lake.

I jump. A suffocating gasp for air,
Anxiety is poking my lungs.
The splash in the deep blue lake,
My body, immersed in silence.
I can feel every pore in my skin,
My mind keeps drifting away.

As I am sinking,
I feel the soft touch of the algae.
The heatwave of the moment makes me forget
The ice-cold water of the lake.
My body begins floating to the surface,
I look up to the blue-gray sky.

I see big red leaves playing with the wind,
gently landing on the surface of the water.
The vivid contrast of red and blue.
To my side, there are big maple trees,
The squirrels collecting nuts from the tree,
For a long winter ahead of them.

As I float serenely in the frosty lake,
I feel my body warming up,
As the lake stops waving after my jump.
I take deep breaths that fill my lungs
With the smell of my surroundings,
The smell of wet grass, warm air, and cold water.

My eyes slowly close,
Focusing to calm my thoughts
And the shaking from the cold.
I have nowhere to be, nothing to do,
Other than enjoying the moment,
my mind relaxes as I begin to rest.

Thiago Rego is a second-year finance major at University Park from Sao Paulo, Brazil. He writes: "My favorite book is Walden by Henry David Thoreau, and my favorite movie is Dead Poets Society. It's a huge achievement in my life to be writing and submitting a short story in my second language to a literary journal. I have been writing short stories and poems since I was 9 and I fell in love with them ever since!"

Old Lions Die Alone, *by Lance Colet*

Once, he had been king.

He had lazed while others hunted,
and still gorged himself on the choice bits of prey.

He had snarled, and others obeyed,
for his regality spoke for itself.

His violent potential had been palpable,
but there was no need to unleash tooth or claw.

Until the flame of the usurper flared up,
and he was called to action,
and he was driven away,
and his cubs were eaten,
and his legacy vanished.

Now he lazed again,
a king without a throne.
Indifferent to the vultures
for he had always known
the natural end to any reign:
Old lions die alone.

Lance Colet is a third year at Penn State pursuing a major in economics and minors in psychology and creative writing.

Setae Maintenance, by Seth Paul

setae maintenance

he calls, and all i hear on his tongue
are three syllables, low, sweet, and calm:
lo – li – ta.

i know he sees me as larva,
coquettish nymphet,
precluding butterfly wings to pin.
no need to clip what has not grown
out, like breasts or hips or sense,
but i listen on as the video call continues
because i clicked the button
saying i was over eighteen
when i was eleven, as what is one and one
to do? not wish to be understood
as an equal? but this is a child

who has avoided every sign and wound up
with some wound up humbert humbert,
humiliating when it dawns
that he clearly saw i was not adult content.
perhaps this was an incorrect comparison,
as dolores was not trying to flirt,
was not flitting her eyeball for
a tongue to sweep across it.

however, i think the older in both
scenarios were one to one in how wrong
they were, though the perspective
fails to make me look favorable.

Seth Paul is a second year majoring in secondary education at University Park. With stolen Pennsylvanian valor, Seth Paul lives in Pittsburgh when not on campus. He writes poetry and creative non-fiction, using movie references and obscure history learned from his quizbowl team to build unsettling and unfamiliar atmospheres in his writing.

The Butterfly Effect, by Brittany Fisher

The Butterfly Effect

With Eloquence
And Grace
The Caterpillar Turns.

From a shriveled worm
To One of Natures
Boldest Pollinators,
One must wonder
if It is born Knowing
Its Fate

or if,
One Day,
It Sets Down for a quiet Nap
oblivious to the fact,
That by Tomorrow
It will Wake

Never to be the Same Again.



B. Fisher

Brittany Fisher is a second-year student at University Park studying corporate innovation and entrepreneurship. Her biggest inspiration is Shell Silverstein who inspired her black and white hand drawings alongside her poems. Alongside poetry writing she is a facilitator for World in Conversation at Penn State and is an avid connoisseur of music and cuisine.

A Falling Leaf, by Leah Hutchinson

Look upon a simple leaf.

See the gold green gashes upon the surface.
The scars of its life, each has a story.

Hear the wistful winds that weaken the grasp.

A falling leaf it now becomes.
A graceful fall it shall venture.

But the journey ends, as it's caught by the coarse cold ground.

One it becomes with the earth, to once again flourish in the fruitful future.

