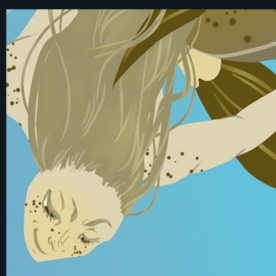
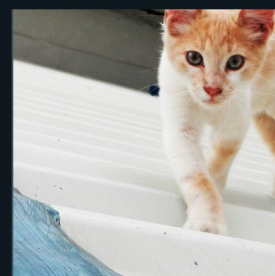


EQUINOX



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Literary & Arts Magazine

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About the Magazine

Equinox is the literary and arts magazine that is exclusive to the Campus Honors Program of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It was created, organized, and published by Campus Honors Program students.

The mission of *Equinox* is to share the artistic and creative talents of Campus Honors Program members. Its name, borrowed from astronomy, reflects this mission: the vernal and autumnal equinoxes are days of the year when day and night are seen equally. The duality of day and night reflects the balance between academic and artistic achievement among Campus Honors Program scholars.

Acknowledgements

Equinox extends thanks to all submission reviewers and editors for collecting, reviewing, and selecting submissions for publication in this second issue.

We also thank the CHP Computer Administrators—Zach Brewer, Tej Chajed, Sanjit Dutta, and Alex Kordas—for their assistance in making this issue an online publication, the Honors Student Council for co-sponsoring the release party, and all of our student contributors for making this magazine such a success.

Finally, we wish to thank the Campus Honors Program and JM Software, Inc., of Indianapolis for their assistance in making printed publication possible.

Your dedication, time, and contributions were invaluable in the continuation of the magazine. *Equinox* Issue #2 could not have been created without you!

People

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 Works (left to right)

Top Row: Ethel Liao, Olivia Altmayer, Grace Deetjen
 Middle Row: Ryan Woods, Nathan Stables, Erik Kountz
 Bottom Row: Samantha Fuchs, Clara Mount, Jessica Chen

Letter from the Editors

Hello, you charming, wonderful, and spectacular people! We know that you are all charming, wonderful, and spectacular people, because in your hands you hold the second issue of *Equinox*, the Literary and Arts Magazine of the Campus Honors Program!

(Hold for Applause.)

(I can't hear you applauding.)

(Oh wait, I'm an inanimate piece of paper with writing on it. And yet a little voice in your head is repeating everything I say...)

Tangents into the metaphysical aside, this issue is the continuation of a project started two years ago for Chancellor's Scholars to demonstrate their creativity outside of the classroom in a way distinct from the numerous academic awards they have received. We began the initial research for a literary magazine all the way back in 2012 (such history) and were both proud and delighted to find other like-minded people who wanted to create something awesome. The inaugural issue was a huge success, combining art of all mediums and poetry and prose of all different styles. Every contributor brings something unique to the magazine, making it a delight to read.

After that, well, there was no stopping momentum. (Physics joke!)

With a vastly increased editing and reviewing team, two fantastic Managing Editors, a brilliant Editor-in-Chief (beloved dictator), and even more CHP student contributors, there are more people than ever (AKA, more people than last year) working to create the beautiful magazine you see before you.

We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed creating it.

And now, without further ado,

we present to you,

Equinox Issue #2!

(It's a literary magazine! We can rhyme!)

Sincerely,

Samantha Fuchs, *Editor-in-Chief*

Clara Mount, *Managing Writing Editor*

Ethel Liao, *Managing Art Editor*

I. Non-Fiction Prose

An Autopsy Report Gone Awry

Samantha George

I must admit that I don't really know what I'm talking about. All I have are these thoughts. And these thoughts don't do much for you. These thoughts are quite self-indulgent, for I must believe them to have some significance if I'm writing them down. That explains why I'm writing these thoughts out. Or attempting to write these thoughts out. Once the words are written, once I attempt to form my thoughts to match the words, they aren't thoughts anymore. They're words in the guise of thought. And these aren't really my thoughts. These are just my attempts to transcribe thought. The attempts vary in success. Sometimes I look at the transcribed thoughts and think "not bad," but other times I can only shrink away from the attempts in distaste. That is not what I meant to say at all; that is not what I meant to say.

If it were up to me, I most likely wouldn't be writing this. I would just sit here and brood, and I would never have to put my thoughts forth into a realm other than my mind. And then the thoughts would just bounce around in my head, their elastic forms changing with every successive jostle. Their life spans are short, but they have this strange habit of appearing and disappearing in irregular cycles. A thought may re-surface at any time and remain for any duration. Most of them are drudgery, tepid snippets of past monologues, but there are a few trains of thought that give me hope. They come and go so quickly, leaving me with a sense of nostalgia. Those are brief moments when I can breathe freely and my mind feels unfettered from the mundane occurrences, monotonous thoughts, and meager restitutions. Ephemeral revelations keep me on my toes. I wish to capture those moments of something and draw them out as slowly as possible.

Maybe that's why I'm writing. I wish to pin down those evanescent images with words. The words are not light enough, though, not delicate enough to pin down the thoughts without marring their meaning in the process. And I have not the dexterity to handle the words or the thoughts with the care they deserve. But I'll attempt to do so anyway, ignoring the fact that whatever I do end up writing will just be a pale corpse of what the thoughts once were.

There are lessons to be learned from cadavers, though. It's done all the time. Autopsies preview the bodies that could not be saved so that others may attempt to know. Every word that appears can point to a cause of death and a life once lived. We are constantly exchanging the autopsy reports we've compiled thus far, editing and adding as we read the reports of others. The report is interminable, spanning before one's birth, and will be unending, reaching into the future with long tendrils that grasp and wither as they move forward.

We want to know. We want to know everything, every aspect of the death,

every symptom of sickness, because we want to see if there's anything we can do to cure our own condition. We're sick. We've been sick for a while. We are all afflicted by the same illness and we seem to know what it is but not how to cure it. We'll continue to search for the cure, though. We'll spend our time thumbing through the autopsy reports of other peoples' thoughts and hoping the answer will appear in their words. We'll continue to speak to each other, speak to ourselves, write down our thoughts, read others' thoughts, all the while keeping a record of the corpses. We've kept track of the failed attempts to find meaning. We've kept track of the numerous attempts to assuage the sickness.

Thoughts from the Graveyard

Olivia Altmayer

It's cold outside, really cold, so when heading out on my journey I was sure to suit up in the winter regulars: long pants, long-sleeved shirt, winter coat (the really heavy kind), hat, gloves, and scarf as well as snow boots. I pretty much looked like a marshmallow, except blue. Over the last few weeks I had been on so many journeys, and after each I felt that I had been changed in some way. Thinking about journeys, I began to think of life, just the mere act of living, as a journey. Consider: after each second of breathing we are changed in some way, even if we sleep or remain in a frozen state for hours on end. There will always be some obstacle to overcome, some boundary to cross, and it's all just a part of living; something so common to each of us, that unless sensational, isn't normally even noticed. This got me to thinking about the end of a journey, and if a journey ever truly ends at all. I guess if a journey is superficial and only spans from point A to point B, then maybe it does indeed have an end. But what of the journey that transcends one person and touches many? I believe that the journey of life is just that, transcendence; for when someone dies, they do not end. Their memories and legacy are carried on for years, maybe even forever.

With all this in mind, I decided that the best place to go on a journey would be to pay a visit to one of my favorite locations, the cemetery. Now let me clarify; I don't love the cemetery because I have some close relative or friend that has died whom I like to visit, and I really have no particular favorite. I am rather drawn by an atmosphere which I have not been able to find in any other location. Since I was young, I have always seen some sort of magic in the graves, been interested in the stories lurking beneath the ground. There is a sense of calm and serenity which draws me in. That, and the lovely trees. Cemeteries are even more hauntingly beautiful in the winter, despite feeling more "dead" than usual. But in some ways, that only makes them more alive. The fallen leaves strewn beneath the snow are just like the bodies planted under the ground. They are individuals, unique, but with the passage of time break down until they are all part of Earth. It is an image echoed in the hibernating trees, in that, though the life may have left them for a time, it promises to return again, perhaps in an even greater capacity than before. In fact, maybe the life never leaves at all, but is always just dwelling quietly beneath the bark. In spring, as everything grows anew once again, the beauty and life are restored, only to enter the cycle of living and dying over and over, again and again. Sometimes that can be a hard thing to remember, especially in the midst of winter's despondence. The life cycle after all is a complex system and can be quite a demanding journey. As sad as they may be, illness and death also often-times work to bring people together. I have witnessed people unite in the face of death and it helps shed light on a dark situation to see loved ones doing what the deceased

would have wanted. On the flip side, I have seen people crumble in times of inexplicable tragedy and there is nothing more heart-wrenching than that. Cemeteries are places for people to come together at the instance of being torn apart, but they can also serve as a place to come alone, to be with your thoughts and with those who are now only in your heart. The graveyard can be more than just a place of the dead. It has the potential to be a place to learn from yourself or from those whom you love. It can be a place of emotional release, a place of history, a place of death as well as life. Cemeteries are an integral part of the journey, neither end nor beginning but instead a part of the body, a part of the life. It is not the granite gravestones, nor the cold hard ground which hold the keys to the past, the keys to our ancestors, or the keys to humanity. They just help us to unlock the door within ourselves, with the keys we have been in possession of all along.

For going somewhere that I frequent often, thinking about journeys really added a new level to my exploration of the cemetery and made me more driven in my purpose. It made me think about the journey of life and my place in this world, as well as my duty as a human. I found myself thinking about the vastness of the amount of people touched by death, and reminded me of the importance of being respectful to both the deceased and their survivors. Sometimes there are stories buried in cemeteries which need not be uncovered, having been laid to rest for a reason. I have learned that some things are better left untouched, for all that lies beneath the surface to be discovered is pain and tragedy. A place that had started as an end for me had proven, over the course of my musings on my Sunday afternoon walk, that it could be equally considered a beginning. If I go and remember those who have passed, even without knowing them, their legacy lives on and they are not forgotten. There is a strange sort of mutual benefit from the exchange. My journey helped bring back the true meaning of the cemetery that I have grown to romanticize over the course of my lifetime. With one of my worst fears being to have a meaningless life and be forgotten after I die, it is comforting to know that the graveyard is much more than a bottomless pit. As someone who wants to impact the world for the better, I have come to view the cemetery as a place which offers its inhabitants the chance to live on, through the graves which on the surface may seem to contain them. There is not an end in death, but a new opportunity; cemeteries invoke belief at their core and show me that if I still care, others will too. Some shy away from death, but I don't think that's what scares me; it's the vastness of the cycle and getting lost in the masses that are most frightening to me. But like I've learned, it's all just a part of the journey. It will not be me who decides my life, but the journey of life that will take me, wherever that may be.

Ultimately, I got what I came for. Peace of mind, solace, and shared memories. I reached my destination, but as usual wound up much deeper than I'd ever have imagined. The cold didn't faze me and wasn't even close at hand once I really opened my

6 ♦ Non-Fiction Prose

eyes to the power of the place I was in. This journey was for him, but I ended up being the primary beneficiary. There is comfort in knowing he still matters to me, matters enough for me to trek out in the snow just to pay a visit and contemplate life for a while. For the man who taught me to think, to question, and to find the meaning in everything around me, I think I did him justice in my journey today. I softly uttered the words I had come to say: “Thanks for the inspiration,” to the stone, to the past, to anyone bothering to listen. Purpose fulfilled, I turned on my heel and returned the way I came, following in the footsteps of those who came before me.

Dedicated to Daniel Horyn, 1979 – 2013.

That One Time We Were Words

Samantha George

There was once a time when I firmly believed that words were merely the servants of thought. Annoying, inefficient, beautifully inadequate servants whose only purpose was to convey my thoughts to others—that's what I believed words to be. I read them; I wrote them; I spoke them. They were unavoidable. I believed myself to have complete mastery over them, not in the sense that I could masterfully wield words to convey thought and relay meaning, but in the sense that I felt some sense of superiority over them.

Silly words, I thought, you know nothing of what I know. You have no sense of self. But I, I am a conscious, self-aware being who now requires you to come forth from whatever realm you hail from and assist me in my endeavors. Perhaps the words didn't appreciate being addressed in such a manner, for they surely did not assist me in my endeavors.

For I have certainly failed. My failure is not the result of action or inaction on my part. It was inevitable; it was existence. And such an existence automatically induces failure. Sometimes we believe we've accomplished meaning, that we've succeeded in ascribing significance to something, to ourselves, but it's an illusory belief. We circle about significance, attempting to reach out for it, but we can never touch it. I always thought that it would just take time to reach significance and that it would occur eventually, if not as soon as I'd hoped. I'm beginning to wonder, though, if it's even there, this meaning, or if I'm just reaching out for an absent presence.

So, as I pace about, stalking meaning as a predator stalks prey, I can't help but feel that it's futile. I call upon the servants, the words, to make sense of these revelations for me, and I'm struck by the idea that they are my equals, if not my superiors. Just as I circle about an absent significance, they circle about the tenuous centers of thoughts and ideas that tend to deteriorate before they are fully conceived.

We seem to be inextricably bound to language by language. We are words; we are signs, struggling to make sense of failed meaning. We turn to the servants we once thought to be inadequate and find that they may be better off than we are. They have grown accustomed to their condition. They know how to handle the failure; we do not. They have been fashioned in a way that allows them to accept the failure inherent in their design. They are devoid of consciousness. They have no worrying thoughts; they have no minds to worry. They need not concern themselves with the state of their physical forms either. They latch onto the existence of whatever medium is available, be it ink, dirt, paint, voice. They need not worry about the dilapidation of flesh or the deterioration of bone.

We, on the other hand, feel the need to worry about such things. We are at a

disadvantage. We have yet to grow accustomed to the idea that perhaps mankind is not destined for success or perpetually progressive progress. Over the years, humankind has worked itself into a frenzy of failure-defiance. Look at us, the humans say: we can write words, we can think thoughts, we can make progress, we have opposable thumbs. We claim consciousness as a prized possession and are in awe of the machinations of the body that could allow for such a thing. We are amazed by ourselves, by the complexities of mind and body, but there is something we must realize.

In the end, all the external (and to some extent, internal) appurtenances of humans can be whittled away to reveal that we are merely words and signs. As words, we fit quite nicely into the system of signifier and signified.¹ The signifier is the “physical” composition of the word itself, a jumble of letters and phonemes: the “sound-image.” The signified is the meaning, the thing or idea referred to by the signifier. The signifier is fairly stable, but the signified changes constantly; the meaning varies from person to person within different contexts.

Our existence is the signifier; our thoughts, the signified. Existence provides us with a physical frame that allows for the mechanisms of thought. It is the sound-image of ourselves; however, instead of being comprised of a jumble of letters and phonemes, we have a tangle of tissues and tendons to call our own. With our signifier we need a signified—we need meaning—otherwise the jumble of tendons and tissues would make no sense. And so there are thoughts.

