

NOMAD

2022



DEAR READER,

My favorite thing about stories is that they end.

Don't get me wrong. I love getting lost in stories. I'm the head editor of a literary magazine, after all. And I've heard great ones from friends and lived through a few myself. Like the music video shoot in Atlanta that led to an active protest. Or the 3D printed currency that held a dark secret. Or the literary magazine that switched editors at the busiest part of the semester.

Nobody wants to be the protagonist of these stories. Every story has conflict—they can be vicious, they can hurt, and they can tear you apart. And at the time, it seems like you might never get out of it. But then it does what every story does—it ends.

And you're left with a wild, insane story to tell your friends. A story of perseverance, or triumph, or plain sardonic hilarity. Or maybe one you wished had never ended, but now that it has you can appreciate it better—relish in every detail you'll never get back.

Inside this issue, we have plenty of both. We have winners of the 2021 and 2022 creative writing contests. We have incredible reimaginations of older stories created by the ArtLAB. We have some of the finest works of poetry and prose that Western Carolina University has to offer.

I hope that as you read these stories, you are satisfied, delighted, and inspired. Because once you've reached the end, it's time to look for the next beginning.

**SINCERELY,
STEPHEN PIERCE**

Verba volant,

scripta manet

Words fly away,

writings remain

THE NOMAD

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A decorative border consisting of multiple parallel lines forming a frame. The top-left corner is folded over, creating a layered effect. The border is black on a white background.

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** 2021 Creative Writing Contest

FICTION

Good Lad

Nicole LaVoie

The dirt sifted through Peter's hands as he uncovered the object. Raindrops that had once been light interruptions in the clear air were now running down his nose, turning the soft dirt of his childhood backyard into mud. He peered down at the thing he had buried there so many years ago and looked at it through the lens of that one unsuspecting day. How had he not known?

Peter remembered how the smell of the sea quickened his heartbeat that Wednesday afternoon. Oh the bliss of an early day out of school. Peter wasn't exactly sure why his mom did this, maybe it had to do with all the yelling between her and his father, but he didn't care. The theme park was less crowded on weekdays, meaning next to no lines for rides or food.

"Want some cotton candy?" His mother asked.

Peter couldn't wait for the day he could see over the counter. There were so many colors and big machines that made the decadent sugary goodness. His hands patted against what he could reach of the grey and slightly sticky countertop. One day.

"Pink or blue honey?"

"Blue!" He knew the right decision.

The booth operator pulled his lips back into a toothy grin as his sweaty hand met Peter's with the cotton candy. "There ya go, kiddo."

"Thank you sir." Peter managed a grin as he took the cotton candy from the seemingly giant man. That was the worst part of this place. The booth operators always seemed bigger and scarier than the adults like his mom. Sometimes they were stinky too.

The wood lightly thumbed against their feet as Peter and his mom walked down the dock. They were not ten feet

from the booth when his mother stopped. "Oh dear, I think I left my wallet on the counter. Let me go get it."

"Can I stay here and look at the waves?" Peter gestured to the railing of the large dock. "It's super close."

His mother sighed. Her eyes were concerned, but too weary to object. "Well, okay. Just be careful of strangers. I'll be right back."

Peter turned and looked out to the ocean crashing before him, then up to the steady horizon. He never understood why the water could be so shaky up close, but then look perfectly straight far away. It reminded him of his father. His mother always called him things like undependable or unreliable when he was close to them, but when he got far away, that seemed to make her think more steady of him.

"Excuse me?"

Peter whirled around to a dark figure and a bad smell. Could shadows talk?

Excuse me, little boy?"

Oh, it was a man. A really old, dirty man. That was where the bad smell was coming from. He was much more stinky than any of the carnival workers.

"Y-Yes sir?" Peter squeaked.

"Could you... do me a favor?" The old man did his best to form a smile, although it was hard to tell under such a thick beard and layers of clothes.

"My mom will be back soon." Peter didn't like this. He knew the rules about talking to strangers.

"Oh, don't worry," the old man exclaimed, "It is not big or anything. I just really need you to take this home and bury it in your backyard. And I need you to keep it a secret." He reached in his very full pocket, rustled around what sounded like something metal, and opened his hand to reveal a small stone. "Do you think you could do that for me?"

Peter contemplated it. That didn't seem too dangerous. After all, the only things Peter's mother told him not to take from strangers was candy. "Yeah. I can do it."

The old man's face crinkled to what he was sure was a smile, and his eyes looked glassy, almost as if he was about to cry. "Oh, thank you young man." He said in a relieved voice that Peter would remember for the rest of his life. Then slipped the cold stone into Peter's hand. As he turned to leave, the old man looked back over his withered shoulder.

“You are a good lad, don’t ever forget it.”

Peter was a good lad. He took the stone right home that day and buried it, never telling his mother a word. He was good for that old man whom he would never see again. He was good for the girl in middle school that asked him to only touch her waist when they kissed, because anything more made her uncomfortable. He was good for his mother when he had to work to support her and his dreams of finishing school. He was good to his father when he could be, although if he ever found him at his mother’s house again, he just might punch the life out of him. He was good for his job. He was just never good enough for his wife, no matter how much he tried to do what she asked. He hoped to be good enough for his daughter, but that probably wouldn’t happen either.

Peter hoped this goodness would count for something. He hoped that if a higher power did exist, they would see all the good things he had done and erase that one night from his record. The night he drank like his father. The night he drove into a car full of high schoolers, hitting the vehicle just right to

kill every one of them.