Leah Hutchinson is currently dual-enrolled at the Penn State Fayette/Eberly campus. In the fall, she will be a nursing student with an expected graduation year of 2026. She enjoys painting, writing, kayaking, riding ATVs and participating in performing arts. She was born in Palmer, AK, and moved to PA in the third grade. She plans to go into midwifery and stay active in the community and theater.

Ma at the Farmer's Market, by Maggie Dickinson-Sherry

On summery Saturday mornings my mother
strolls through sunshine picking
the perfect plum with a
scrutinizing eye,
and long fingers that stroke
the blackened skin as if
the fruit were an ancient textile
broken out of a museum's
glass display case.

I believe it is an art form
to be able to squish a small fruit,
so tender, so juice-heavy in
the sticky August heat,
and know how it will taste
tomorrow sliced over oatmeal
with a sprinkle of Stevia and
a cup of black coffee on the side.

Maggie Dickinson-Sherry is a third-year student at Penn State majoring in English and minoring in gender studies. She writes: "This semester I have the honor of serving as both Music Editor and Kalliope Liaison here at Klio. You can also find me over at Klio's sister magazine, Kalliope, where I am the Arts Coordinator. I have loved poetry my entire life; some of my favorite poets include Robert Frost, e.e. cummings, and Sylvia Plath."

I Said I'd Come Back, by Gabriella Surovcik

the sound of an ever-present lullaby
still lingers between the linen curtains-
long elegant gowns of a musty off-white
swaying through an open windowsill
like dancing ghosts
waltzing to a melody of windchimes
a red cardinal observes from a tree branch
sitting, singing a silent song
of distant memories, so long ago
you're still alive—
how unfortunate is it to have survived?

Gabriella Surovcik is a sophomore pursuing a B.S. in Biobehavioral Health with minors in Human Development and Neuroscience at University Park and plans to become a physician. She is from the Lehigh Valley, PA, having grown up a small town that no one recognizes unless from the area. Her hobbies include dancing, reading, writing poetry, and enjoying the outdoors. She is involved with Volé dance company on campus and enjoys the performing arts.

Arson, by J.D

When I said goodbye I'm not sure if I truly meant it.
It was empty and cold,
like a hearth without loving kindling to ignite
Our hearth was fantastical and it burned passionately.
There wasn't enough wood in all the forests that could satiate its hunger
Our hearth was forgiving,
And it grew experienced with age.
Regretfully,
Nothing is permanent.
Even the hottest of furnaces dim without fuel for the flame.
Our hearth became depraved.
Decrepit and deceitful.
Rusted over and inefficient.
I'd come to realize that we'd coddled the arsonist.
Our hearth, our home, was crafted from nothing and returned to nothing.
Regretfully,
Nothing truly *is* permanent.

J.D. is a freshman majoring in Aerospace Engineering and Astrophysics at University Park. He writes: "I love the arts (most specifically music), but thought I'd take a shot at poetry. Poetry has become a form of therapy for me and my friends recommended that I start to share, so here we are!"

A Night at the Fair, by Maggie Dickinson-Sherry

You could see the lights from a mile away,
a cyberspace landscape
dusted with funnel cake sugar
and cigarette ashes.

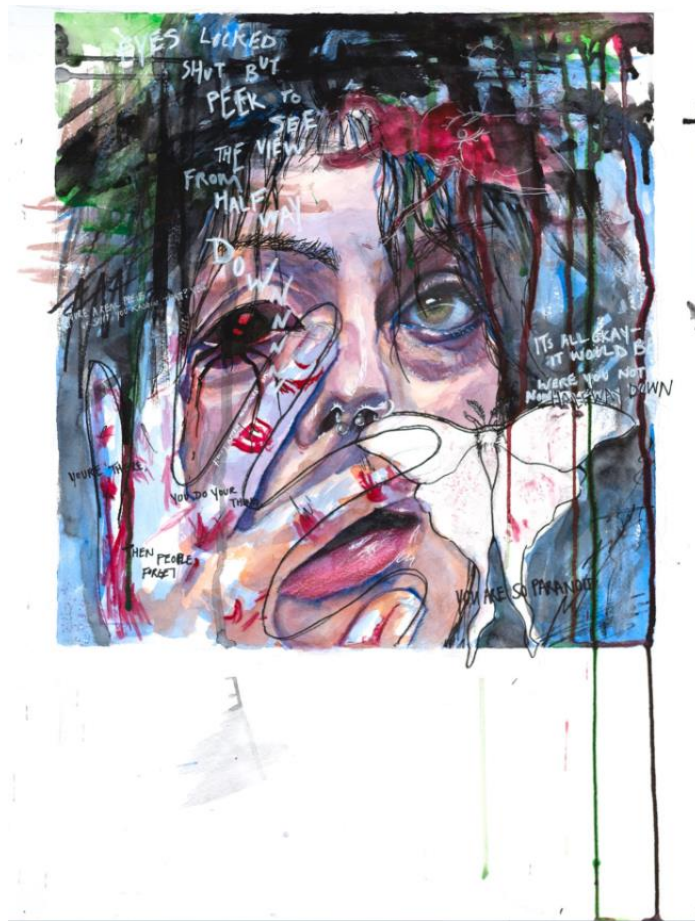
I counted the colors:
candy-coated pink and green for the slides,
an acidic yellow for the lemonade stand,
red and blue bled together to make purple
as the ferris wheel spun.