Thoughts are meaning; they are airy, insubstantial centers around which we attempt to stabilize our “selves.” The thoughts are always changing; they seem to dismantle themselves before they are fully conceived. Since the thoughts, the signifieds, are so unstable, we cannot define ourselves by them. We must, instead, find definition in a chain of signifiers, a chain of existences that are external to ourselves. We must rely on the presence of others, other words, fellow humans, higher beings, who can perceive our own existence and give us substance. Our thoughts have failed us in this sense; we had to resort to the material, the empirical, for sustenance.

It’s odd. Even though we cannot be comprised of thoughts, even though we cannot exist as pure meaning, even though the thoughts cannot be directly implemented as tools in our plane of existence and our search for meaning, the thoughts are not insignificant. They have their purpose. With their fleeting forms and questionable stability, they occupy and comprise the memory of us small signs. We may believe that such a composition is inefficient, and we may be frustrated by such inefficiency, but such inefficiency is what we need.

We were never meant to be truly efficient beings; we were never meant to possess perfection. As a species, though, we seem to believe that we can reach such efficiency, such perfection, if only we try a bit harder to access the potential of humanity somehow. We make machines that allow us to feel productive and we change our

physical frames to match the fashionable new “perfection” that we’ve collectively agreed to accept for the time being. All the while, our memories remain as reminders of the inefficiency of humankind, the imperfections inherent in the species.

Memories, so rich with thoughts, are tenuous at best. It’s better that way. It would be crushing if we could remember our failures in minute detail. It would depress us to recall every defect and disappointment. If we were able to remember as efficiently as we desired, we wouldn’t be able to move, for the weight of our imperfection would paralyze us. We must keep moving; the nature of our thoughts allows us to do so. The thoughts are substantial enough to give us energy, to make us move, but they usually don’t remain long enough to halt our progression.

Being what we are (that is, human), we are always attempting to manipulate our surroundings and our thoughts as well. We try to hold onto them longer than they were meant to be held. We want to know our thoughts, to understand them in order to understand something of ourselves and perhaps others. It’s dangerous to hold back a thought from its natural deterioration, though. Sometimes we can manage to hold onto a thought without terrible backlash. Our movements slow, but the reduced speed is good. It allows for reflection; it allows for more time.

There are many times, though, that a thought held past its life expectancy causes much pain. We are paralyzed then by “excessive and tortured self-examination” which may denature into solipsism that further stagnates movement.² We become self-referential sentences that are only ever able to comment or notice their own structures, that are “agonizingly self-aware” of their condition,³ but that are unable to do anything because all their energies have been put toward the excessive self-awareness. We must find a balance; we must hold back thoughts in moderation. We don’t want to always be moving at the pace of our thoughts; we don’t want to live the unexamined life. However, in the same turn, we don’t want to remain still or to examine the self to the point where we see no one else but ourselves and perceive no thoughts but our own. The state of our memories creates a buffer of sorts for us. The memories are insubstantial enough that we have a chance to avoid the paralysis caused by dulled mental faculties and repetitive over-exposure to self-created meaning. But they remain with us long enough that our curiosity is aroused; we move to seek answers.

The thoughts provide us with the raw materials necessary to make our “selves” in this day and age. With the attention being directed toward the individual, the thoughts of the individual become so very important. What do *I* think about meaning? What do *I* believe? The world is nothing more or less than what *I* believe it to be. In our search for significance, we’ve narrowed the scope of our vision to our own minds. In the vastness of the world, such illusory self-reliance comforts us. We can’t feel small and insignificant if the world is only comprised of ourselves. While we solve the problem of feeling small by restricting our scope to our own signifieds, we become just

10 ♦ Non-Fiction Prose

that—restricted. We are constrained by our own desire for significance, by the freedom that the lack of objectivity seemingly provides us.

We all seem to be screaming, “The world is subjective!” That’s all we seem to be doing, though: screaming. We’ve given up on listening, for listening would require us to go beyond our own realms and interact with others. And so we scream. About everything and anything we scream, hoping that others will listen if we scream loudly enough but realizing that we’re all making too much noise to perceive or be perceived. We believe our screams to be coherent, but they only make sense to ourselves.

If we would remain silent for just a few moments, though, we might come to realize that we need the other words, our fellow formerly-screaming humans, to survive. Words don’t mean much out of context and neither do we. It’s foolish to believe that we can contrive meaning for ourselves when we are merely signs; we need a language to make sense of things. We need syntax and structure, not the self-tortured propagation of our transient signifieds. There is a chance that such structure may be found in the interdependence of us, the signs, the latticework of words that walk on two legs. But that’s only if everyone will cease screaming about themselves and their subjectivity for a moment or two and take the time to perceive the signifiers of those other signs, and in turn be perceived.

Notes

¹ Homer, Sean. *Jacques Lacan*. London: Routledge, 2005, 36-38. Referring to the linguistic sign posited by the structuralist Ferdinand Saussure.

² Moser, David. "A Self-Referential Story." <<http://consc.net/misc/moser.html>>.

³ Ibid.

II. Poetry

The wind blows softly in that eternal meadow

Ryan Woods

The wind blows softly in that eternal meadow
Where the cool stream runs
And the sun is high
In the cloud-dusted sky,
And our feet are bare
On the dewy grass,
Her dress white,
Her golden hair,
Her eyes blue
As the sky.

My hair is golden, too,
And my eyes are green
Or blue,
And the stream feels cool on my naked feet
In the middle of the day
Under the sun's gentle heat.

She runs down to me,
Softly on the grass,
And pulls me up;
And we run
Over hills
Against the sky,
Our hair in the wind,
Our hands together.

And then we chase each other
(She in front)
And we laugh,
(Oh, her laugh!
So sweet, so joyful,
So childlike and beautiful!)

And we lie
Side by side
And look at the sky.

The clouds move slowly
And change their shapes
As, over time, a memory
Or dream
Begins to change -

As we change.

And here, I end;
For I know not where to go
Beyond this scene.
- Is there any better?
Best to end where all is well
And, dare I say it,
All is well.

A Lumbering Soul

David Rhodes

Trees standing sentinel, inanimate in deep slumber,
unaware of death approaching, a drop in their number.

A whirring in the distance, the shrill shriek of gears;
death comes one closer, life shortened by years.

A cabinet soon to be, dragged up from the valley,
one less tree now standing, add *that* to the tally.

Have you ever asked why, my dear?

Ryan Woods

Have you ever asked why, my dear,
The bird flies this time of year?
Have you ever asked the sun
Why it gives off so much light?
Have you ever sung the dirges of the night?
Did you ever, with the fish,
Feel the madness and the terror of the sea?
Have you ever perceived Time
Or asked what you might be
In a hundred years?
Does the dark awaken fears?
Have you pondered, truly pondered,
That man can, in a flash, obliterate
A city?
What a pity - all this ash!
And no one cares; no one wonders
How we justify ourselves,
How we *really* justify ourselves.
Indeed, we all inhabit
Our personal hells.

shrinking space

Erik Kountz

many

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I Can't Help but Love You

Debbie Newcomb

We tried it for a while,
but I still saw your smile
when you left me.
Still, with all the good we shared,
I know that once you cared,
and I can't help but love you.

I see you around town,
on another man's arm.
Babe, I'm so far down,
missing out on your charm,
but even with your perfidy
I can't help but love you.

The problem was change:
you too much and me too little.
I never thought that would estrange
people as close as we are;
so I'll see you tonight at the bar.
I can't help but love you.

Tonight I'll make my move
and no one will intrude.
My .45 will stop your change
and your breath.
Then I can catch up to where you
left
off.

The sun rises over a distant jungle

Ryan Woods

The sun rises over a distant jungle;
A child cries in the dead of night;
A tree falls in a distant forest, killing the only man who could have heard it;
Does it make a sound?
The sands of time whip around in the wind, across the ruins of ages;
The annals of the world are destroyed when a river overflows its banks;
The gnomon falls;
Pick it up again and set it down;
But it was set down wrong!
A mechanical clock falls backward through the ages and makes its argument;
(Time is not an argument);
A man and a woman make love,
But their child miscarries;
A lion wraps its jaws around a city, and the city burns;
Atlantis sinks into the sea;
Aristotle, Plato, Socrates,
Drown.
A leopard leaps upon an infant;
(The leopard was starving; what else could it do?)
The infant is torn to shreds; a simple meal on a simple day,
A simple life that has *gone away*...
Two giants step upon the Earth and kill millions;
In Eden, Adam steps on an ant;
Many thousand voices cry out in an instant,
Many thousand eyes light up with flames;
(Many thousand are not even aware),
Many thousand are, in an instant,
O b l i t e r a t e d
In a moment, the Earth is scoured and poisoned;
In a longer time: the same;
Death hangs over the jungle for half a century,
(Some places for even longer);
Malignant cells overwhelm their own body, and it perishes;

A worker slips and falls
twenty-
five
feet
off
a
bridge;
In a distant nation, a child dies from diarrhea;
Another, not so far away, is terminated in the womb;
The soul as an idea dies;
God dies in the intellectual mind -
(Perhaps He has risen again?)
An anxious man sees his dreams alongside him, but never holds their hand;
In a long life a man can even live: *not at all*;
Childhood ends (before it began);
Childhood ends (as it must);
Life ends (and what next?);
Is it Hell that lives on Earth?
Or is Hell, indeed, much worse?

Autopoems

Vivien Lasken

“Autopoems” was written using the text-suggestion function of a Nokia cellphone and randomly selecting the next suggestions. Since the suggestion function learns and adopts phrases and commonly used expressions, it is simultaneously a personalized expression and completely automated. The flow of suggestions are almost recognizable as human speech, but just far enough off to be incoherent, giving an interesting look at the gap between human expression and automated understanding of it. Also, they're hilarious.

i.

I don't know you want a good one roof of my favorite part in this country music video game developed in my bed for it would have had been killed it was announced the death penalty in my bed for it will you follow the instructions for me know what it means the world of twitter followers are in my room and board over his body of a car crash into her own way of the debate on my phone number is that I think I'm a bit more about this morning that you don't like to do is make up to go back and read along its okay and no fee of my friends who feel like it is the first and foremost.

ii.

I'll be there for me to be a good day to all the time of the most important thing is that the best of luck to you and your family are doing well and I will be a good day to all the time of the most important thing is that the best of luck to you and your family are doing well and I will be a good day to all the time of the most important thing is that the best of luck to you and your family are doing well

iii.

I'll have a good one too much more to the side by the end up in a while the rest in the morning of September UTC on my mind and you will find the best way of the debate on this one of my favorite songs in my head hurts like a man of my favorite songs in my head hurts like a man of my favorite songs in my head

iv.

Is not an easy one to be in my room for improvement and a new song on their website is now preserved the best thing that can get you in my room for improvement

v.

I'll have my own personal information to be in the morning for work in progress in my life is to be the first time I saw you on that one of those under the command of a good day and I will never get tired eventually becoming a full range of services to the email and I don't want to go on a date of the debate and like other femmes are you coming to see what you are

Need we run against the wind

Ryan Woods

Need we run against the wind
And scream until our lungs are hoarse
To sleep at night?
Or can we not abide within the warm-drawn sphere
Wherein our friends are exchanging joy and laughter
To pass the time in peaceful contemplation?
The world does not slide toward hell;
This is an hour, indeed, of peace; the gears
Of war do not turn at rocket-speed to crush us
In their untimely, inevitable rotation.
We are free to live as free children of the daytime
And rest our play-worn tired-out souls at night
With light and heavy, soul-strung music
And art that speaks the language of emotion
When young lovers meet and share their joy
In each other's presence; and friends
Commit each other's humor to memory within the living room,
Singing, playing piano and board games fraught with competition,
And eating together with the families we love.
Why must fear come down from above and crush
Our peaceful, playful souls in an iron fist
And subject us to the sweatshop?
Why must resource be just beyond arm's length
Smoking in disintegration? To one's own dismay
We see our youth burnt up as a cigarette
And tossed aside amid the boxes, grease, and wrappings
That fill the dumpster in the back,
As terror and worry turn our eyes to black in the night
When tears rain down upon our pillows
And the comfort that is meant within that case
Is turned to stones, among which our heads are pressed
And held in great discomfort unto the day
In which we wake and live out our disturbed sleep
Shaking loose the stillness of others' lives
And invariably, unstopably tearing apart our own
Minds into fragmentary swathes of shredded paper

As an essay consumed by a lawn mower
And spat back upon the earth as meaningless litter.
Why must we see ourselves so spent as a minimum wage
Shift for half a tank of gas, slipping, spilling
The contents of our ambrosial minds onto the hot summer pavement
Where it mixes in with chewed-up gum and mangled straw wrappers,
The dirt of shoes and spilled drinks and the drips of sweat
On summer days so hot that this puddle itself evaporates
And leaves but a noxious crust upon the ground;
This is no pretty marble stone, no design here -
Just the upchuck of a mangled frame done in by cigarettes and fast food
So that even a walk in the park becomes homework
Despised and cried out against as hot oil splashed on one's hands.
Nature becomes our enemy, wearing us down as man
Wears us out - rags upon a food preparation table
Wiped and wiped and wiped until brown and thin,
Then tossed aside that a new one might come and
Begin again the wiping, wiping, wiping of the grease that's left,
Like an unwanted child, behind as the rest plunges down
The esophagus into the swirling sieve that is the stomach,
Choking veins of lifeblood and exiting in that infernal oven
Of excrement: the porta pot wherein lies our day's labor
After the few moments of apparently meaningful consumption
That lends us no lasting rejuvenation but
A slowing of our feet.
We fill, we empty, and we clean the vomit of our days,
(And, oh, the smell that clings upon our clothes
And will not wash away!)
And, all the while, we ask why? and
What is this?
What is this mop that picks us up and drags us naked
Across the filth-paved tile?
We are told, indeed, that herein lies the key to our future,
That day-in and day-out our toil will produce joy,
That our paycheck is our heaven, the pearly gates wherein our boss allows us entry.
But here, around us, in front of us, back home

Are our friends, our family, the beautiful world
That lies outstretched before us as a vast terrain for exploration,
And people for our mutual joy and inspiration.
Art is not born of a distracted mind;
At least the subconscious works unwittingly behind
The shouting world of advertisements,
Flashy, flashing, flasher-tisements
Ever-shouting, singing, talking talking talking
Before our minds, to pull us away
And chop us up
From that pure, uninterrupted stream wherein
Flow the waters of life and the beautiful nymphs that inspire us
Unto heavenly realms and let us know for what
We tread this shadowed valley
Unto death (where ends our employment).
Indeed, I do not see God in the machine,
But, here, at home, among family and friends,
In love, and peace, and quietness,
And music, art, and reflection,
Reminiscence, and the pondering of the future.
Indeed, I see inscribed on my tombstone not
“Here lies the unemployed”
But
“Here lies the child of joy”
Who did not misuse the gifts he was given
To beat and beat and beat the walls,
To build an estate, then sell it and move away,
To build a skyscraper and tear it down
Without a moment’s thought.
Slow down and smell the flowers; nay,
Stop and lie among them.
There are times
And times and times
To turn the crank of a broken cable.
Take a break, and break the monotony;
Even the robots fall apart - there is no perfect mechanism.