Six years of prison. Two years of parole. Three years and counting of therapy and AA meetings. One divorce. Millions of assumptions. Peter spent every waking moment trying to make it right, trying to do the responsible thing, but no one seemed to see past his lack of responsibility that one night he had fought with his wife and just wanted to get away and have what was supposed to be a drink or two.

Now he stood at 22 Sycamore Street, watching as the movers took his mother’s belongings out of his childhood home. The funeral had been months ago, but Peter couldn’t wear anything but the color black. It was nice to finally have a reason to mourn on the outside the same way he had been mourning for years in his heart.

His loafers thumbed against the mahogany floors of the hallway his growing and bare feet once scurried down. His mother always used to get upset at him running through the house, but she didn’t correct his stride every chance she got. She was good like that.

This was the only happy place Peter ever truly knew. The only home he ever truly had. Was selling it the right thing?

Well, it didn't matter now. The deal was already closed.

"Ok Sir, it looks like that is everything. Can you think of anything my boys and I might be forgetting?" the head mover asked.

As Peter was about to confirm with the mover that everything was clear for them to go, a memory slashed straight through his consciousness, almost transporting him back in time to the smell of saltwater and the taste of cotton candy.

"Y-Yes... no! Wait, yes, there is one more thing, but I will take care of it. You and your men are free to go."

"Okay, sir." The mover said, giving Peter a slightly concerned glance.

As soon as the last mover closed the door, Peter took off to the backyard. *Could it really still be here?*

He skidded into the mound that had once been his mother's beloved garden like a Major League batter into home base and began digging. He broke the packed earth with his fingers, shoving soil underneath his fingernails and staining the sleeves of his sweater. Peter's mother had kept the garden so soft when he was young. It had to be here. He had to find it. Such a feat might

not accomplish much, but if Peter found it, he might finally get an answer to the question he had wrestled with for months. He clawed further into the ruins of the garden.

After what felt like hours of digging through the long-rested soil and examining every rock and clump of dirt he could get his hands on, Peter felt it. An unmistakable cold that pierced through the mud caked on his fingers. Peter picked up his long-dormant secret, rubbing the soil off of the surface that had somehow managed to remain shiny after all these years. Rain began to trickle from the sky, and as it slowly increased, it finished his job of uncovering what he had buried so many years ago. The bullet.

Peter sat back into the mud, remembering everything about that moment so vividly he might as well have been there. The bulky pocket of the homeless man. The desperate look in his eyes. The metal sounds that he now identified as the unloading of a gun. The way he had looked so relieved after Peter has agreed to burying what had only appeared to be a strange little rock.

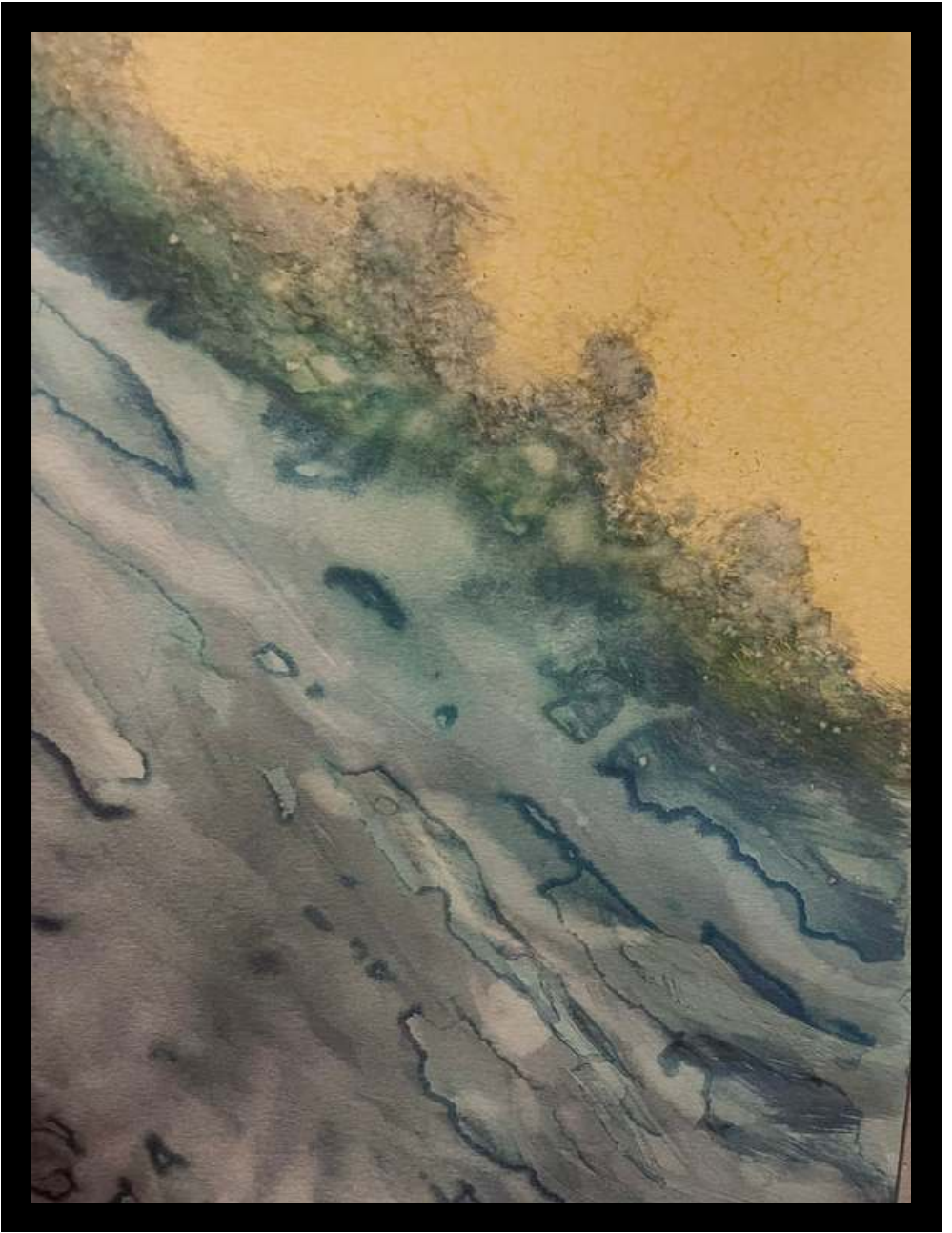
His tears joined the rain that ran down his face as Peter knelt in the mud