Ma squeezed my hand and said,
“Stay close.”
It was easy for a small child
to get lost among the fluorescence,
and the fog of passing patrons,
and the festival of stars sparkling
above us in the abyss of night.

Maggie Dickinson-Sherry is a third-year student at University Park majoring in English and minoring in gender studies. She writes: “This semester I have the honor of serving as both Music Editor and Kalliope Liaison here at Klio. You can also find me over at Klio’s sister magazine, Kalliope, where I am the Arts Coordinator. I have loved poetry my entire life; some of my favorite poets include Robert Frost, e.e. cummings, and Sylvia Plath.”

ART

Paranoia, by Samantha Lilley



Samantha Lilley (Sammi—she/they) is a sophomore earning a Drawing and Painting BFA at Penn State University Park. Sammi writes: “I’ve been doing art my entire life and have always used it as an outlet for getting my own thoughts and emotions off of my chest. Outside of doing art, I love performing! I sing a lot and dance sometimes too.”

Starshine, by Samantha Lilley



Dissociation (2022 KLIO cover), by Samantha Lilley

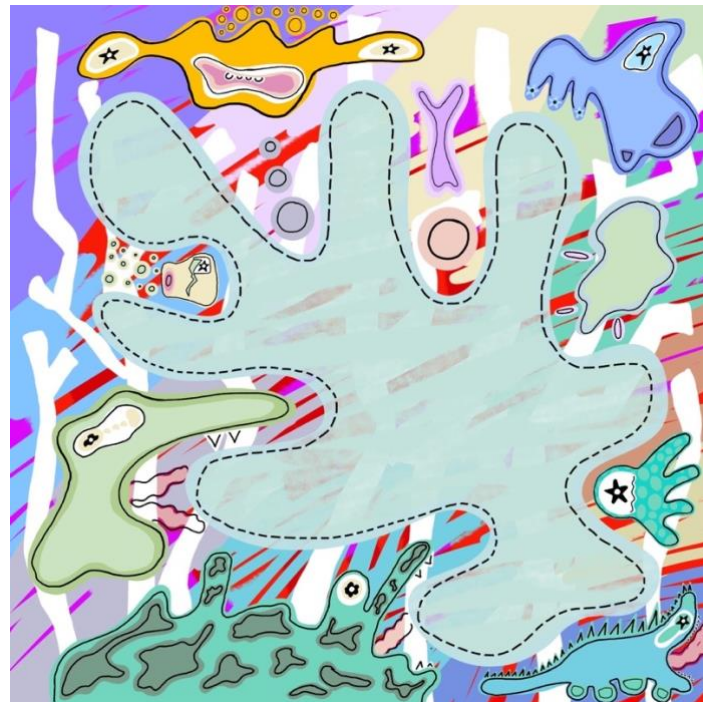


Roses, by Johanna Pitner



Johanna Pitner is a public relations major with a passion for all things art and photography. She took AP art courses in high school and said she proud to have had some of her artwork displayed in the State Museum of Pennsylvania after receiving a Gold and Silver Scholastic Award for her 2-D Drawing and Photography work. She currently runs her own side business for her art and photography services. She can be found on Instagram @johannarosephotos.