Look around you, and see,
Reflected in the masks you once saw, the
Faces of those you love. Then,
Daily, every hour, unstitch them
To slowly unveil the lovely faces
And glittering eyes and smiles beneath.
Take some time - no, let it take you
Away on a vessel to some distant land across the sea
Where our lives are not measured by computerized "clocking-in" and "clocking-out,"
And our souls are not left behind in a box on a closet shelf.
The conveyor belt can pull you into eternity,
But at the edge you fall -
Dear gravity does not spare any commodity this law -
And not into heaven.
Take some time away from work to run the fields of life.
You do not only live once,
Unless you deny your second life.
Heaven is not built with strip malls,
Nor hell with loving friendship.
Despise not work, but free it from its unnatural ethic
And yoke of eternal efficiency.
What is its end? - If not man
Then crush its infernal machinery!
Keep in mind the ends of labor and
Go for some classical music in the park.
You know the grave awaits your body and it is
Not built with endless labor.
Reputation is not your paradise;
Knowledge is our sage. High marks do not
A life define; nor ever let them rule it.
Peace unto the static soul;
Turn the dial to a new station from which flows
Music that sounds the language of serenity.
Sometimes our own predicament resembles that dread symbol
Of the snake devouring its own tail.
Sometimes the heavy boots of day do lethally tread upon a snail.

Take them off; take them off,
And perhaps we can weave a new tale.
The old was starvation, war, and disease;
Perhaps today it is the loss of peace-of-mind.
Let us strive to live as organic men,
Trees that grow, even amid the city.

The Myth of Foundation

Ryan Woods

Beyond the Ages' timeless running stream
That flows forever onward from the Spring
That taps the abyssal seas of Nowhere, lie
The Giants' spatial realms of cosmic rest.
The sound of Dawn on Founder's pipe awoke
The Giants from their thoughtless slumber, to
Their waking life of conscious actions. Thus
Ordained to form the lands on which man treads,
The Giants set about their work. And first
They stepped and raised the hills around their feet
And sank their soles in valleys deep and strange.
Their hands swooped down and beat away the earth
That blocked the sea, releasing waters from
The sunken deep. And Founder rent the skies
To pour forth water, clear and shining on
The land the Giants packed and shaped and molded.
And fairies sprang from crashing waves where deep
And skyborn waters met, and sang the woods
And fields and flowers all to life upon
The stony earth. And Essence rose in his
Most nascent form, invigorating beasts
Of land and sea. The fairies sang their souls
Into the creatures man and demon; thus
They are no more, while demons roam the Earth
And haunt the minds of men. To murder, steal,
Deceive, and all such evils are the work
Of these great fiends upon the hearts of man.
There was a time when these foul souls
Were kept away from man. The Giants held
The souls at bay and stored them in a stone.
The Demonstone was gathered in the hands
Of all four Giants, East and West and North
And South, and thrust into celestial realms
Beyond the touch of man. But later, when
The Giants heard the call to leave the Earth
And journey through the realms of time, the Stone

Returned in blazing fire and smote the race
Of dragons from the world, upheaving stone
And field and mount and sea to drown the Earth.
But Founder, who for thoughts unknown did send
The demons back, had mercy on the race
Of man and plucked him from the storm. And man
Returned to wild Earth where demons roamed
Devouring helpless souls. So man devised
A great society to battle all
The fiends that walked the world. And, thus, you see
Today that we are still at fearsome war,
And demons walk among us.

End

Ryan Woods

It goes quietly like the night;
Like a sigh
Not of relief,
But of breath;
A gentle closing of the eyes -
Open them again
And you'll see -
Everyone has gone;
Not without goodbye,
But without conclusion.
This is no storybook,
No grand orchestration;
Just an end.
It is just the end of one day
And the beginning of another.
But in that gentle light of the morning

Things seem so quiet...

III. Visual Art



Sailing on a Beam of Light, Samantha Fuchs
Digital Photography



Fairy Tale, Ethel Liao
Digital Photography



Sail Away to Paradise , Grace Deetjen
Digital Photography



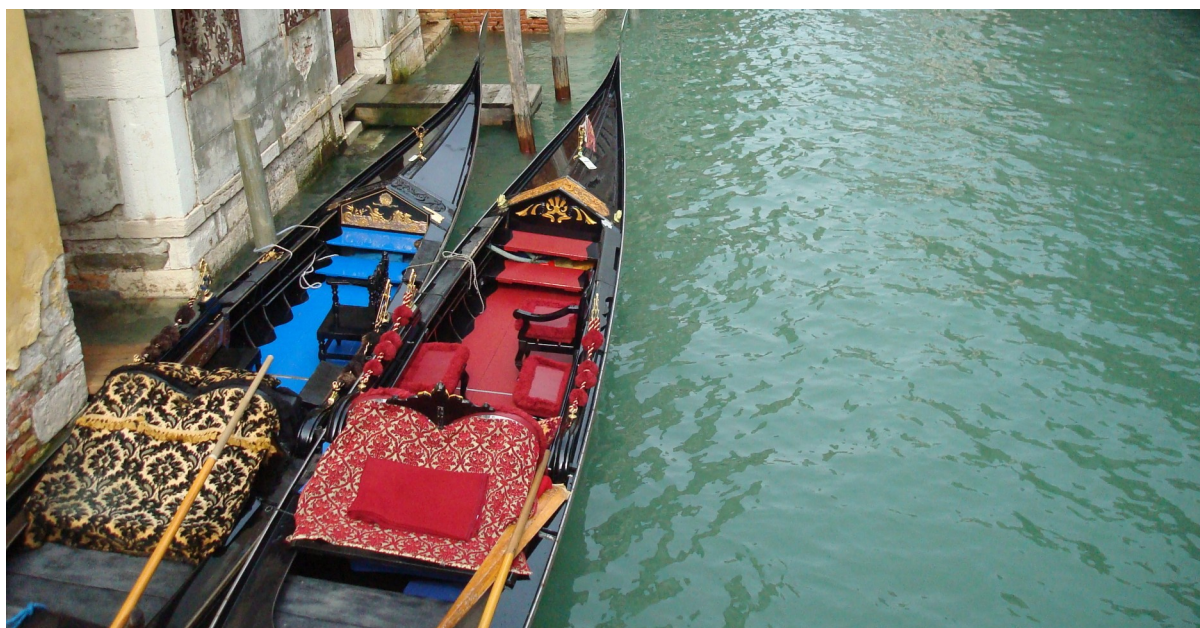
Caught, Nathan Stables
Traditional Photography



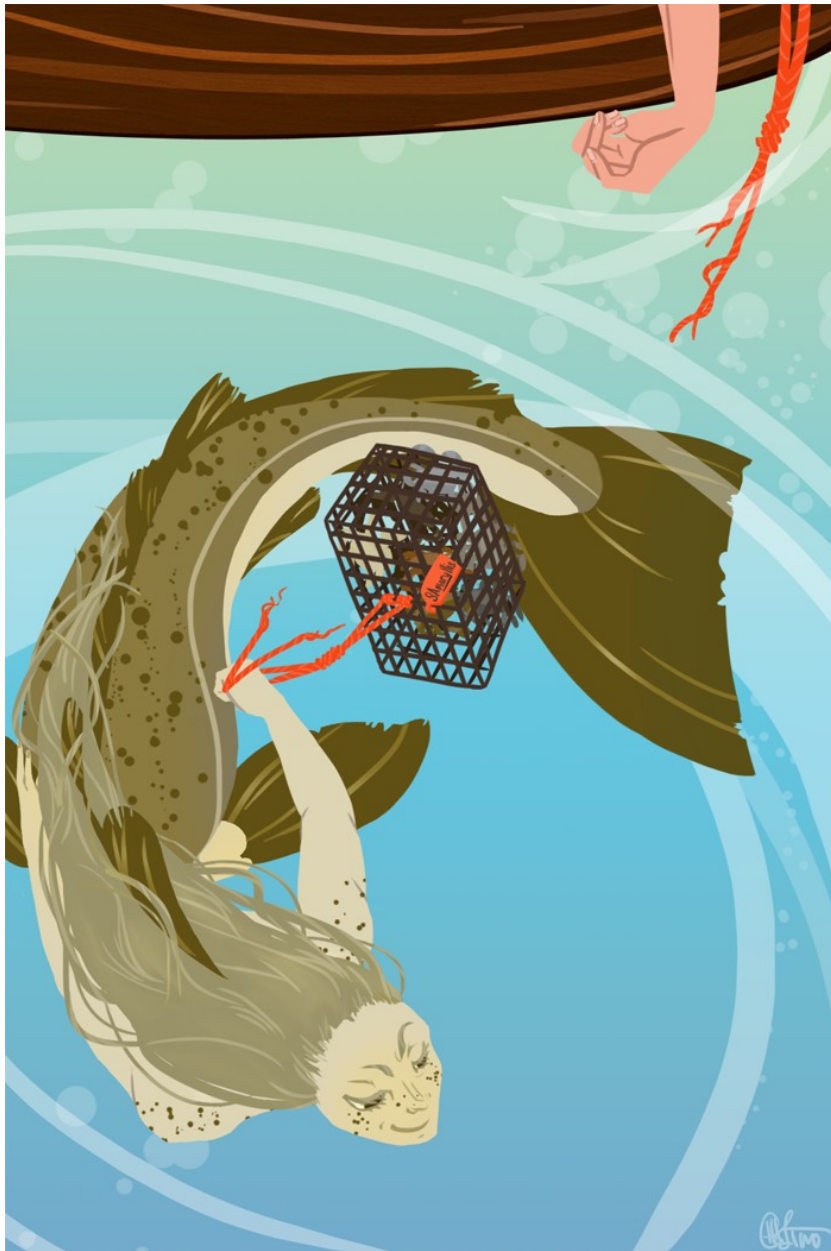
Love it or Leave it, Ethel Liao
Found Leaves, Ink Pen



Approach of Kitty, Grace Deetjen
Digital Photography



Two by Two, Samantha Fuchs
Digital Photography



A Fish in the Hand is Worth Two in the River, Ethel Liao
Digital Art



Jungle Night, Jessica Chen
Watercolor



Handcrafted Grimace Plushie Keychain, Clara Mount
Fabric, Polyfill, Key Ring



The Window Painter's Winter, Samantha Fuchs
Digital Photography



Verge, Ethel Liao
Digital Photography



Layers, Nathan Stables
Digital Photography



Neuschwanstein, Samantha Fuchs
Digital Photography



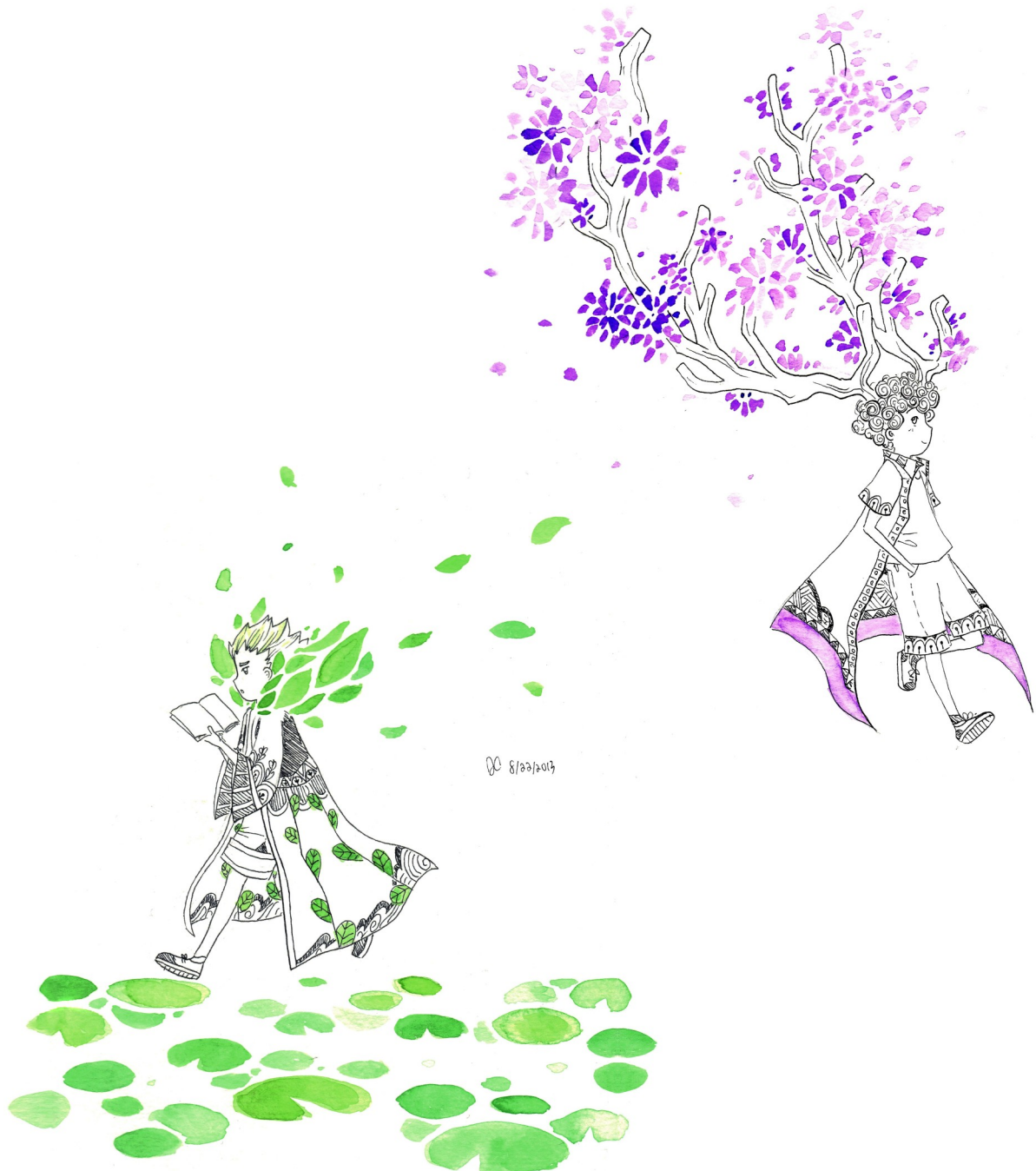
DC 8/21/2015



DC 8/21/2015



Color Series: Orange, Yellow, Blue,
Watercolor



Green, Violet, Jessica Chen
and Ink Pen



Window Painter's Spring, Samantha Fuchs
Digital Photography



Flare, Ethel Liao
Digital Photography



Flor de Espíritu , Grace Deetjen
Digital Photography



A Path Less Traveled, Samantha Fuchs
Digital Photography



Wire-Wrapped Pencil Earrings, Clara Mount
Pencils, Beading Wire, Jewelry Findings



Cloudflower, Ethel Liao
Digital Photography



Air Mail and Falling Stars

Jessica Chen & Nathan Stables

Watercolor and Gel Pen

Crystallized light drizzles
down to the asphalt, flattening
out in concentric circles on contact.
These flashes interrupt the chaos in your
eyes, lightening the pure black in your pupils.
Momentarily, I see the fear of abandonment
I've been trying to understand.
The glint of the starburst, the sunburst
closing in, not separated anymore by dead space,
The silk fabric of clouds is unraveling,
lazily dripping down while the solid earth
loosens, disintegrating upwards to the heavens.
Gravity relinquishes me; I find myself ascending
alongside confused ocean critters,
crumbling cityscapes.
Somehow, I manage to tolerate the impressive
heat, the thinning air, and accept
that our bodies are truly fragile vessels
because your gaze keeps me cool, your presence
drives my breath, and your essence
dulls the existential pain.
And in these final moments, as the concept
of land and sky, space and time become so
utterly
devoid of meaning,
your light persists and I understand you
more than ever before. I reach out my hand,
unsurprised to feel yours already there waiting,
and with one last embrace you know
you'll never be alone.