and sobbed. He thought of all he had gone through. All the awful things that were said about him and to him. The love he had lost, and the love he seemed to never be able to gain. He thought about his own bullet in the pistol that lay nestled in his dresser, waiting for him to get up enough nerve and answer that question of life he consistently fought with. Then he remembered the other thing that old man gave him, one of the first statements that ever made him feel as though he truly mattered.

“You are a good lad, don’t ever forget it.”



** winner of 2022 Water Works Contest*



WaterColored

Maegen Hering

We Were Taught It Was Not Water

Cynthia Warren

It started with a Sunday rumor.

“You hear Wilder has his own water?”

Whether it had come from the men, women, or children, it was all over the small town and into the ears of the local sheriff by noon.

Sunday was an idle day, a day of rest in a world where not working was for the rich, and none of them were. The definition of “work” was given some leniency the residents themselves weren’t allowed. They figured it was a little mercy God would give them. The same kind of rules applied to drinking. Liquor was the safe and sterile, but still shunned by boozers’ wives. The point was that everyone was a little bit of a hypocrite, but that didn’t afford you the dignity to sit inside. If you were going to drink on a Sunday, with an air of moral authority, you stood in the summer sun. That was where Roy Deacon was

rocking back and forth on a rickety chair through the stagnant air.

Roy fanned himself with his wide-brimmed hat, exposing his hair to the harsh sunlight. It flickered an odd tint of orange as he moved in the midday sun, the color of rust. He took another long sip from his bottle as he watched the whispers circle around him like flies. He was the sheriff of the grimy town, a rusty six-shooter pressing into his hip.

The dust coated everything, permeated everything. From the spickets came a grimy sludge of stuff the town called water, used from everything from cooking to the laundry pressed out with streaks of sand. The whole world was tinged in a yellow that never washed out and had been for so long no one could remember what it was supposed to look like. And just like that, what it was supposed to be was supplanted by what it was. When it rained, the ground rose to

imeet it. Dust clouded a foot above the ground and the drops sloshed thick and murky. The only ground tilled was the cemetery behind the church, marked with the generations all gone and passed. Roy's granddaddy had come from Virginia, only moving West to separate himself from the Germans who went to Pennsylvania. He was the last living soul around to have seen the ocean, and he'd been buried closest to the church gate twelve years prior.

That was why talk of water flowed faster than the current itself.

Wilder was a farmer, one of the ones who had given up on the gold rush and settled after his wife had taken ill. The smart ones, some said. The cowards, muttered others. The land struggled to provide crops the people needed, but Wilder had already removed himself from their good graces. Two seasons in a row he'd refused to harvest early, only for a dust storm to bury the plants before they could be safely stored until needed.

Water, fresh water, sounded exactly like the kind of story he'd invent to get all their hopes up.

At least, Roy thought so. He watched the men congregating outside,

and they seemed to agree, all buzzed and feverish. '

The issue was no one would say the quiet part out loud.

He stood up.

"Let's go see this water."

For all their bravado, the men had needed a leader. Roy was the perfect type, the type with conviction and gumption. A real man brave and true, a man without fear. Little did they know that Roy was more scared than all of them combined. He just made a point to never show it.

Cole Wilder lived on the fringes of their community, all by his lonesome. When Myla had passed, his grief ate him whole. He drank indoors and ate more than he made. Roy had arrested him twice before for public indecency and threatened to hold him longer if he didn't shape up. No one blamed Roy. It was hard watching his brother-in-law destroy himself, and so the townsfolk went about choosing sides and sympathies even while Myla's grave was new.

The soil around Wilder's house was dark but aerated, like a cake that settled in the bottom of a pan.

Roy rapped his knuckles on the

door. The men stood back, almost fearful.

Wilder answered a few moments later with a smile.

“Roy! You look—”

“Show us this spring.”

His face deflated. “I wanted it to be a surprise, but I guess Heath’s no good at keeping secrets. Right, Heath?”

If Heath was in the crowd, he did not speak.

Roy stayed stoic.

Wilder’s nerves began to creep up on him as he stepped out into the high noon. Wordlessly, he led them out back to a pile of rocks.

He got down on his knees, slowly working them to reveal a steady stream.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. The men held quiet cacophony as they watched the refraction of the light, the iridescence Wilder’s discovery created. The book of Genesis mentioned God making a rainbow, but none of them had the wherewithal to identify it as such.

Wilder beamed, an atypical smile breaking through his shaggy beard. Relief flooded him full. “See! It’s a local type, an underground basin, maybe.”

Roy leaned over. His eyes flickered

back and forth, watching the current.

“It ain’t water.”

“What do you mean?”