City and Green, by Rithu GS



Rithu GS (she/her) is a current undergraduate student in marketing and telecommunications at Penn State, University Park.
Instagram: [@rithu_gs](https://www.instagram.com/rithu_gs)

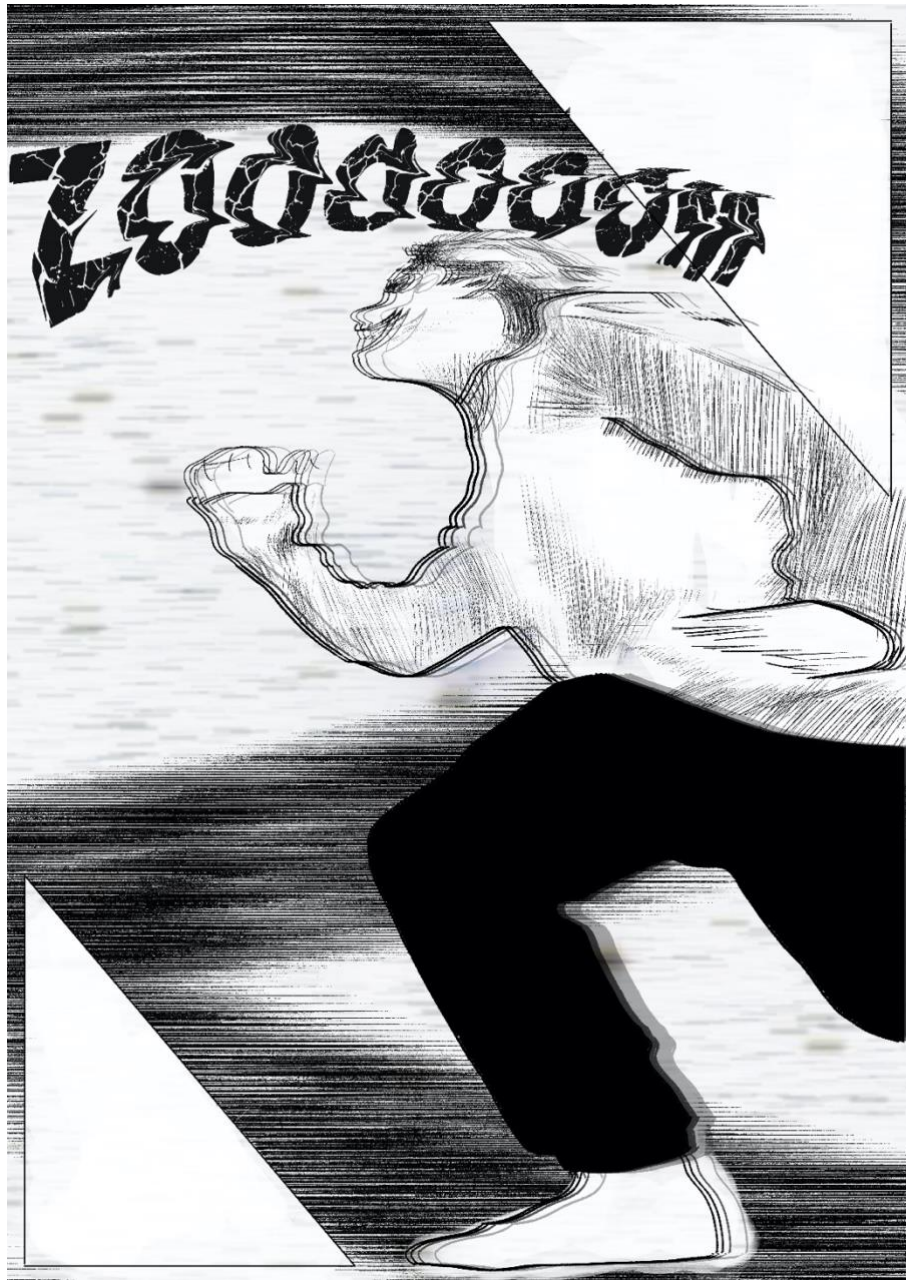
War and Life, by Louie Mitchell



Louie Mitchell (he/him) is a current undergraduate in the class of 2024 studying English at Penn State University Park.
Tiktok: @thoppin