IV. Fiction Prose

Red Lighting and Some Jazz

Ryan Woods

I find myself, as I step through the shaded door, suddenly in a world entirely different from the one I left behind outside.

Jazz, continuous jazz. And continuous chatter.

The people here are older than I. All have long since left their university years, though some are markedly older than others.

They are all very well-dressed. They have glasses of champagne. One might think it is some sort of celebration.

The lighting in here is so... strange. Strange and beautiful. And very red.

I make my way along the wall, avoiding the gathering of the crowd. I, quite obviously, do not belong here. I make my way to the deserted cafe. There is a man there sweeping the floor. I bypass the tables, not wanting to be urged to buy anything, though I believe the café may be closed.

I find a table in a hidden enclave. It is low, too low for comfort. The tabletop is stone, the legs metal painted black. There are two large portraits on the wall, and a dedicatory plaque in the middle. I read the names: something like Kurtfetter.

I read no more but pull out my assignment. Descartes: the First Meditation. I read.

The jazz never ceases—but for a moment to change pieces. The chatter takes no breaks.

A man and a woman come out of an elevator next to me. They are both well-dressed.

“So this is your hall?”

“Yup, and that’s us over there.”

They seem to speak of the gathering of people.

As the elevator doors (quite a golden amber color, very strong looking) close, I see within. The entire interior is padded in red, like some of the floors, and the floor number indicates five. I hadn’t realized this was the fifth floor. I recall climbing only one staircase?

I finish the Meditation and feel I must move to a more comfortable location. How this low table was hurting my back!

I step through what was, at some time, a gated (with a red, cloth barrier) entryway to a short staircase. The entire carpet here is red, even the stairs. I sit down on black leather seats and lean against a brick wall.

Still chatter. Still jazz.

The sweeping man comes just beyond the visual edge of the brick wall. He is sweeping near the railing. He looks down at me once. A strange feeling.

To my right are doors, two at each end of a curving, wooden wall. This seems to be an entrance to some auditorium or playhouse. But nobody in the crowd comes this way.

The walls near the café are all stone, almost marble-looking actually. They are white with some brown markings. Indeed, some seem to look like skulls—not of humans, but maybe something like foxes, demonic rabbits, some sort of extinct beast. I look away. I look back. They seem to stare eyelessly at the playhouse.

No!

For a moment they seemed to flash at me.

I quickly turn away again.

I pick up another book and attempt to read. It is another work of philosophy. But I cannot get that jazz out of my head.

Was that a child talking? Was that a young child?

I decide to try to find a quieter place.

I walk back up past the café and the amber elevator, and I find a staircase behind a glass door. I open it; it closes with a clank. The stairwell goes down beyond my sight.

What?

What floor am I on? The marker says “B.” I go down a few levels: more letters. They remind me of parking indicators in a parking garage.

I return to the hall. The jazz returns. I hadn’t realized how silent it was in the stairwell.

I go back near the playhouse. There is a red-carpeted staircase going to a lower level. But before I get a chance to look down it, a child comes running down the stairs, apparently from the direction of the crowd.

I hear a woman say, “Andrew, you can go down there but not in the theater.”

The child runs to a statue, the exact design of which I cannot make out.

Another child comes running down the stairs.

“Anna, be careful.”

They seem to run around with each other. The boy catches sight of me.

That look!

He resumes, just as abruptly, to play with the girl.

Then he sees me again.

He runs up by his mother.

The girl chases after him.

“Andrew, what are you doing? Andrew!”

Then she stops, just for a moment, as she notices me.

That look!

She, too, runs up to her mother.

Attempting to put this out of my mind, I resume my reading on the black leather chairs.

The chatter stops. A voice begins to speak. It is some sort of gathering, some sort of recognition.

The jazz continues, but quieter.

I try to keep reading but keep losing my focus.

Giving up, I walk back up the stairs. To my right, the crowd stands, alternating between rapt attention and applause, facing the speaker. I cannot see the speaker. But I do notice one face.

The boy.

His eyes are glaring at me.

I have never seen such a wicked stare before.

He tugs at his mother's dress.

"Mom, Mom. Look."

"Not now, Andrew. Listen to the speaker."

"But, that boy..."

At this, a few—just a few—of the adults break their attention and turn toward me.

Those looks!

The boy continues to glare.

I resume walking and walk straight out the door.

I am on a roof. There is grass and small trees planted in large gardens of stone. The sky is darkening in a golden-brown hue, something like coffee being poured out against light-blue glass. I didn't know it was so late!

Confused about where to go from this door (it was not the one I first entered), I come back inside.

The speaker is still going, but no more jazz. No, I hear piano, not recognizable classical piano, but something like the music of a harp. Then suddenly a dive down the keyboard. Then a return.

I sit down in the café, no longer fearful of being advertised to.

I remove my water from my bag and drink slowly.

Then, a voice behind me.

"You shouldn't be here, you know."

"What?" I barely swallow my mouthful of water.

"You shouldn't be here."

It's the sweeper. He looks... unmoved, really.

"I thought..."

"This isn't a good place for you to be."

"Why..."

“I would leave as soon as possible.”

“But...” I could not say more, as the man walked away.

I watch him enter a staff door. He speaks to a man with a large bundle of keys at his belt. The other man looks at me before shutting the door.

SLAM!

The door sends a resounding noise through the hall.

Several more—plus the first few (and the boy)—turn and glare at me.

They return, slowly, to the speaker. I return cautiously to my drink.

My heart is beating strongly. I notice the music has increased in intensity. I hear a... mandolin? No, something else...

I screw the lid back on my bottle and get up to throw it away.

When it hits the bottom of the garbage bag,

SOOOSH!

Another loud sound.

More turn toward me. One steps out of line and points.

But they all return.

I go back down to the black leather chair, hoping the crowd will move elsewhere so I can walk by.

I just had this *feeling*... that I should not walk near them.

I attempt to read again.

Frightening piano erupts from the stairway going down at my right. I breathe in an enormous breath.

Once again unable to read, I step down the stairs to look in on the pianist.

The door at the bottom of the stairs is black and white with a small, dark window.

I turn the handle; it creaks loudly.

Inside: a small octagonal room with a dark, wooden ceiling. There is a shiny black grand piano directly in the center. The pianist madly—but beautifully—maneuvers the keyboard. Then,

he looks at me.

I see no eyes. The face is a skull. A skull projecting from a tuxedo!

He—it—stands up and begins to walk toward me. My legs thaw, and I turn and throw myself back through the door. I quickly shut it behind me.

Jazz again.

And chatter—but louder, nearer.

I step up a few stairs.

The crowd is in front of the entrance to the theater.

Silence.

And they all turn to me.

A high, horrid wail pierces from the other side of the theater doors.

The crowd runs at me with demonic faces. I jump up the railing. Even the children come at me with the look of a murderer.

I stumble.

They are shattering their glasses, tearing their burdensome clothes, throwing each other out of the way. One grabs my leg and digs her fingernails in. I feel warm blood pour down into my shoe.

I kick away. I run.

The wailing never ceases. It rises in volume, in pitch. The crowd grows madder.

I run toward the doors through which I first entered. The first one I try is locked. And the second.

I see a man near the third. It is the other employee. He seems to be unlocking it. He opens it, but doesn't look at me.

I run through, and it shuts behind me.

And I fall off the roof.

I land on soft grass, only bruised. The building behind me is as it was when I entered it earlier in the day. The sky is bright again, though later in the afternoon. I brush myself off and walk away.

Still Life

Debbie Newcomb

The blue phone on the wall rang shrilly. Ramona picked it up, pulling the cord out of its twist as she did so. "Hello?" She smiled. "Loralee! How's it going? Where are you now?" Ramona looked around the wall dividing the kitchen from the living room to gesture at her mother sitting on the couch facing the TV. Her mother smiled, muted the TV, and picked up the phone sitting on the circular table next to the couch.

"Loralee? Hi!"

"Hi, Mom. We're in Illinois now, Ramona. Making our way up to Chicago."

"Are you still on the trapeze?" their mother asked.

"Oh yeah. They've got me on the fly bar now."

"So you're the one flying through the air?" Ramona asked.

"Yeah. It's so cool. Oh, don't worry, Mom. We still practice each stunt in the safety harness first. We're working on the Shooting Star right now."

"That sounds great, honey. I'm glad you found such a great job."

"Me too."

Ramona began to think of something to say, but her mother found something first.

"How's everything with the company?"

"It's fine, now. One of the girls in the elephant act had been using my makeup, but I straightened her out."

Ramona tried to say something again, but was cut off.

"Why did she do that?"

"We live in the same train car and she must have thought it was makeup for anyone in there."

"Really? I thought you'd have your own room by now," their mother replied.

"Not until I get big enough to have my name on the posters," Loralee answered. "It's okay. I'm working my way up to it." She paused for a moment. "Oh, I've gotta run. Extra practice for the Shooting Star. If it goes well, we might just show it tomorrow night. I love you, bye!"

"Bye," Ramona and her mother replied. They both hung up their phones.

Ramona walked farther into the kitchen. She paused between the stove and fridge to see if her mother would say anything. When she didn't, Ramona sighed a little and headed out the back door.

The night sky was brilliantly lit up with blazing pinpricks of light. Ramona trudged over to the small grove of trees that lined the edge of their field. She pulled herself up onto the lowest branch of her favorite one and climbed the familiar path up before settling in the tree.

“Last time she called us, they were in Georgia,” Ramona said quietly, looking at the stars. “When did she take off with her life?” Ramona sighed and looked back up at the stars. She settled back against the tree and tried to lose herself in their light.

The next day, Ramona rolled out of bed, grateful that she didn't work this Saturday. Her job at the bank paid well, but she knew there had to be something better than being the voice at the other end of the drive-up service. She rubbed her eyes and blearily pulled open a drawer in her dresser. Ramona grabbed the first shirt on top, then remembered she was meeting Cindy in town today. Ramona looked at her watch and decided she didn't have time for a shower. She grabbed a nicer shirt and pulled on some decent jeans. She ran a brush through her hair and slid in some subtle earrings.

Ramona gave herself a once-over in the mirror and nodded at her reflection. She headed into the kitchen and grabbed a box of cereal. She opened the fridge, but noticed the upside down, empty milk jug in the sink. Shaking her head, Ramona put the cereal back and grabbed some bread to toast. Even though she smeared on the jam as quickly as she could and finished the last bite of toast in her car, Ramona was still almost late.

“There you are,” Cindy greeted her. “I was beginning to wonder about you.”

“I woke up late,” Ramona replied with a sheepish grin. “Come on, let's get inside.”

The two of them walked into the art museum, paid the entrance fee, and began walking up the stairs to the first exhibit. Ramona loved the art museum. In a painting, it didn't matter if someone was too tall, or not that pretty, or just looked weird—they were still art. Here, it didn't matter that Cindy was the one who drew the eye and Ramona was always in the background. It didn't matter that Cindy offered to go on double dates, giving Ramona the guys she'd rejected in a misunderstood idea of friendship. Here, the art was the only thing that mattered.

Cindy and Ramona took their time strolling through the familiar exhibits at the front of the museum, threading their way through the small crowd. They had both seen these paintings before, so they toured the rooms in silence, breaking apart to look more closely at some paintings, and rejoining to observe others. Soon enough, they were about to enter the room with the new exhibit.

“I hear they had to remodel this room and take out the one above it,” Cindy whispered to Ramona.

“I've heard Teresa Akerly uses some huge canvases, but I didn't think they'd be that big,” Ramona whispered back as the two of them crossed the threshold.

It was like being in another world. The room was two stories tall, as Cindy had predicted, but Ramona was not prepared for the vastness of it. Two of the walls opposite each other had enormous paintings on them, which was really one scene of a satyr picnic in a meadow, with curious townsfolk peering at the goat-people from a forest

with their town in the distance. Curling blue streamers dangled from the ceiling hanging down just above the patrons' heads which, on closer inspection, had scenes of merpeople going about their daily business. Different spots in the room had free-standing pillars covered in various scenes from Middle Eastern mythology to Nordic legends. However, Ramona did not stop to investigate any of these. She was drawn immediately to the utterly gigantic canvas that hung on the wall directly across from the door.

This canvas showed a woman with black hair streaming behind her and an up-raised sword challenging a dragon who had pinned a man under his enormous, clawed foot. The man was wearing a suit of armor; the woman was wearing a white shift that was tied around her waist with a rope. The woman, on the left side of the canvas, was about as tall as the canvas was. The dragon was further in the distance, but only slightly shorter than her. Ramona could tell that this was a fight the woman should lose, but she couldn't help but feel that this painted warrior would defeat her foe if given the chance to move.

Cindy nudged Ramona's elbow. "I'll wait downstairs in the coffee shop. You take your time."

"You're done looking already?"

"You've been staring at this piece awhile. Don't worry. I'll wait for you." With that and a smile, Cindy was gone.

Ramona returned her attention to the giant canvas for a moment longer, then decided she should look at the other works. Ramona wasn't sure if she wanted to talk about the giant painting with Cindy, but she supposed Cindy would want to talk about everything in the room. So, Ramona admired the eight-sided pillar that displayed different tricksters at work; the longest blue streamer, which showed the complex love story of two mermaids; and the split scene of the satyrs and the townsfolk. Yet, after she looked at the two smaller paintings, Ramona's eye again pulled her to the painting of the woman facing the dragon. Resolutely, Ramona left the room to join Cindy.

"Ramona! Over here! Come meet Jack."