Instead of an answer, a shot rang out.

The empathic crowd fell silent.

Roy holstered his pistol and took a step over the body, fresh, yet to bleed. He lowered his forefinger into the rush of the spring.

It was cold and crisp, nipping into his flesh, filling every crack and pore it could touch like a greedy sponge. Wilder’s blood began to wash into it, a faint pink color tinging what had been pure and untouched. So too did the dirt of Roy’s finger, brown washing away to reveal a sanguine tint to his skin.

Roy pulled back.

“It’s probably toxic. I’ll get it handled.”

A sigh swept over the onlookers. No mistake had been made, and there was no reason to doubt their sheriff. The fact that their trust had faltered enough to hold their breath was crime enough.

Roy glanced back to the shed where the farmer’s tools lay.

“Let’s get to puttin’ it back, whatever it is.”

The work was done quickly with

the many men, with two holes dug and both buried beneath the setting sun.

It was only at nighttime when the full moon revealed the remnants of sprouts, trampled beneath the boots of the crowd.

The nocturnal creatures, who had learned long ago to avoid work in the hard Midwestern sun, shimmied to the surface; snakes and scorpions scurried to their spring. When they found only dirt, a last shovel half-stuck in the ground, and the weight of moisture sinking farther and farther away, they communed in silence. Neither turned to attack another, for they understood water had been a place of necessity and neutrality.

They approached the buried spring and remained there in a moment, searching. A few animals curled around it, searching, searching, until acceptance trickled through.

There was no water here.

One by one, they filtered out. The frogs hopped away, insects flitting through the night sky without pause, and foxes returning to the den to scrounge for new territory among the harsh desert. Language was not needed to understand.

This place could nurture them no longer. All it would cultivate were weeds and dust.



Rainy Day

Leah Wagner

There once was a black-haired girl in a bright orange hat sitting in an alleyway. She wasn't interested in any way. I could leave the story here, but that'd be quite boring, so I'll tell you a bit more about this girl.

She lived alone in her neighborhood in the best house the neighborhood had to offer. It only had three walls and a soft floor, but the roof was stable enough to keep out most of the rain. She loved her home, but at times she wished she could paint the walls orange like her hat. Unfortunately though, all the stores that sold paint wouldn't take her currency — she carried all of her savings on her, and not a single one of them resembled a dollar. She had an old hairbrush with only half the bristles, a few decrepit cans of cat food, a small brown bag that she had to be careful with because of the hole in the bottom, a small box of rolled papers a friendly

older lady had once given her, and a shard from a broken mirror that barely fit in her tiny hand. She also had a friend: a stray black cat that liked to sit in her lap and be stroked by the hairbrush. Sometimes, the cat would be up for playing, and, when it wasn't raining, the girl would reflect a beam of sunlight off her mirror shard for the cat to chase.

It rained a lot. When it did, she shivered under the roof of her house, curled up around her cat with her orange hat pulled down over her ears and nose. Her feet were never truly able to fit under her roof with her, so they stuck out and rested between the freezing cobbles of the alley floor and the raindrops. She waited patiently until they got cold enough so she wouldn't have to feel that they were cold anymore. When the rain fell down and covered the city in pounds of noise, her

orange hat still burned brilliantly. It was the only part of her that could be seen through the gray haze.

The blue-hatted girl came during a sprinkle. She approached soundlessly over the stones, drowned out by the dripping of the rain falling down awnings and roof edges. When her thin legs appeared in the doorway to the orange-hatted girl's home, she spoke.

"Hello, Orange Witch."

The Orange Witch flinched and poked her head out from underneath her roof, looking up at the silhouette of the blue-hatted girl against the blinding gray sky. She could see similar black hair to her own and a deep, royal blue hat with flimsy edges.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm the Blue Witch."

"Ah, makes sense."

"I'm just like you. We're outcasts."

The Orange Witch crawled out from her abode, standing up on wobbly legs to meet eye-to-eye with the strange girl. Her black cat friend was tucked securely under her left arm, silk-soft fur of its belly weaving between her fingers.

"Why have you come?" she

questioned.

The Blue Witch pointed a finger towards the far side of the alley. "I want to play adventure with you."

And, innocent to the world, the Orange Witch stood and took her hand. The Blue Witch started pulling her along, going towards the alley opening. The Orange Witch felt a tremor run up her neck she was anxious and uneasy about this adventure game. But one look at the calming blue of the other witch's hat quenched her worries, and off they went into the empty street.

It was weird. Normally, the Orange Witch would watch as hundreds of people passed her alley sometimes, she'd find entertainment in counting them but today there was no one. The streets were split with streaks of water from the rain, draining where it could and pooling wherever it got trapped. The rain had lightened up a bit, but the sky was still gray and casting an eerie, cool bloom off the windows of the buildings that drowned them.

The Blue Witch continued to tug her along, walking with a brisk pace fast enough to match the raindrops that still

fell, but never making a sound. Her tiny, ghost-like feet coasted across the cement silently, and the Orange Witchseemed to come to a realization.

“Your hat,” she commented.

“What about it?” the Blue Witch said, turning her head just the slightest bit. The Orange Witch could see her chin and mouth, but nothing more.

“It covers your face.”

“I prefer not to show my face. Anonymity is powerful here. Go with the flow. Fix your hat, by the way. It slid to the right.”

They continued along, and the Orange Witch was just about to complain about the cold when the Blue Witch let go of her hand and hopped over a tall metal fence. It was the gate to the park.

“I don’t think we should go in there,” the Orange Witch said uneasily.