Thoppin Series, by Louie Mitchell

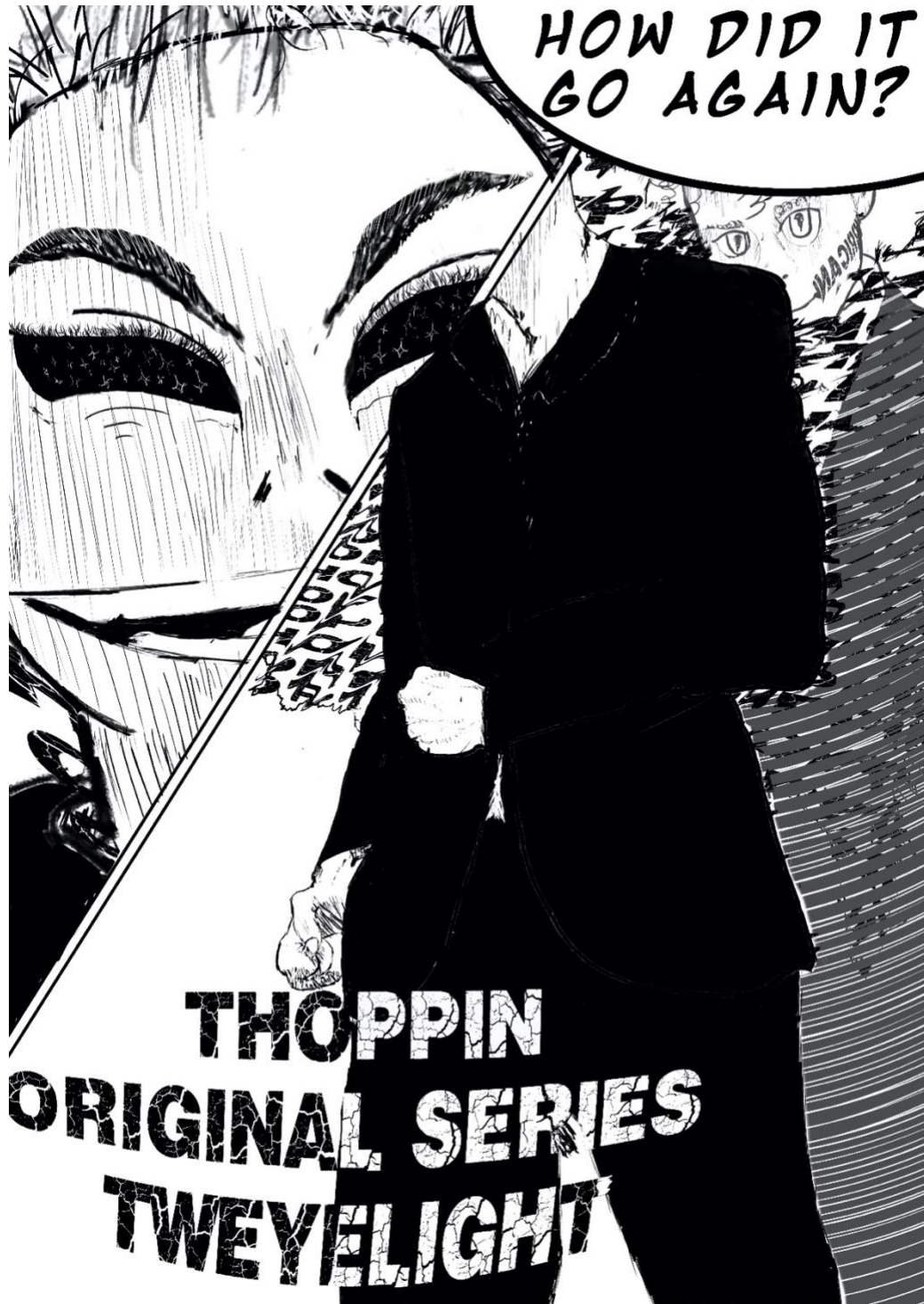
Thoppin Running



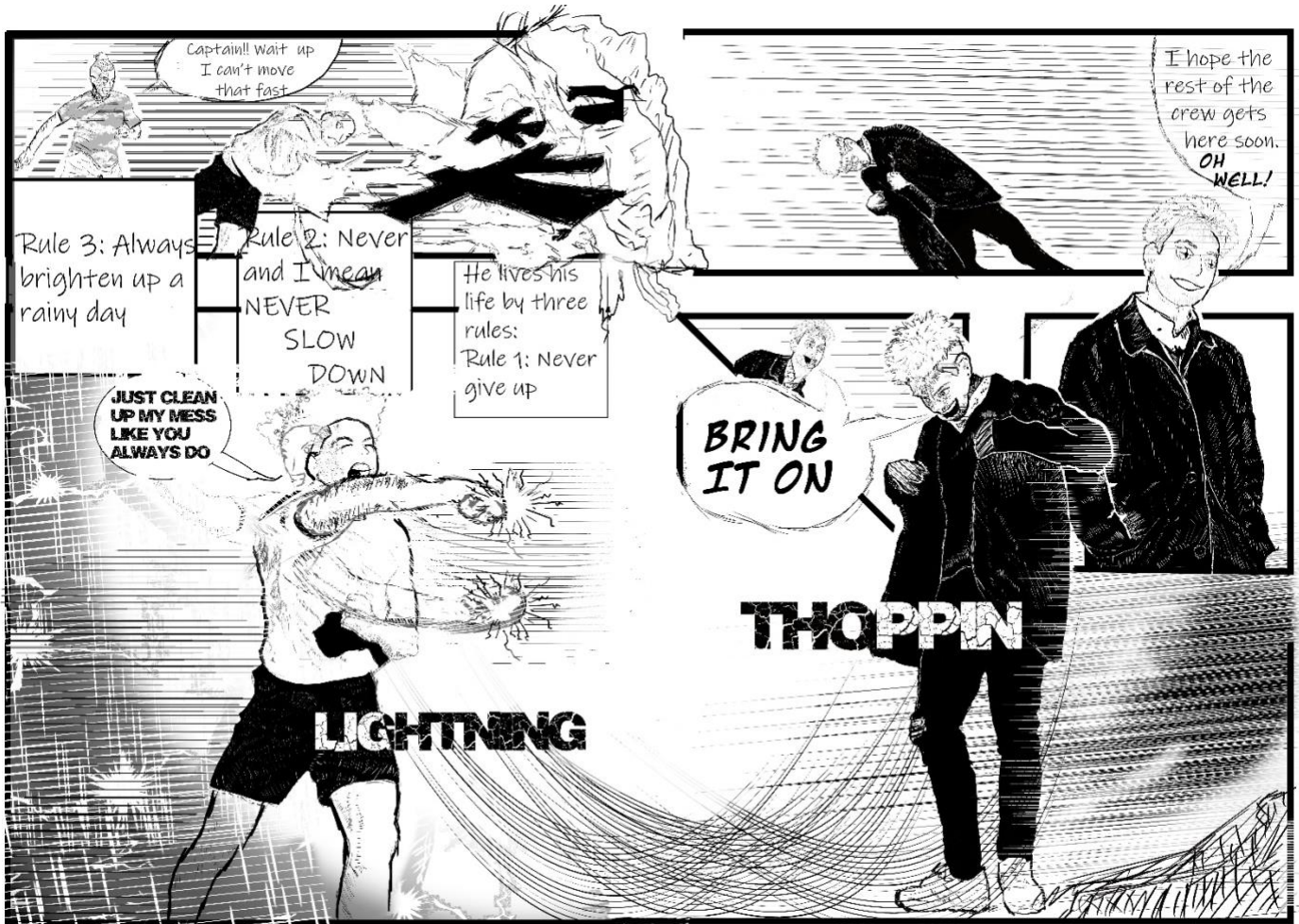
Thoppin Egg



Thoppin Clapping Back Final



Lightning vs. Thoppin



An Enigma, by Iman Siddiq



Iman Siddiq is currently a second-year Architecture Major from Dallas, Texas. Iman writes: "I have always loved art and have found it to be one of the most joyful and calming ways to express my creativity. Trying to find my style has also helped me understand myself and my personality, which is one of the reasons I love to experiment with different mediums and techniques."

Tiger's Eye, by Iman Siddiq



Tree of Luck, by Iman Siddiq



Moment, by Danielle D'Amico



Danielle D'Amico is a first-year medical student at the Penn State College of Medicine at UP. She is from NJ and humbly apologizes for this. In her ample free time, Dani enjoys reading the types of books that schools ban from their shelves, picking up heavy things and placing them back down without throwing out her back, and rearranging plants on her single windowsill to make room for new ones she probably shouldn't have bought.

Lyssa, by Danielle D'Amico



MUSIC

Ky Fantiago



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Hailing from Penn State's Altoona campus, Kiane Doughlin, otherwise known as Ky Fantiago, is a junior majoring in Criminal Justice who makes rap music. His main goal is to have Fantiago a known name somewhere.

Francis Villanueva



[Stream Francis Villanueva music](#)

[Listen to songs, albums, playlists for free on Soundcloud](#)

Francis Villanueva is not just a senior at Penn State majoring in Secondary Social Studies Education, but he is also a rockstar. Francis plays keyboard and sings in a rock band called Wicked Scoundrel, and uses FL Studio to produce his own original music that he uploads to SoundCloud. His favorite song of his is "Fusion", which was fashioned out of a medley of his best friend's favorite songs and given as a Christmas present. Besides creating music, Francis' favorite things are music theory and helping people.