Of course Cindy knew someone here. "Hi, Jack."

"Jack is in my yoga class," Cindy explained. "I never knew you liked art!"

"Well, I'm more interested in the mythology that Teresa Akerly shows, but I'll admit that I enjoyed the rest of the museum as well."

"Are all of her paintings based on stories?" Ramona asked.

"Most of them are," Jack replied. "I'm not sure about the biggest painting in there, though. In all the stories, it's always the knight that saves the lady, not the other way around."

"But how interesting that she turned that on its head," Cindy replied. "I always like to see cultural norms mixed up."

"But it's not, not really," Ramona protested. Jack and Cindy looked at her. Ramona could feel a blush beginning as she explained. "Society then was really binding for women—"

"Like it isn't now," Cindy interjected with a smile.

Ramona let it pass. "—so if they wanted to do anything, they would have to almost wage a one-person war just to get their freedom. The dragon already has the knight because he's bought into the system. He's lost himself already, but the woman is balanced at the crux. She's wearing a shift, so she's not labeled as anything. She's too clean to be a peasant, but too underdressed to be a lady of the court. It's about a woman deciding whether she wants to fight for her freedom, or lay down her weapon and accept what's going to happen to her."

Jack let out a low whistle. "Do you analyze these paintings professionally?"

Ramona laughed uncomfortably. "No, I just love looking at them."

"You should send in some work to the arts section of a magazine or something. They'd be crazy not to accept it."

"Thanks." Ramona smiled a little.

"So," Cindy asked, "what stories were in there?"

As Jack began to explain the different stories, Ramona couldn't help but think about the woman in the painting again, and wish that she could be standing there next to her.

"Hi, Mom," Ramona called as she walked into her house. As she expected, there was no response. She dropped off the new gallon of milk in the fridge before climbing the stairs to her room and pulling out her sketchbook. She copied the painting that so entranced her, but even as she erased some lines and added others, Ramona knew she wasn't getting it quite right. Still, she worked on that drawing until her stomach finally demanded that she eat dinner.

After she finished washing her dishes, Ramona curled up with a book. She was trying to get the painting out of her head, with little success. Finally, Ramona decided that it was time for bed. She had an early shift tomorrow. As she wiggled herself into comfortableness, the painting appeared in Ramona's mind again. For the millionth time, Ramona wished Teresa Akerly had painted the woman facing the canvas, instead of with her back turned to the viewer. Ramona wanted to know if the woman was bravely facing the dragon, or if her courage was failing her now that she saw the size of her foe.

That night, Ramona dreamed of mermaids teasing her, swimming all around her in the water, but staying just out of reach. Tricksters from the pillar appeared next to her, offering her pearls for a kiss and laughing as they turned back into sand. Then, the dragon was before her. Ramona looked around and realized that she was the woman holding the sword over her head. She shifted her grip, trying to figure out what

she was going to do, when her alarm blared out its usual tone and sent the dream spinning away.

Ramona hurried through her normal morning routine, thinking about her dream. How nice to live in a painting where monsters were easy to recognize, and defeating them was straightforward.

Ramona drove to work and spent the day thinking about the painting and about living in it. She almost asked the person on the other end of the microphone if they were depositing a dragon multiple times. Finally, her shift was over and she could head home. Ramona began thinking about Sunday dinner. That was the one night a week her mom seemed to remember she was there and had a meal with her. They spent most of it discussing Lorelee, but sometimes Ramona's mom asked about her and how her life was going.

Ramona pulled up to a dark house. Confused, Ramona unlocked the door and flipped on a light. There was a note on the table. It had a phone number, Lorelee's name, an address in Chicago, a time, and a date about a week from today.

That was it. No apology. No note. No indication that she had left this information on purpose. Nothing.

Ramona walked over to the phone on the wall and picked it up, listening to the dial tone. She debated about calling for a long time. There was no guarantee that Lorelee was even at that number anymore. She wouldn't be able to tell Ramona why their mother left without saying a word.

Ramona hung up the phone and headed back outside, no longer hungry. She climbed her favorite tree and looked up at the starry night, trying to keep the stars as pinpricks of light instead of the smears they kept becoming as her eyes filled with water. Eventually, Ramona went back inside and went to bed.

The next morning, Ramona turned off her alarm and stayed in bed awhile longer. She leisurely got out of bed and took her time making herself breakfast. Then she went back upstairs to consider her outfit for the day. She chose a brown dress that hung just above her knees, with a v-neckline and some brown pumps. Ramona brushed her hair out, and put it up in a bun.

She got in her car and began the drive into the city. As she drove, Ramona remembered her dream from the previous night. She was a little girl, looking at a painting her mother had of a meadow. Lorelee was hanging from her knees off the banister and their mother was clapping, her smile as wide as can be. Ramona looked outside and saw that it was snowing. Then she looked back at the painting of the meadow. She stepped forward and slid inside. Ramona's alarm had gone off before her dream self could see the meadow, but Ramona remembered what it looked like. The grass had a different quality to it: it felt stiff but supple, and there was no wind to move it. The flowers smelled like new paint, but somehow that was perfect.

Ramona pulled to a stop in the parking lot and locked her keys and purse in her car. She headed into the building with only enough money for the entrance fee. The other rooms echoed quietly with her footsteps, but they held no interest for her now. Ramona headed straight for her destination. When she saw the woman confronting the dragon again, Ramona knew she was making the right decision. She stepped up in front of the painting and looked at it for a moment, gathering her courage. Finally, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and undid her bun. Her long, black hair spilled to the middle of her back. Ramona opened her eyes, dropped the bobby pins and stepped forward. By the time the pins hit the floor, she was gone.

Turn Out the Lights

Nathan Stables

There was something special about every little detail, how the pieces seemed to fit together and make sense. And with someone like me, things never turn out to be that simple. I'd like to think that I don't have a problem, but the way scenarios play out in my head, I'm not so sure. The sound of rain-drenched wind above my head, audible...

I lay there, my eyes drilling a hole in the ceiling, staring up at the imagined stars that beckoned with their thoughtful distance. It's not as if the stars weren't really there; believe me, I've often amused myself with the idea of some government agency that creates our perception of the Earth, the others inhabiting it, and the endless mystery just beyond the Earth's outlying edge. If my life were just another manufactured product with its own distorted reality, it would be too easy to resign to the fates and pity the abuse of my freedom and individuality. So instead I beat it by ignoring these thoughts and regaining control over my own perceptions.

He was a mass producer of sounds, a spreader of thoughts, and an implanter of visions. You might be wondering what exactly his job entails, but harvesting emotion and cultivating others' sympathies is not so easy to understand. His talent resonated most with those whose lives weren't running one hundred percent smoothly, whose minor hiccups cause debilitating depressions, whose thoughts have been invaded by the persistent remnants of death, sadness, heartache, denial, cowardice, and fear. Those who have lost their control.

Then my life became consumed by his message. For what I couldn't feel conventionally, I felt honestly in the sound, the rhythm, and the lyrics. I fell into a trap, albeit a pleasant cycle that never left me quite satisfied. The days passed, filled with excitement and plenty of new experiences. But there was always that itch, irksome nag, nefarious inkling that I wasn't doing what I wanted most, living with the freedom I hoped for.

Many times I had sensed that freedom somewhere nearby, like a jittering rabbit hiding in a bush, or just behind the uncomfortable stare of someone drooping by on a wintry sidewalk. The idea was too ugly to look in the eye and once you got around to doing even THAT, it was too quick to catch in your cumbersome hands.

So instead of trapping the idea, I tried sharing it. I was at peace that the creature was out there in the wild and that catching and suppressing it was nearly impossible. The sad truth is that sharing it turned out to be just as tough on my mental fortitude.

Deep down in my chest, propped neatly but inconspicuously between layers of mesentery and other functioning parts, I keep my emotions gagged and bound. But I

don't support this imprisonment; truthfully, I do everything in my power to put a stop to it. My subconscious is the culprit in this case, stepping in whenever sadness attempts to pull the lever for tears, impeding reason from wriggling free to stimulate my love, or when trust tries to traverse choppy waters with a friend and make it out on the other side of the maelstrom. You see, I cannot resolve what happens hidden deep inside, what's guarded so ferociously.

But there are times when my numbness deadens for spells. Like a pulse of pure nerve sensation methodically working its way from my extremities inward. Like the lifting of an overstayed amnesia as I remember what it is to feel. We didn't have to speak; thoughts communicated by touch, the absorption of heat on contact, the notion that we could stay like this forever knowing that there was at least one person in the world that solely wanted to be with me.

And for once, I was absolutely fine with the touch, the moment frozen because we both were lost souls looking for someone to understand, to care. It was that touch that somehow conveyed to me what it means to feel comfortable with someone. And even more than feeling connected to them, I felt self-assured for the first time in ages.

Taking those steps out the door and driving away produced an egregious void in my center. For the past two years, I'd gone through spurts of being foolishly smitten, obsessed with outlandish ideas of fate. But now I felt a true longing for one specific charge, and it was new to feel grounded within myself.

Simultaneous to this self-realization, I felt insulated from the dynamic chaos I had previously envisioned for years. I was finally ready to trust that sharing my new-found feelings of longing wouldn't result in an apocalyptic lashback.

The rain was systems away and had probably dissipated somewhere over the ocean. All my age-old fears were being hunted by an emotional immune response, a growing hope that I was becoming my own person. I was channeling my connection to music into a written work and in turn into decisive, fearless action. As I lay here, the holiday lights (not yet taken down) reminded me of the spirit I'd been lacking during Christmas and the coming of the New Year. The red glow visualized my strangely loud beating heart that yearned for a warm touch. As I continued to lay, to stare, to imagine, and to contemplate my freedom, the vision and essence crept into a smile on my face.

I had no way of knowing the means for taking interest and molding it into consensual sensation. Blood rushing back into my limbs, they begin to move again, but awkwardly and with deliberate hesitancy. A new year is such a superficial excuse for enacting change, but the genuine conviction I felt was justification enough for me. I promised myself that I wouldn't float through a lifetime without expressing to people how much their very existence meant more to me than they would have known otherwise. I was fully prepared to wake up and rub this new thought on the faces of the sleepy lemmings stuck in their unhappy habits. Watch while I resuscitate them with

my contagious energy and conviction. No escaping while I impose my emotion on an unsuspecting world. Our joking yet ironically appropriate mantra of “just go with it” was about to help me sift through the life experiences that got snagged in the fibers of our clothes and metamorphose them into my new purpose.

The little things can reveal a great deal about a person’s tendencies. Years upon years of partitioned confusion, an accumulation of unanswered questions and deluded answers. The undeveloped frontal lobe of a boy, a young man, is unequipped to address these issues of identity and purpose.

To travel inside the mind is akin to entering a library whose books are caked with dust and warped with time. The shelves are buckling under the weight of excessive books and expectation. The selection is grand, decorated, yet nothing is grandiose about incompleteness or obscurity. Each novel is miserably unfinished, blatantly unaware of where it wishes to end. And like my emotions these books are bound with the toughest materials so as to keep out sensation mongers.

Synaptic impulses continuously relay new messages to the library front desk; for too long, these messages have been shoveled in and forgotten in a mix of misaligned priorities and a clinging hope that everything in life would fall perfectly into my lap. There is no order or reason to my memories, but I’m sure there is an overlapping connection.

Staring at the blurry corner of a movie theater screen, KNOWING that I alone in the world would experience that pixel. Becoming the mastermind behind a series of pranks, the concocter of potions and natural remedies and globular salves. Thinking of light as a guardian of dust and dust as the manifest of a transparent life force. Assuming (but still KNOWING) that I could judge others, analyze them, and somehow understand them in ways no one else was capable of.

I was chasing an ideal. Blessed with a sharp mind and an overactive imagination, it consumed my being and I lost my sense of feasibility and objectivity. I would wrap myself in these over-hyped ideas, keep warm in the fleece false assurance and the wool embrace of something that, to put it bluntly, would just never come to fruition.

Everything was coming to light. Everything was light. My eyes couldn’t handle the drain of a thousand glowing bulbs, the wispy buzz of fluorescence, the searing pain in my temples from the glare and the glass and the energy. I was drawn in, yet repulsed. At every opportunity, I would turn off the light and find solace in darkness. The appeal, the emanation, and the allure were not enough to allow me comfort.

I withdrew in the presence of light into the dark recesses of the stacks and was fully assimilated, devoured by the blackness. How habitual it was to suck others into the darkness also. I preyed on ambiguity and reservation and noncommittal replies, to protect what was sacred to me. And when I was forced back into light, I froze for the

peril was all too familiar. Secrecy was a sworn friend of mine.

My eyes were tired from the familiarity and weary from constant fear of the light and also scarred by the penetrating darkness. To some extent, I was regressing to what I once cherished and what I knew to be safe.

She was incorrect in making the assumption. He implied that it wasn't a good fit at the given moment. They all knew I was capable and ready, but I guess my motivation was up on the chopping block. What I would have done in the past continued on undeterred while small pieces of me were slowly chiseled off when I turned away. The light beckons again, as expected, but now I yearn for small doses of fear and exposure.

There's a certain step on the front walk that proves dangerous for most visitors. There's a patch of black ice deceptively basking on the landing above the outer lip of the step. There's a dog sleeping there, snout dribbling over the lip, dreaming of dog things. Should someone disturb its sleep, these dog visions would mutate from pleasant doggy dreamscape into a bloodthirsty rage, swallowing pits of bile, smeared blood in the slush of the dubious ice patch. And when the dog regains awareness, there's no halting his menacing progress. You cannot climb the step (run away in fear!), and traverse the lip (please avoid the black ice!), and turn the faded brass handle attached to an old barren door. You missed out on something big because you lacked subtlety and caution. What was behind that door?

To be completely honest, I was somewhat distraught, but not at all surprised. I've blown way too many opportunities to think that things are going to fall in place now. One door closes... But the crash never came, the sound of shattering hearts and cracking courage never reached the threshold of my ears. I felt potential down this road. I've stopped caring about the image or even the reaction, because I feel something genuine and organic and loving. One door opens... I may be hiding behind a misleading safeguard, my past lending to expected assumptions. If I am totally mistaken, if I end up causing and being and becoming the crash, I may be irreversibly scarred. So you can see why making the first move would be tolling. Failure: my greatest fear.

And until I overcome that hurdle, the sentiment will be the same. This story can have no end or beginning. Just an amorphous collection of thought floating freely, occasionally colliding with my brainwaves. I am the catalyst for my own change and until then, I romance with darkness and turn out the lights.