The Blue Witch held herself at the top of the fence on the other side, looking down at her accomplice. All the Orange Witch could see of her was the thin, straight line of her lips, outlined drastically against the gray sky by the flaps of her saturated, blinding blue hat.

“It’ll be fine. Here, I’ll help you up,”

the Blue Witch said, holding out a hand.

The Orange Witch couldn’t say no, so she grabbed onto the outstretche and used it to help pull herself over the fence not nearly as gracefully as the Blue Witch. Her feet plopped into the mucky ground, coating her worn tan boots with black mud.

“Your boots are fine,” she said, gazing down at the Blue Witch’s shiny shoes with bewilderment.

“I’ve done that more, but I’m just like you. And fix your hat.”

The park was just as empty as the streets, but more peaceful. The Orange Witch knew this was what the Blue Witch must’ve meant when she said they were going to play adventure. Arms of willow trees flowed around them one even tickled the Orange Witch’s arm. The black mud was still abundant, but where the ground was high the grass was mint and the pebbles were lavender. The mist from the chlorophyll mixed with the light rain and harmonized in the atmosphere. It was beautiful and tranquil, but completely still, noiseless. Not a bird could be heard singing nor a cricket chirping.

"It's very quiet here," said the Orange Witch quietly. The Blue Witch stopped them beside the thick trunk of a nearby willow and held a thin finger over the pressed line of her mouth.

"Look," she whispered, guiding the Orange Witch around the tree and pointing to the first other beings they'd seen on their adventure.

A woman clad in yellow stood next to a similarly dressed woman, but in violet. They were walking and had just breached into the shallower fog, able to be seen almost clearly because of their eccentric clothing choices. Though they were talking, the Orange Witch couldn't understand their voices.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"They're the Yellow Witch and the Violet Witch. They are secrecy and pride. Secrets to be embarrassed about, secrets that will never emerge from the depths. Uncontained pride that will never enter the depths."

"They look friendly."

"Confidence always looks friendly to us. Secrets lure us in. Beware of them. They are the ones who sent us here."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's keep walking," the Blue Witch said with finality, once more grabbing the Orange Witch's hand and pulling her along.

They hopped the fence again, the Orange Witch learning from her previous attempt and not requiring the Blue Witch's help anymore. Though she still wasn't as graceful, she landed on the stone sidewalk without wobbling.

This time, the Blue Witch took her to an old building, one that looked half-demolished. It's insides and the windows were entirely gone, allowing the two to easily climb over the brick wall and enter it. The Orange Witch didn't like this area as much as the park, but the Blue Witch remained unperturbed.

Piles of old, heavy sawdust flew into their noses as they walked and tiny bits of rubble popped under the Orange Witch's feet. The Blue Witch must've known exactly where to step because still, she made no noise. Pink, fluffy bits of insulation were scattered across the floor, and some of the walls had dried paint on them peeling and eroded from years of missed touch-

ups.

The Blue Witch guided them through the labyrinth of rubble, until she pointed out two more people the Orange Witch had never seen before.

A man dressed head to toe in a scarlet robe and a crimson cap was laying across one of the half-downed walls, talking in a familiar distorted voice to another man in emerald green. The man in red had his back turned to the young girls, and the man in green's bowler hat was three sizes too big for his head, causing it to fall over his bowed face.

"Love and envy. Be happy you've never experienced either. The Red Witch and the Green Witch are much like the previous two I showed you. They're symbiotic."

"Are they dangerous too?"

The Blue Witch nodded. "You cannot have jealousy without love. You, who has never experienced love before, has never experienced envy. Be glad that you're dehydrated from them."

The Orange Witch stepped closer to the Blue Witch, a thought crossing her twisted and forlorn mind.

"What are we?"

"What are you?"

The Blue Witch finally turned to her, lifting up the flappy edge of her sapphire hat to disclose her face fully. The Orange Witch almost cried out in shock, for what faced her wasn't a new person — it was herself, staring back with tired eyes and a thin line for lips.

And there she was, back in her three-sided home again, staring into her broken mirror shard as raindrops fell and distorted the image. No, not raindrops — tears. The rain had long since stopped.

"I understand," she whispered to herself, for no one else was there. The Blue Witch was gone, and so was her cat.

"I'm naivety. I'm innocence. Gullible and always in danger. You tell the truth, you're clarity. You're reflections. You're maturity."





Divinely Whole

Amanda Clark

Mermaid in the Mist

Stephen Pierce

Even as they seized the ropes tightly round me wrists, the only thing on me mind was her.

Her father liked to say the salty sea ran through her veins. Aye, it seemed like the truth. We rarely saw the lass without droplets of water speckled across her skin. When she dipped 'neath the waves, she seemed to become one with 'em, like they were her true home. I thought she musta walked right outta one o' me childhood fairy tales.

She was a real beauty, that one. I've never been so captivated as when I first saw her haul herself above-deck after an evening swim. The moonlight shining off her wet body made her skin gleam as brilliantly as a pearl. Her hair was as black as a squid's ink and clung to her shoulders like tentacles. I like to think she knew I was watchin' from the riggin'. She had a smile on her face like the two of us were sharin' a nasty

secret.

She must have cast some spell over me heart. I knew that no matter what anyone thought, she was the only treasure on the seven seas I wanted to plunder.

Her face was launched from me mind by a thump on the cabin door. The two burly guards standin' watch pulled it open, revealin' a red-coated man with raggedy black hair pourin' in waves outta his gigantic hat. He narrowed his eyes at me like I was nothin' more than a dead rat in the bilge.

"Bring 'im up to the deck, lads. We're carryin' on with the plan."

"Aye aye, cap'n."

The two guards hoisted me off the bed and dragged me into the passageway. I glanced at the storm ragin' outside the porthole and stared at the captain.

"B-Blimey! Have you gone mad?" I shouted. "We'll all get swept overboard

in this weather!”

A sudden blow slammed me face-first onto the floorboards. I felt lightning shoot up my spine as a dense fog rolled over me mind.

“A murderous scoundrel like you’s got no right to question me judgement. Now get up. The sails are already furled, so there’s no use in dilly-dallying.”

I responded with a pained groan. Someone grabbed me by the collar and pulled me to my feet. They roughly pushed me down the passageway as thunder boomed like cannons overhead.

“I never heard the sky clap so loud,” a guard grumbled. “You should’ve known bringin’ that girl aboard would bring misfortune.”

“That girl was a better sailor than you’ll ever be, laddie,” the captain said. “Keep walking, ‘fore I decide the sea’s hankerin’ for another meal.”

With a low growl, the guard continued shoving me along. The captain led the way up the rickety wooden steps to the deck above.

As the door opened, I was almost struck down by a rush of wind and water. The sea and sky were broilin’ with divine fury, but it wasn’t nearly as

intense as the glare comin’ from the captain in front of me. Though he’d steered many a vessel, anyone could tell he’d never weathered a worse storm in his life.

“We’ll make this quick. String ‘em up, men!”

The rest of the crew let out a raucous cheer. I could feel them torchin’ their resentful gaze into me skin. How quickly they’d turned against me!

“Y-You ingrates!” I shouted. “You’re makin’ a huge mistake! I never hurt her! Hell, I was tryin’ to save her! God don’t take kindly to murderers!”

The captain smiled as the guards shoved me toward the port side.

“I know,” the captain said, “But I b’lieve he gave up on us years ago! Isn’t that right, lads?”

The captain turned and raised his hands. He cackled madly as the wind raged through his hair, invitin’ another cheer from the crowd.

Every one of those men used to be me hearties. We shared drinks. We played cards together. But based on the look in their eyes, they just wanted to chuck me overboard.

Once we reached the edge of the ship, the guards grabbed a rope danglin’

from the riggin' and made to wrap it around me hands. I struggled like a fresh catch, shovin' them away and pleadin' with the captain.

"Listen to me!" I cried. "You don't understand. She's just gone back to the sea where she belongs! I'd never hurt me mermaid!"

"That's the last damn time ya call me daughter that!" the captain snarled, snatchin' up a cutlass and aimin' it at me. "Now listen here! I won't have any more o' yer bellyachin'. If ye can't face yer doom like a man, I'll rip out that vile tongue o' yers!"

"You...You're just blamin' me for this cause you never accepted our love! Just cause I'm a lowly swabbie!"

"No, it's cause yer a damn lunatic!" Droplets of spit flew from the captain's twisted face. "Always talkin' like she was some magical creature! I shoul'da offed ya' when I had the chance. But now ya've taken her—me most precious treasure of all. And you'll get no quarter fer that!"

The captain stepped forward and shoved me into the arms of several sailors.

"Come on, mateys! Smartly now! Let's blow the bastard down!"

The sailors easily overwhelmed me, seizin' the rope tight while a couple more heaved on the other end. I cried out in horror as I was lifted higher and higher into the air and left hangin' off the side of the ship, starin' out at the grey sea that broiled like a cauldron.

"How're ya likin' the view, Mr. Blackburn? Better enjoy it while ya can. Cause by me authority as captain of this ship, I'm sentencin' ya to death by firing line. Gunners! On your marks!"

Four boots stamped on the wood as a line of pirates crouched and raised their flintlock rifles. The weapons were steady in their hands, aimed right at me.

"Please! Have mercy on me poor soul!"

The captain's only response was a monstrous laugh.

The stormy tempest battered me face. Swingin' about on that flimsy rope had my stomach dancin' an Irish jig. But just when I thought me time was up, I saw somethin' that made me heart leap.

Down there in the water was the woman I loved. She floated gracefully on the surface with her arms stretched out in welcome, lookin' just as she had when she left me. Her raven black hair seemed to swirl through the water

deep down to the depths.

"Bonnie, me sweet siren...Oh, how I've missed you!"

The captain's eyebrows furrowed. He stomped over to the taffrail and locked eyes with the mermaid. He pressed a hand to his mouth and closed his eyes, lurchin' in disgust.

"Captain...Captain!" a voice wailed.

He looked back at me, pulled a pistol outta his coat, and aimed it high.

"Disgustin' and wretched to the end! Kill 'im, lads!"

I heard an explosion of powder and felt a pain like the devil all through me back. I cried out as I found myself slippin' through the stormy sky. The crew yelled in triumph and watched me plummet from the riggin', trailin' red drops among the rain.

But I didn't care. Me beloved was waitin' for me.

I fell into her cold arms and, findin' that me bindin's had been severed by the bullets, wrapped her in an embrace. Her arms remained wide, not returning my show of affection. She always was a coy lass.