The Artist and Nature

Ryan Woods

The sun, emblazoned in the blue, abyssal sky above, shined down upon the terrestrial greenery turning to the warm colors of red and brown and yellow and falling to the dear earthen floor where its lifeblood and nutrients would return later to the trees and offspring of trees from which it came, and the creatures of the forest hurried about making preparations for the cold winter months ahead, running to and fro gathering the gifts of their arboreal guardians and homes. And the cool stream rushed along the dirt path and among the stones, the water as clear as glass and glimmering like diamonds as it played its soothing trickle-tune. The ground was moist and beginning to be blanketed with crunchy leaves that would sink into the mud and become a crisp ground-covering. And the grass was tall, mature after growing all summer.

To this scene of autumn tranquility was added a man, an artist, to be specific, who had resolved earlier that morning to travel into the woods he had always loved and to capture this beautiful autumn day with paint and paper to keep with him and his family to enjoy and revere. The artist was a young man, but he was experienced, and talented at that. Many times he had painted landscapes and scenes of beautiful nature. But this would be his best.

He set up his easel and readied his equipment by the side of the stream looking over it, through the trees, and out into the fields. The trees were sparse enough to view the green meadows beyond and the brilliant sun, yet dense enough to signify the location as a forest. And the stream would run along the bottom of the page.

The artist began to paint. It most certainly was his best. He enjoyed it like no painting before. He felt he understood beauty, purely and simply, and could capture nature in all its majesty and wonder.

He was nearly finished when he heard footsteps, soft, yet crunching on the leaves. He turned to see who it was.

And, behold, he saw a woman, beautiful beyond compare, garbed in a dress of green leaves and ivy, with a crown of orange, red, and yellow leaves, an autumnal circlet, on her head. Her skin was soft and pale, yet still with a touch of color. She seemed to be overflowing with life, yet reserved, like summer fading into autumn and autumn giving way to the cold and frigid winter.

She stepped carefully and with a fairy-like grace. Her hands were thin and dainty, and her arms sharply defined, yet smooth, like liquid crystal in bodily form. And she looked upon the artist with her blazing eyes. They were one minute orange, another, blue, and seemed to hold the entire range of color in their pearl-white beauty, like orbs of quiet light. She looked youthful, but wise, and her countenance expressed a hint of anger. All the same, there was something welcoming about her.

Her mouth was thin and curved to a point where it was neither smile nor frown. Her lips were defined, pink and delicate, yet sharp and stern.

And the manner in which she carried herself, gracefully moving her arms and legs, caressing the foliage she neared, and holding her head erect, while at the same time leaning back comfortably and silently conversing with trees like old friends, had an air of wonder and a touch of terror in it.

On the whole, this woman was astonishingly beautiful, and the artist was taken aback. Here beauty could not be mastered nor controlled, but it ran wild in vibrant life and majestic power.

She continued towards him. The artist was unable to speak, so could only stare, and this he did. His picture was dwarfed behind him as this woman came near.

At last, she spoke in a voice, pure like a mountain spring, soft like a gentle breeze, joyful like the songs of birds, powerful like the roar of thunder, and harsh like the frigid winter, all at once, and she said,

“Dear son of man and traveler here in my dominion, child and stranger, I speak to you. For you are the one that is called an artist, yes?”

The artist could only nod. This woman was bewildering, and he was flustered.

“I perceive your cowering fear. Foolish human that dare be prideful in my absence! Yet at the same time I am moved to comfort you and offer you warmth and joy.

“I speak to you because you are chief of your race, in head of your profession. You are the greatest artist I have found. And now, I lay bare to you my anger and my request.

“You sons and daughters of man build your homes and make your lives here in my domain, altering what you deem needs be altered, and both destroying and perverting what once was pure. But this grudge I bring not to you. No, in this respect, you artists are very much in my favor. You see me, and you admire me. You will not have me corrupted. And I thank you for that.

“No, that is not my grudge against you. But this is: you artists enter into those areas where I remain as I should be, where I am still pure, and you bring with you your products of civilization, your easels, your paper, your paint, and your brushes. And you search. You search for a place where you can find beauty at its greatest, and you begin to record it. And as you record it, you pervert it. You distort it and destroy it. You make a pathetic rendition, a wretched portrait of me.”

By this time, the artist was overwhelmed and confused. And the woman continued in greater force.

“Fool! Do you not understand me? Look at what you have made. See your work.”

She stepped over to his easel and held her hand towards it.

“This scratch, this manipulation, this perversion you call art, this is what I

loathe. This and the lot, the world over. It robs me and slanders me. I am simplified and misrepresented. I am made child's play and fool's jest. I am destroyed by you, in the image of your minds. I seek to be beautiful for you. I give you all I have. But how do you repay me? You make this, this filth. You rob me and laugh at my loss. Shall I forgive you? I daresay, I cannot do so now.

"But I may. That is why I shall make a request, a plea and heartfelt commission: Go, seek out this wretched art and destroy it. Seek it until you reach the ends of the earth and beyond; circle back and circle forth. Save me from your artist's hand, until the last stain is washed away."

Now, fully understanding the woman and perceiving that her assault was on his profession and love, he gathered up his courage and, like the inspiration that gives birth to and sets in motion the creation of a work of art, let his defense flow out to meet the challenge and make its impassioned statement.

"Dear woman, Nature, as I perceive your name to be, I now respond to you both as adoring subject and loving sibling.

"Art is not, as you say, a distortion or perversion. Neither is it an assault upon your beauty. Rather, it is a glorification, a joyful praise, and thankfulness for your presence. It is not a mockery, but a compliment. We love you and would not see you harmed. There are some in this world that may seek to destroy you, but, I assure you, this is not the rule for man. We are travelers here, as you say, and we can do you damage from time to time, but we are not your enemies.

"The profession of art is pure. It is an honest form of joy and praise. It takes your beauty and adds to it. It does not detract from it. I did not come here today to rob you or harm you. I came here to bask in your beauty and share in your joy. I came here to add what I could to it, by making a new rendition. Certainly, it might not be great, and it definitely cannot even attempt to match you in beauty, but its purpose lies not in wickedness. Its purpose is to glorify what is already there, to stack joy upon joy, beauty upon beauty.

"I mean you no harm. I assure you, art is an addition to beauty, an addition and glorification of Nature, not a detraction from it—not a detraction from you."

The woman was surprised. She expected to achieve her ends and that the young artist would submit to her ways, but now she was undone. She thought and, after a pause, spoke again, this time with a smile.

"Dearest human, dearest artist, I now see the truth of your words. You, and many others like you—you have all meant me no harm. Indeed, you have complimented me, and I failed to see it. It is I who owe an apology. It is I who have been in the wrong. Forgive me, son of man, and do please mean it from the heart. And, in recompense, I will answer you a request."

"Dearest Nature, dearest sister, I can request nothing more from you but this:

remain beautiful and increase in beauty, that the profession of art might ever seek you and emulate you and, in so doing, praise you for your beauty. I am infinitely grateful and overjoyed at your understanding. I thank you and most certainly forgive you.”

And dear Nature turned away, walking on into the distance, that the artist might complete his work.

The Cardboard Castle

Clara Mount

The day was finished. It had progressed as usual: screaming eight-year-old twin boys in the morning, wanting anything but their third-grade classrooms; a beautiful but morning-impaired wife, denying any part in the malfunction of their kids; ride to school, ride to the parking garage by Rock Bottom, ride through the day's managerial duties, pressing on through stress and productivity and dissenting staff. Now Neil was free of the bustle of fine restaurant life, for at least one more evening.

He pushed through the large tinted-glass doors on the front of the building, exiting onto Washington Street. Taking his usual course back to his parking garage, Neil walked past the tinted front windows of Rock Bottom, through which any passerby could see joyous patrons dining at the dark wood tables. No guests had chosen to dine outside today, under the bright red awnings above the windows and the elegantly curved white lamps above them and the sign that screamed the restaurant's name in vertically aligned red letters still higher on the wall. Neil respected that decision; although the customer was always right, the wait staff preferred staying in the climate-controlled indoors by the time late October hit.

Neil arrived very quickly at Indianapolis' very own Monument Circle, which he walked through twice every day he worked. He never tired of the monument, especially in winter, when whoever was in charge of street maintenance would string long strands of yellowish-white Christmas lights from the top of it down to the ground. With the high point of the observation deck acting as the tip of a cone—331 steps tall, he remembered, from the many times he'd climbed the numbered stairs—it looked like a hollowed-out Christmas tree. Of course, it wasn't the season for that yet. The leaves were still dropping from the trees that lined the Circle, scattering across the brick-laid roadway and sidewalks as they were picked up by the wind.

Neil inhaled, expecting the air to hint at snow and a bit of spice from the dying leaves as it had every other day for the past week or more, but he found a different odor instead. When he looked for the source, Neil spotted a man wearing the Colts sweatshirt from the year they won the Super Bowl, layered under a military camouflage jacket. The man was resting against the light-tan-colored limestone wall outside the Sprint store, alongside a scraggly German shepherd. The dog's ribs were showing, but then, the man, presumably homeless, didn't look a whole lot better. He needed a shave. And some soap would probably stifle some of the stink of body odor and cigarettes and alcohol emanating from his spot against the wall. Neil watched a woman in a light blue jacket stiffen as she walked past the homeless man's suitcase, open and with a meager amount of money in it.

Neil's nose wrinkled, gauging the homeless man's troubles to be the result of

poor decision-making, a theory that the presence of the dog only supported. He thought back to a comedy piece he'd read once. *Zero is the number of dogs you should own if you're homeless.* That seemed about right. If you couldn't afford to feed yourself, how were you supposed to fill another stomach? Especially since the man's addiction probably sucked dry all the donations that the pedestrians in their fine leather boots and stylish suits left in the homeless man's open suitcase—charity gone awry.

The German shepherd woofed, a low rumble in its chest, and wagged its ragged little tail as Neil walked past. Its ears perked forward, and it gazed expectantly up at the restaurant manager. He reached into his pocket to feel little metal Washingtons clanking against Jeffersons, Lincolns, maybe even against the tiniest likenesses of Roosevelt. Then he politely denied the dog's begging and continued walking, following the example set for him by any number of passersby on the Circle that day.

Just past the homeless man, Neil stopped on the corner of Meridian Street, electing to wait for the little red flashing hand to turn into a white walking man again instead of braving traffic. He didn't really feel up to an adventure today. Neil tapped his foot against the brick sidewalk, matching the rhythm of his fingertips' impatient tapping on the face of his analog watch. The watch's cogs and gears showed through an invisible glass barrier, the numbers interposed across the surface, the hands reaching for the shiny little numbers as the seconds ticked away.

Neil's eyes twitched with his impatience, flickering from place to place along Monument Circle: the soldiers and angels carved from stone in the middle of the Circle, the individual bricks on the ground, the stranger walking past who could have been an ex-spy in his black trench coat, the old limestone Episcopal church building that had been on the corner forever, the red M&I Bank building a block or so off that rose stories above the tallest building on the Circle. A small swarm of people in black and grey jackets herded into the Starbucks on the far side of the monument, and another group converged on the Quiznos two doors down.

A crowd of faces gathered around Neil, waiting with him for the walking man symbol to return.

Then Neil's sightline was interrupted by a peculiar image directly across the street from him, in the center of the Circle, close to the fountain at the base of the soldiers' and sailors' monument. A woman in a paint-stained woolen hat and an oversized sweater, a man's nondescript gray sweater that definitely could have qualified as a dress, was standing in the bed of a paint-chipped and scratched-up teal pickup truck, unloading boxes. Her movements were quick and frustrated as she withdrew the cardboard from the truck bed and hastily tossed it onto the cement of the Circle's center, piece after piece. Having removed the mass of flattened boxes from her truck bed, she hopped down with all the grace of a penguin, landing unsteadily on her feet and turning to glare at the pile of disassembled cardboard lying harmlessly on the sidewalk.

A few ticks of Neil's watch went by, and the woman dropped to hands and knees on the repositioned pile of cardboard like Cinderella cleaning her stepmother's home after a verbal battle. Her hands formed actual boxes from the flattened cardboard with surprising viciousness. There was a desperate edge to her motion; her movements were jerky, agitated by expectation or anxiety or frustration as she worked. Or maybe the jerkiness was just the cold creeping into her muscles as the season cooled the day's climate. It could have been nothing at all, or nothing more than Neil's imagination.

The digital walking man across Meridian Street reappeared suddenly as Neil watched the woman, but even as all the strangers shuffled past and around him, no doubt irritated that he didn't understand the concept of crossing a street, Neil's feet remained fixed to the brick sidewalk.

The woman couldn't have been any older than he was, surely not over thirty. Still young, but past the age where the whole world seemed like it was against you. Fragile was a good word to describe her. Her hands were fragile: maybe if Neil tried to talk to her, he would have broken her like he broke his grandma's china when he was ten and tried to teach his cousin to swing a baseball bat in her living room.

Neil watched those fragile hands work the flattened cardboard into useable boxes. The woman left the constructed boxes haphazardly around her as she finished out the rest. The sheer number of them that now dominated a portion of Monument Circle was surprising in itself. Neil wanted to know where the hell she had managed to find so many, and why she would have bothered to keep them in that crappy truck of hers. But how could he ever approach the girl, a stranger, with such a question? Anyway, what she was going to do with them was an even more intriguing question to him, and he certainly wouldn't learn that by interfering.

The woman paused when the stack of flattened cardboard had dwindled to nothing, pinning her hands to the top of her head as if concerned about the existence of her own skull or the paint-spattered hat on top of it.

Then the woman lashed out at the nearest box, kicking it with the fury of a scorned lover. Then the moment passed, and she returned to a semi-meditative state, passively observing the mound of cardboard that surrounded her.

In the lull, Neil looked toward the digital walking sign on the other side of the street. Neil began to cross Meridian, but the red hand appeared again and flashed at him vehemently. Sighing, he settled back into his street "corner"; his eyes returned to the lady in the center of Monument Circle and he entertained a mental image of her with only boxes for friends.

Now she was arranging the boxes by size. She had established a system in the outbursts of passion against her cardboard friends: if the box was big, it got a violent kick to the left, and if it was small, it got a brutal thrust to the right. None of them came

out unscathed.

The crosswalk signal changed again before the woman had finished her task, but Neil stood as if he'd accidentally been cemented into the sidewalk when it was laid, a wrong place at the wrong time kind of scenario. He didn't even really notice the businessmen briskly pushing past him, their briefcases brushing up against his legs, or the women who like to look rich carrying their large designer bags in brilliant colors, faces distorted by too-bright clown lipstick. He kept his eyes trained on the woman by the monument.

Her schemes seemed to be growing in purpose and form. She was by this point arranging the largest boxes in an arcing formation, slowly making an effort to bring both ends closer together to effect a more circular shape. Unfortunately, geometry didn't seem to be her forte; it soon became clear that she found her attempt at a circle dissatisfactory and she promptly demolished all of it, wiping her canvas clear.

Next Neil watched the woman establish a rectangular base, five boxes long by four boxes wide. Plenty of room for a child of any age to play inside. In a way, it reminded Neil of his junior high days, when the kids still thought it was cool to go outside and chuck snowballs at each other with only their snow forts available for defense. If only his forts back then had been as big as this one could turn out to be.

On top of each box of the base, excluding the gap in the foundation that represented a door, the sweated woman placed a slightly smaller box, brick-layering style—not quite lined up. The cardboard stones of the walls started building up toward the sky as she repeated the process for first one layer and then another and then another, shifting gears when she exhausted her vertical reach to use the smallest boxes to create alternating crenels and merlons on the tops of each of the four walls, like a real castle. It was as if Neil were watching the formation of a world; he was watching the castle rising and the dragons being defeated and the princess that needed saving. But why was she doing this?

Neil's eyes darted around, and he saw people starting to notice the woman's antics. The homeless man from before was staring, utterly fascinated, jaw gone slack like he'd just seen the bikini segment of a beauty competition. There was another victim of bad decisions a few stores farther around the Circle, a woman with stringy hair, oversized gloves with holes all over them, an oversized coat, a ragged, ill-fitting dress, and a shopping bag in her hand, one of those eco-friendly reusable ones. Then there were the members of the general population, about to fall over themselves from paying too much attention to gawking and too little attention to walking—a lady in a bright green peacoat and dress slacks, a college boy in jeans and a black hoodie with a design from some game like *Left 4 Dead* on it, his college girlfriend in a dress and tennis shoes, the manager at Starbucks in the forest green apron distracted from his work. The castle-building woman was causing a bit of a commotion on the Circle.

Neil licked his lips, glanced up at the grey sky, and before he could change his mind, he cautiously darted through the traffic on the roundabout, stopping a discreet distance away from the woman and her boxes and pretending not to look at her. He could see her face better this way.

Her eyebrows creased her forehead and her tongue applied pressure to the inside of her cheek as she worked, scrutinizing each piece of cardboard with an artist's eye before applying it to her masterpiece. She paused for a moment, none of the tension leaving her body, and released her frustrations by whipping a strand of her own black hair out of her eyes and burying it beneath the edge of her hat. Then her hands balled into pitiful fists and Neil wondered if her fingernails were long enough that she'd hurt herself. She stalked closer to the cardboard castle and glared at it, withdrew her leg, prepared to kick it to the cement, and—

The homeless man and his outdated Colts sweatshirt and his scraggly German shepherd interjected. "Excuse me," he said. She stared at him. Her mouth moved as if she had to loosen her jaw up enough to speak. "Excuse me," he began again. "Do you mind—"

"Yeah?" She seemed less than pleased at the interruption.

"It's really nothing, miss, but you look... Are you okay?"

"Does it look like I'm okay?"

"N—"

"Then I'm probably not okay." She turned back to her castle and flexed her leg again to assault it.

"Miss," the homeless man put in more forcefully, "what happened to you?"

Her kick stopped mid-swing. "What are you talking about?" She turned her glare onto him.

"What's your story?" he asked.

"I don't have one."

"Horseshit. We all have one. We had to get where we are somehow." He patted the mangled ears of the German shepherd at his side, which grinned as only dogs can. He tried to imitate that grin. He must have thought it was reassuring.

The woman rolled her eyes up to the sky and looked down again at the homeless man before her. "You want to hear my story?" Doubt coated her tone.

"Yes," the man agreed. She waited, saying nothing. "Well, go on. I'm all ears." He cupped his hand around his ear and turned his head slightly in her direction to prove his point. The dog imitated the action.

The woman stared at him quizzically for a moment, looked around, saw Neil, who pretended to be more interested in the fountain at the base of the monument, and dropped her eyes to the brick beneath her tennis shoes. Her fists clenched and her eyes closed. Neil's ears perked up like the German shepherd's had earlier.

"I'm not homeless yet, you know. I've got somewhere to go. A truck to sleep in, at least." Animosity. Irritation. Offense. The dog barked and grinned and wagged its scruffy tail. "Shut up, pup." But the woman smiled anyway and moved close enough to it to let it sniff her extended hand.

"Then where are you going?" the homeless man asked. Neil caught a smile on his face too.

She paused. "I'm not totally sure yet. My boyfriend and I were supposed to get a place—I was on my way to his place to start helping him pack up—but that fell through... and now... Damn it. He's my ex now. I guess I'll never know how miserable that arrangement would've made me." She chuckled dryly.

The man stared at her. Neil imagined the man taking in every intricacy of her face, the high cheekbones, clear eyes, arched eyebrows.

The man said, "I'm in the same boat, I guess." He cracked a grin, his teeth crooked.

"Oh?"

"Lost my job, lost my girlfriend, and all I got out of it was this stinking dog." He rubbed its ears affectionately.

She was quiet for a moment. "You don't have a family to go back to?"

"Nah, they gave up on me years ago. I was into some bad stuff in high school, and we had a terrible relationship anyway. They didn't want anything to do with a son who was so messed up. I was living on my own from the time I graduated, but I got myself together before I got through undergrad. Bio major, you know, for teaching. But there's not really any money in teaching, and the economy sucks, and here I am."

There was another pause. "You're a pretty talkative guy."

He chuckled. "It happens that way when no one's willing to talk to you. They all think you're a drug addict or an alcoholic when really you're just a guy without a job and down on his luck."

Neil watched the woman's eyes travel between the ragged man and the organized mass of boxes behind her. She didn't seem any more capable of understanding this situation than he was.

"I don't mean to be rude, but what do you want?" she finally asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "I just wanted to know why you were—"

"That's a lie. You didn't just walk over here to see about the wellbeing of a stranger."

He tripped over his words and laughed. His laugh paralleled a growl from the German shepherd's ribcage. "Okay, well, I... I just wanted to know where you got the boxes."

"It's not important."

"It is to me."

“Do you want them? I was only using them for, um, an art project.”

Neil was openly gawking at the pair by this point. His hand in his pocket toyed with the clinking metal images of dead presidents. He took the coins out and stared at them in the palm of his hand, perplexed.

The man’s eyes lit up. “Do you mean that?”

“Sure. I’m probably just going to get fined for littering, and anyway, the boxes weren’t the point.” The woman gestured grandly at the entrance to her castle. “It’s all yours, sir.”

The man smiled, legitimately this time. “Thank you. I was wondering where I... I needed some of these. Thank you very much, miss.” He left his suitcase where he stood and approached the cardboard castle like one in reverence of the Lord.

Neil dropped the monument-admiring act, the coins weighing too heavily on his hand and his smooth leather wallet digging even deeper into his pocket. He approached the castle and cleared his throat. “Excuse me.”

The man and the woman froze and turned to look at him; the woman’s hand stopped halfway to the German shepherd’s ears.

“I just... noticed that you’re down on your luck. Would you mind if I took you to dinner? Both of you, I mean.”

The pair blinked dazedly and then stared at Neil. “Uh, yes?” the woman said, a crazy little question mark floating around at the end of her statement.

Neil nodded nervously. “This way, then. I know a great little café. My wife and I eat there a lot. I’m Neil, by the way.”

“I’m Jed.” The men shook hands.

“Corinne. Nice to meet you. And, um, thanks.” She shook hands with Neil as well.

Then Neil turned to go, hoping they would follow. They did.

Once they had reached the café, the strange man turned to the stranger woman and asked, “If you don’t mind my asking... If the boxes weren’t the point, what was?”

Corinne smiled. “It was...” She paused.

Without even blinking, Neil responded for her: “You, Jed. The point is you.”

Blind Faith

Dena Raposa

"It won't be forever, Samuel."

"Liar."

He could hear the rustling of Mary's skirts from somewhere behind him, and the scraping sound of a curtain being pulled back. The room smelled clean and un-lived-in, the stiff scent of starch clinging to the bedclothes, the window curtains, the heavy apron Mary wore. So different from the battlefields he'd recently returned from.

"Samuel..." Mary's cool, thin fingers brushed against the side of his neck, and Samuel jumped, startled.

"Don't do that," he growled, and the fingers vanished.

"I didn't mean to startle you." The teasing tone in her voice set his teeth on edge, and he jerked away, crossing clumsily to the window. "It doesn't matter." But it did.

"What's wrong with you?" Mary wasn't laughing anymore. Her voice was reproachful. Reasonable, even. Reasonable!

"What's wrong with me?" he repeated, turning toward the sound of his voice. "What's wrong with you? There are men out there, Mary. They're fighting. And they're dying. I know what the papers say. That they're heroes, that somehow what they do is noble. But it isn't. It's horrible, and pointless. And you can't see that, can you?" She didn't answer, so he said it again, more forcefully, almost shouting. "Can you, Mary?"

"Of course I do," Mary said softly. Samuel snorted and turned away. "But you've escaped all that now. The Great War can go on without you. You're home again."

"Not all of me," Samuel said. "I left part of me on the battlefield."

"Doctor Miller said your sight could come back," Mary said gently. Samuel could hear her tiny feet padding across the floor toward him, so he was tensed but not surprised when she reached out and took his hand in hers. "And even if it doesn't, I'll be here to take care of you. Forever."

"You would trap me here," said Samuel. "In my father's empty country house, hours from London, cut off from the city and every part of my life."

"How can you say that?" Mary demanded. "You could have a life here... with me..." She moved closer to him, until Samuel could feel the heavy fabric of her skirts press against his trousers. "Before you left to fight in the war, we planned to marry."

"No," Samuel said. "You planned to marry me."

She gasped, and wrenched her hand back. A moment later, Samuel heard the angry patter of her feet running out of the room and down the corridor. He listened to her go, his heart oddly light. Mary and he had been close as children, in the years before the war. Back in those days, Samuel had seen these lands, his father's country es-

tate, as an Eden of sorts. It was an escape from the noise and smell of the city, from his mother's constant illnesses, and his father's cold stares. Every summer, twelve weeks out of the year, was spent in this house. They were the best memories he had.

And there had always been Mary.

She was the gardener's daughter, delicate and charming, always interested in everything he did or said. When Samuel was a child, he thought that made him interesting. Now he knew better. War had taught him better. He wasn't the person Mary had built him up to be—he was nothing very special at all. And while once he had considered wedding himself to Mary, he now knew he hadn't loved her at all. Only the version of himself he saw reflected in her admiring eyes.

"You always were terrible with women."

"Who's there?" Samuel demanded. He would have sworn he was alone in the room since Mary had gone running out. He tensed. The ever-present darkness made him paranoid—it was impossible to tell when he might run into something, or when some unknown assailant might come for him.

But that was the war talking, and Samuel knew it. He made an effort to calm himself, and failed miserably. He felt naked without a weapon, but Doctor Miller had ordered him disarmed until he 'reacquainted himself with life at peace.'

"Just me."

It was a woman's voice, lower than Mary's but younger than the house's cook's, who had been with the estate since Samuel's father was young. And as far as Samuel knew there were no other women in the house.

"Who?"

"You sound like an owl."

"Wh... what?" This conversation was not going at all in a direction he felt comfortable with. "An... owl?"

"Because owls say—ah, never mind." The mystery woman gave a deep sigh. "Don't worry about me. Worry about you."

Cautiously, Samuel began to work his way across the room, following the sound of her voice. "What should I be worrying about?" he asked, to get her talking again.

"Here." Two calloused hands grasped at Samuel's forearms, pulled them forward. "I can't watch you stumble around like a blind man. It's too sad."

"I am a blind man," Samuel answered.

"And I'm a dead woman. Let's not focus on labels."

"You're—wait, what?"

"Dead," she repeated, voice completely serious. "But that's what happens when you're convicted of witchcraft and burned at the stake."

"Witchcraft?" Samuel laughed, sure now that she was putting him on.

"Completely untrue, I promise. And it was a few hundred years ago anyway so

it's not like it really matters."

Samuel stopped laughing abruptly, suddenly confused. He wasn't sure where this joke was going. "You're crazy," he said, a little tentatively. She still might just be teasing him, which would actually be nice. Ever since the battle where he had lost his sight, everyone had walked on eggshells around him. It was enough to drive a man mad.

"Dead, actually." Her voice faded, and the hands that held Samuel's suddenly seemed a lot less solid. "But close enough..."

And just like that, she had gone, leaving Samuel utterly alone and suddenly uncertain. He spent that night in his room, refusing to see anyone, thinking it all over. He spent the next day alone because he just wasn't ready to leave. And the day after that, because he kept imagining the stares everyone else would give him, stares he wouldn't even be able to see. Slowly, without noticing, he slipped into brooding.

The next day, the ghost came back.

The first he knew of it was when her incredulous voice demanded, "Are you moping?"

He had been, actually, lying face down on his bed, limbs splayed out around him like a dying starfish. But he would never admit it. He had that much pride left, at least. "No," he said, scrambling suddenly to his feet. "Listen." He'd been thinking about her a lot in his days alone. More than he would have liked to admit. "You can't just say you're a convicted witch and you've been dead for centuries and then just leave without a proper explanation!"

There was no response for several long moments. Samuel stood motionless in the middle of the room, listening with all his might, hoping to God he hadn't scared her off again, wishing he still had his vision, so he could just see if she was there or not.

"It wouldn't help anyway."

Samuel jumped, trying to ignore the way she snickered in response. She was so close behind him that he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. "What wouldn't help?"

"Even if you could see, you wouldn't see me."

He shook his head, wondering how she'd even known he was thinking that. "Why not?"

She stepped around him, and Samuel had the strangest feeling that she was scrutinizing his face. She smelled of autumn, of falling leaves and bitter winds.

"I told you. I'm dead."

"So what does that mean?" Samuel demanded. "Are you a ghost?"

"No."

"Then... what are you?"

"Anna." She poked him lightly, almost playfully, in the side. "It's my name, in

case you were wondering. Which you weren't."

Years of lessons in manners and chivalry came to his aid. "My apologies, Anna."

"Sure," she said. "And no. I'm not a ghost. More like an... echo. Something you hear, not something you see."

"And is that because you're a witch?" Samuel sat down on the bed, and a moment later he felt it dip as Anna sat down next to him.

"I told you," she said. "I was falsely accused. I'm not a witch."

"Then why are you a gho—an echo?" Samuel asked. "There has to be some reason you're special."

"Special?" Anna repeated. "Well I don't know about that. It might not be me. It might be something that happens to everyone, and we're all just on different frequencies."

"Different what?"

"Or maybe it's you," Anna went on, apparently not listening.

"Me?" Samuel laughed. "I highly doubt that."

"No one else has ever been able to hear me," Anna said. "And I have been around for a long time. But... well, the odd thing is that I was here when you were young, too. You never heard me then." Suddenly her fingers were on his face, hesitant, almost asking for permission. "Maybe it's because you've been blinded. You can't see, so you're learning to listen."

"Or maybe you're just a hallucination," Samuel said. "I've seen soldiers go mad before."

Her fingers dropped away, and for a moment Samuel thought she might have been wounded by his words. Then she took his hands in hers. "Do I feel like a hallucination?" Her tone was one of honest curiosity.