I brushed the hair outta her face. Her eyes were dull as a pair of deadlights starin' into the night. I was

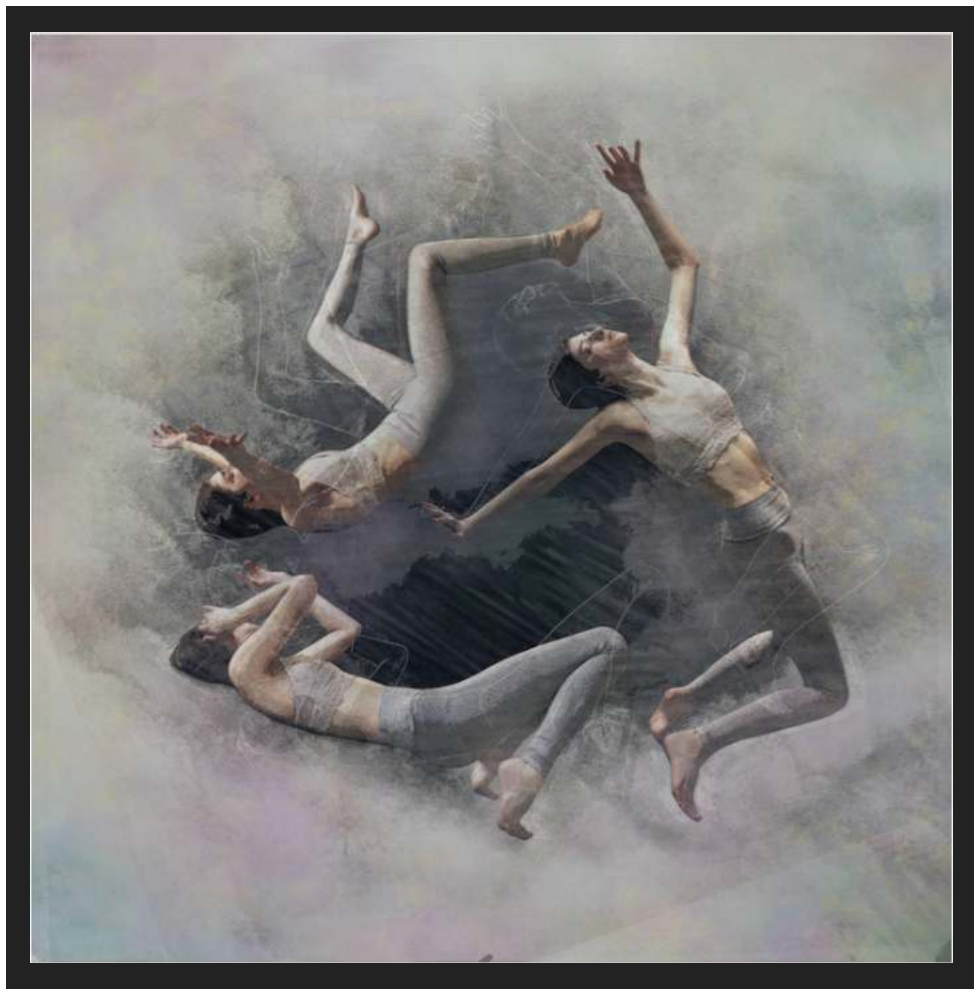
surprised to see her forehead still split by a sickly gash. I thought the water woulda healed her. And yet clouds of red still leaked from her face, swirlin' along with me bullet wounds into a crimson tempest.

"B-Bonnie...You came back!"

She didn't speak. She didn't even seem to have heard me. Surely the waves were just too loud. Aye, that must be it...

As she became one with the ocean once again, her limp limbs rose with every crest. Water pounded from all sides and dragged us into a whirlpool. But this storm wasn't as intense as the one I felt within as I touched her cold skin. Somethin' wasn't right...but hadn't I done the right thing? I just wanted to stop her hurtin'.

I thought back to the last time I saw her. It had been a simple accident that brought the sickly red water from beneath her skin. I knew we had a special connection and finally snuck into her quarters to tell her. But she wasn't listenin'. She called me crazy and started screamin' like a banshee. A fog rolled over me eyes...and she was on the floorboards, and me hands...they were around her neck.



The Sensitive, Introspective Type

Amanda Clark

Off-Camera

Abigail Parker

Scarlett chose the place. She knew nothing about it, just that she had driven past it on her way into town. It was the kind of place that needed no flashy marketing, just a sign out front that said "Diner: 6am-11pm." The sun was still coming up over the west coast when the two women sat down in the booth opposite each other, separated by a grimy table. Scarlett fixed her eyes outside the window, pretending to focus on the cars and people drifting by. Angie re-read the five options on the paper menu and looked absently around the room.

"They have an old school jukebox," said Angie. "Those were a big deal when I was a kid."

"I saw it," said Scarlett. She noticed two Volkswagens pass by.

"So, how's school? You'd be a junior, right?" Angie asked. She spoke an octave higher than her natural

voice; the same way she did for talkshows and interviews.

"Senior."

Angie let out a small "oh" and returned to the menu in her hands. Scarlett kept looking out the window. A station wagon drove by.

"I have some quarters, if you want—"

"Hm?"

"For the jukebox."

"I don't want to play anything. And I've got my own quarters if I did," Scarlett replied.

She glanced away from the window and back at the woman across the table. She didn't look old enough to have a teenage daughter. Her strawberry-blonde hair sat in loose waves across the shoulders of her blouse, and the skin around her bright green eyes was not yet wrinkled. She was thin and full in just the right places, and Scarlett understood why anyone

would eagerly put her in front of a camera. A waitress came by to take their orders.

Scarlett said.

"Any coffee?"

"Uh, yes. Just black."

Angie forgot what she'd wanted and looked back at the menu for the tenth time that morning.

"I'll do the eggs benedict. No coffee," she said to the waitress. She turned back to Scarlett. "It yellows your teeth, you know."

"I drove for twelve hours yesterday just to get here. I'm exhausted."