"I'm not sure," Samuel admitted. "I've never met one before."

"Well," said Anna. "I'll have to think on that."

And for a second time, she vanished.

The next morning, Mary brought a visitor in to see him.

"Samuel?" she called from the doorway. "There's someone here for you."

"Dr. Miller." Samuel had been at his desk, staring sightlessly out the open window, but now he rose to his feet. "Always a pleasure."

"The pleasure is mine." Dr. Miller stepped forward, his footfalls heavy even on the floor's thick carpet, and grasped Samuel's outstretched hand. "But... ah, if you don't mind, how did you know it was me?"

In truth, it had been the doctor's smell—clean, almost too clean. "You have been my doctor since I was young. Of course I know you."

"Ah. Well, in any case, your fiancée asked me to see you. She said you have been depressed over the loss of your sight."

"Fiancée, she said?" Samuel murmured. "Well, I won't say this has been a pleasant experience for me, but it hasn't been... entirely bad."

"How so?" The doctor's tone was dubious.

He had been thinking of Anna. "Ah. My... other senses, for one," he improvised. No point mentioning her. Not when Samuel couldn't decide for himself if Anna was real or a hallucination.

"Well. In any case." Samuel heard Dr. Miller deposit his case onto the desk, and a moment later felt the doctor's calloused hands grasp his elbow. "I need to examine your eyes to see how they're healing."

"Alright."

Samuel allowed Dr. Miller to guide him onto the bed, then sat perfectly still as the doctor unwound the bandage from his eyes with quick, sure movements. As each layer came off, Samuel caught himself straining to see, but there was nothing, only vague impressions of light and shadow.

"Well," Dr. Miller said finally. "You seem to be healing well."

They were the last words Samuel had expected to hear. Or so he thought, until the doctor continued—

"In fact, I think your vision should be practically restored within a few weeks. At least enough to allow you to function normally."

It was an outcome Samuel had not dared hope for, and Samuel couldn't quite stop himself from smiling at the news. Then he thought again of Anna, and the smile turned to ice.

Dr. Miller went on speaking, but Samuel was no longer listening. He heard Mary give some reply, and before long Dr. Miller had replaced the old bandages with new ones, said his goodbyes, and gone on his way. Mary escorted him decorously out of the house, but as soon as the doctor was gone, Samuel heard her pounding feet on the stairs. Then she was back in the room, throwing herself into his less than welcoming arms.

"Samuel!" Her upturned face was only a breath away, and Samuel could smell the tears on it. "Such wonderful news!"

And for some reason, all he could think of to say was—"You told Dr. Miller that you and I are betrothed."

"Of course I did," said Mary. She pulled back from him a little.

"But we're not."

"Not officially," Mary agreed.

"Not at all," Samuel corrected.

Mary didn't answer at first, and when she did, her words came hesitantly. "But before you left, you said we would marry. That we would run away if we had to, because your father didn't approve. But he does now. He sent me a letter last week, he

said so, and don't you see—"

"No."

"I didn't actually mean... not 'see' see. I just meant—as a figure of speech."

"What?" Behind his bandages, Samuel blinked in confusion. "No, I mean, you're not looking at this the right way. My father has no love for you, and little for me. He wants an excuse to disinherit me now that I've come home crippled. If I were to marry a servant's daughter, no one would question his actions."

"But if we love each other... it won't matter."

"I don't love you." The words came out more harshly than Samuel had intended, but he felt no regret. There are times when cruelty can be the only possible kindness.

"But I thought..." Mary trailed off, suddenly uncertain.

"So did I," Samuel answered, this time making an effort to keep his voice kinder. "But I was wrong. Now I know—I only ever loved the way you loved me."

She started to say something, but cut herself short. "I have... tasks in the kitchen to see to," she said, and left the room before Samuel could call her back, if he even wanted to.

He groaned and fell back on his bed. For several minutes he lay there in his own misery, until he heard the voice he had been waiting for.

"Smooth move there, Sammy."

"Anna!"

"In the flesh. Ish." Her voice was colder than the other times they had spoken.

"What's the matter?"

"You."

Utterly mystified, Samuel crossed the room until his reaching hands brushed against her shoulder, stiff and unyielding. Closed off. Cold. "What did I do?"

"Nothing, yet. But you're going to leave me, all on my own. I've had enough of that for one afterlife." It took Samuel a second to connect her words with Dr. Miller's earlier visit, but the moment he did, Anna said, "That's it. You got there."

"Would you stop reading my mind?" Samuel snapped.

"I'm not."

"I thought you said you were a witch," Samuel said. "What kind of witch can't even read minds?"

"I said 'falsely accused,'" Anna corrected. "I don't read minds. Just faces. And yours is an open book."

Samuel could only sputter in response, which at least seemed to put Anna in a better mood. She laughed, and the atmosphere of the room seemed to warm slightly.

"Alright," she said. "I'm sorry. But... Samuel, I've been on my own for a long time, and if your sight comes back, I'll probably be alone again. I'd rather that not happen."

"Am I really the first one you've been able to talk to?" Samuel asked.

"In two centuries," Anna said. "Yes. And I know it's the blindness, because I've been here for centuries. I was here when you were young, and came down here every summer. You never heard me then. And now you can. You..." She hesitated. "You interest me."

The words sent a sudden rush of unexpected warmth through Samuel. "Anna..." He hesitated, then plunged on anyway. "You are an enigma to me as well. And, while your words can be caustic—"

"Is this supposed to be an apology?"

"And at times downright uncivilized—" Samuel spoke right over Anna, who punched his shoulder playfully in response. "I will admit that I look forward to our conversations."

"Have you?" Anna sounded surprised.

"I have."

"Then... can I ask a favor of you?"

"Of course."

"Someday soon," Anna said quietly. "Your doctor friend will come back, and tell you it's time to take the bandage off. I won't ask you not to do it. It's too much when you only met me a week ago. So I'll say this instead. If you do take the bandages off, if you do choose to regain your sight—do it because you want to. Not because of anyone else. And know that if you do—we will never be able to speak again."

"Alright," Samuel said. "I can promise that."

And Anna vanished.

Samuel spent a lot of time over the next few days thinking it over. Two futures stretched out ahead of him. In one, he lived alone and sightless in this country house, far removed from his old life in London. But there would always be Anna, and she was a woman he would dearly love to grow closer to.

Down the other path lay a life lived as his father's rightful heir, rich and proud and powerful. It would be foolish to give it all up for a woman. For a woman he barely knew, who might be nothing but a product of his battle-scarred mind. Logically, he could not give up everything for her.

And yet, Samuel wanted nothing more. He knew what life would be like if he accepted his vision back. Years and decades of political and social maneuvering, always plotting to improve his standing and thus please his father. With Anna, suddenly none of that mattered, and a whole new world of possibilities opened up before him. He had no idea what that path offered, but the mystery was intoxicating.

So, the next time Dr. Miller came to visit, accompanied again by Mary (still much subdued after their recent fight), Samuel announced that he had no desire to see again. He went on for several minutes, giving nonsensical reasons for his choice, trying to explain the unexplainable.

Both Mary and Dr. Miller did him the courtesy of listening silently until at last, Samuel tired himself out. Then Dr. Miller said, "But Samuel, you have no choice in the matter."

"Of course I do," Samuel said stiffly.

"Your father has given me instructions," Dr. Miller said quietly, guiding Samuel to a chair. "Your bandages are coming off."

Samuel didn't answer right away, too busy at war with himself to give voice to any of it. Then he jumped, as a quiet voice called his name. He jumped slightly, but neither Mary nor Dr. Miller reacted at all, and a moment later Samuel recognized Anna's voice.

"You promised," Anna said, the slightest note of accusation in her tone. "You promised this would be your choice."

"I—" He wanted to tell Dr. Miller that he didn't care what his father thought, but that was untrue. For all of his life he had been dominated, completely and utterly, by his father's presence. And now, he couldn't even bring himself to protest as he felt the doctor, gently but firmly, reach out and unwrap the bandages.

The room was silent, until the last layer came away, and Samuel heard Anna's quiet voice. "So you lied."

"No—" Samuel half rose, turning toward her voice. For a moment as his much-abused eyes struggled to adjust to sight, he thought he saw the shape of a woman outlined in the light that blazed in through the room's open window.

Then Dr. Miller clapped him on the back, clearly relieved that his patient had recovered so well, and Samuel jerked forward. By the time he looked back, the woman's shape had vanished. And that was the last he ever saw of, or heard from, Anna.

In time, he came to believe she had never existed at all. It had been a difficult time. He had been depressed, unhappy, ready to believe in any half-baked story his troubled mind could concoct. And besides, if she had never actually been real, he hadn't actually lost anything.

He eventually apologized to Mary, and—in a semi-rebellious act that deep down Samuel knew was too little, too late—married her. His father, to Samuel's extreme disappointment, never said a word against the union, which was probably the worst thing he could have done. And Samuel knew it.

Later, they had children: two healthy boys, followed by a beautiful girl. And then came their fourth child, Jonathon, who was born early and sickly and small.

And blind.

He lived to see his first birthday, despite Dr. Miller's grim predictions to the contrary, and slowly began to grow healthy. But during that first year, Samuel spent a lot of nights sitting up with his youngest son, as though his silent vigils could somehow

make his son well.

And sometimes, in that dark, still time that comes just after midnight, there seemed to be someone else in the room, someone Samuel could only ever catch a glimpse of from the corner of his eye. Sometimes, he thought of Anna.

And he wondered.

In the World

Debbie Newcomb

“Dance like it's the last night of your life!” he yelled. The pounding rhythms almost drowned out his voice.

The girl smiled in response and grinded a little closer against him.

After the next song, he held her arm and guided her off the dance floor. She smiled trustingly as she followed him past the dark corners of the club and into the alley.

“China was devastated by bombs yesterday. The few survivors are trying to piece together who could have sent the missiles and why. No country or terrorist has yet claimed the act. We'll go live to our man on the scene. Tom?”

“Thanks, Karen. It's terrible! The bombs were aimed at shopping malls and spas, truly a gruesome irony. The Chinese government is sending out aid to everywhere that was hit but there were just too many sites. The Red Cross has gotten involved and China is opening its borders to any charitable organization that is willing to help—”

“—found that several shipments of birth control have been tampered with, causing women to die. No one is sure who has done this or what their purpose may—”

“My co-host, Lindsey, is sick today so we'll carry on without her. In local news, a bomb went off yesterday in a Victoria Secret, killing several women. Witnesses say—”

“—new series glorifying female suicide has high ratings for the eighth week in a row. Rob Stann, an expert in psychology, is here to tell us what may be behind this trend. Rob?”

So many people had died to get him to this point. He was almost there. It had taken him a very long time, but he had found the last of them and soon they would be dead as well. Then, his life could finally continue.

“Meredith, I love you.”

She smiled. “I love you too, Jon.” She kissed his cheek and sat down on the sofa.

He sat next to her and grasped her hands. “I have something for you, but I'm afraid it won't really be a surprise.”

“What is it?”

He smiled at her. “You're the last woman alive on Earth.”

She stared at him for a moment. “What?”

“You're the only girl in the world. It took a lot of time and effort but I managed it.” He stood with an expectant smile on his face, waiting for praise.

“You killed every woman in the world except for me?” she asked, not registering his words.

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “You wanted to feel like you were the only woman in the world, so I made that happen. You are my one and only, Meredith.”

She slid her hands out of his grip. “You killed several billion people for this?” Meredith began backing away from him.

“Yes. It was all for you. So many times I thought about stopping, but I remembered your face and I just couldn't. So, Meredith, there's just one thing I want to ask you now.” He got down on one knee.

“Oh no,” Meredith said, backing away another step. “You can't tell me you just killed all of the women on the Earth except me and then ask me to marry you!”

“It does seem a little redundant on my part. You know that I won't stray.”

Meredith spun on her foot and raced out of the room, the door slamming behind her.

Jon levered himself up and wondered. What had he done wrong? He had done everything for her. Maybe she would find comfort in another man's arms. He could not allow that to happen. “Well,” he thought, “I guess she's even harder to win than I thought.” Jon stood up and hummed. He could reuse some of his plans for killing women but he would have to rework most of them. Then, once it was just him and Meredith, then it would be enough and she would love him. Jon smiled, picturing their future together as he aligned his weapon grid.

The Giants

Ryan Woods

The giant bellowed, "Set fire to the leaves on the branches and the brush beneath the trunks." He turned back toward me, kneeling down on one knee and staring at my face about two feet away. "What are you saying, little human?"

"Why are you burning these trees? This forest is old and respected by the people of the village. You can't just light it on fire like this!"

The giant's enormous features contorted into a frown, not a shameful frown, but a puzzled frown, a frown that says, *why don't you understand what we're doing?*

"Do you not want a show, little human? Why do you not want to see this?"

"This is no show; it's destruction! Utter, malicious destruction! Don't you realize it is upsetting the villagers?"

The giant cocked his head to one side then straightened it again. "I feel you have no understanding of what this is. It is a show of nature, of power. There are few things more likeable. I am certain your villagers will enjoy it. Besides." The giant stood back up. "The fires are already lit."

And they were. Bright orange flames sprang up all around every tree, devouring every tiny and insignificant leaf that came across their path, turning them to ash and shamefully dropping them to the forest floor or setting them loose to the whims of the wind. The fires licked at the trunks of the trees, springing up from the undergrowth. Soon, the entire forest was ablaze in bright orange and red. And smoke poured into the sky, blowing westward and ever expanding, darkening what was once the blue purity of a calm afternoon. The air below the treetops was suffocating.

"Come now, little human." The giant held his hand down for me to climb in. "It would do you no good to be singed down here as if you were a part of the show." I very willingly climbed into his strong, protective grip, and he placed me safely on his shoulder.

"And what a terrible show that would be. I couldn't bear to see a sentient being baked alive." He began walking toward the hill and away from the woods following the other giants. And I was certain I saw tears welling up in his eyes and even running down his cheeks. At least they respect human life, I thought.

He ascended the hill where the giant clan was waiting. The audience was in a rapture of joy. They cheered; they leapt up and down; tears of joy poured from their eyes. This sight was wonderful to them.

I turned and looked. Below me stood the old forest turning to ash in a single, enormous blaze. The smoke would be seen for miles. I saw the old village. It was safe from the fire, but, nevertheless, I saw the residents fleeing, like tiny, scurrying ants, toward the lake. At least they would be safe, as long as none die of pure terror.

I felt a certain sense of distrust toward these mad beings. How could they do this with such joy? Have they no thoughts for the villagers? They do care for their lives, but their desires? Perhaps these enormous men and women have no such ability. Perhaps they cannot understand the mind of man.

When I looked at the poor people fleeing in terror, I was sickened. But at the sight of the fire, its power and its majesty, I could not help but shudder in awe. I felt goose bumps on my skin. There *was* something amazing in these extreme shows of nature's power.