"Of course, you must be. I'm sorry."

"It's a long way between here and Medford."

"I know it is."

"So, I'm exhausted."

"I understand." Angie grasped for a new topic in her head. "So how's school? You said you're a senior. Do you ... play any sports?"

"No," Scarlett answered. But then she looked at this strange, glamorous woman who couldn't lift her eyes from table, and looked so uncomfortable and out of place in such a cheap, normal diner like this. Against her own will, Scarlett felt a shred of pity for her

mother."

"I'm on the student newspaper," she offered. "And I work at a movie theater near my house."

"So you like journalism?"

"I guess. I like writing, at least. I'm not much good with a camera. Either in front or behind it." She paused. "I guess that's not a problem for you." It came out snarkier than intended.

"Well, acting on camera does feel a bit different than being on stage. That's where I started - on the stage."

"I know. I read your interview in the Times last week."

"Oh. Right."

"I like journalism, remember?"

Angie sunk back into the cushioned booth.

"Sorry."

The food came. Angie carefully spread the paper napkin across her lap, while Scarlett left hers on the table. The only sounds were the scraping of forks, faint overhead music, and an occasional clatter from behind the kitchen door. Angie focused on her plate. Scarlett turned her attention back to the street outside her window. A young woman pushed a stroller down the sidewalk. The chubby creature

inside gurgled and pointed at a fluffy dog on a leash. The owner smiled and held up the dog's paw, as if he were waving. The baby was ecstatic.

Scarlett sensed her mother glancing at her. She must be thinking how little resemblance there was. Scarlett's dark hair was nothing like Angie's strawberry-blonde, and she might've actually been a few inches taller than Angie.

"For what?" Scarlett asked after some time.

"Hm?"

"You said sorry, but for what?"

Angie sighed, "Sorry you had to drive so long to get here."

"Well, I didn't have to," Scarlett reminded her. It was true, nothing was obligatory about it. Scarlett could have lived the rest of her life without knowing. But curiosity is a stronger force than reason, and she had let it drive her across 700 miles of forests, hills, and deserts to Los Angeles.

"I was younger than you are now, when..." Angie finally said. "Well, I was sixteen. You understand."

Scarlett understood perfectly. A sixteen-year-old couldn't be a mother and remain America's sweetheart.

Hollywood would've spit her out, and she'd be forced to live an ordinary picket-fence life. How terrible that would be for Angela Morrison. She understood.

"I saw one of your movies a year ago. I get free tickets from work sometimes," Scarlett said. "Which one?"

"I don't know, the one with that guy SNL in it."

"Did you like it?"

"I don't remember it," Scarlett said.

The waitress came and cleared the plates. Scarlett noticed that Angie's was only half-empty.

"I'll pick up the check," said Angie.

"Don't worry about it," Scarlett replied. "I'll pay for my own."

"You sure?" Angie said.

Scarlett saw the waitress standing at the edge of the table, waiting for an answer.

"We'll pay separate," Angie said with a strained smile. She paid with a shiny plastic card.

The daughter paid in crumpled dollar bills. She looked again at the stranger across from her.

"You might as well go put a quarter in, if you want to play anything before we leave," she told her mother.

“Sure, if you want to.”

“I don’t care, you pick.”

Angie slid out of the booth and walked to the back of the diner, where the jukebox sat in the corner. She fished out a quarter and flipped through the song cards. She settled on a Nina Simone song, and watched the record lift to meet the needle behind the glass. The tune carried through to the front of the diner, where a few dollar bills sat on a grimy table, and the booth was empty.



Unlike Sisyphus

Jared Ross

In a night alive with the light of stars, a boy in tattered rags cleaved to the side of a mountain, clawing at rocks that crumbled time and time again. Like Sisyphus, he threw himself at the side of that mountain, clamoring as if this was all he had, all that he would ever have.

Blood flowed from his hands, knees, and feet, caking him in grime that looked to be as old as his hunger. He had not eaten in days, of course—his legs shook, and his head pounded from the all-encompassing hunger he felt, but there was no time to eat. He had a mother to save, and stones to speak to. This was Sisyphus' fatal error, you see. Time after time he pushed that boulder up the hill, only for it to fall back down when he neared the top. Yet, not once did he speak to his boulder. Not once did he hear it whisper back.

This boy, Venus. He would not be like Sisyphus.

Venus reached upwards again, grabbing hold of something solid. He did it again, and again, roaring in pain as the sharp rocks of the mountainside buried themselves in his hands, his knees, his feet, eliciting cries of fury at stars that deafly denied his gift.

He kept doing this, body shaking in pain and hunger, head pounding in fatigue. The seconds stretched into hours, hours into days, a climb that encompassed every facet of his thought. He had no past, he would have no future—there was only this, this mountain to climb, these stones to reach. He pulled himself up once more, one final aching time. He stopped.

He stopped because he was nothing like Sisyphus. Venus reached the top.

It was flatter than he imagined, or at least he thought. He collapsed once he crested the peak, facedown and shaking, heaving in breaths of icy air as

a frigid wind chilled the sweat and blood that coated his body. There he lay, counting breaths instead of minutes, resting as the song of his pounding heart began a ritardando.

At last, he stood. He looked back, at the mountainside he just climbed and the barren valley he came from. He looked down, at the sheer brutality his body endured, the ferocity he forced his body to endure.

Finally, he looked ahead at the stones with which he came to speak.

There were three stones, barely six feet tall, arranged in a semi-circle. Feeble little things—perhaps even obelisks at one point, if not for the erosion that whittled them down to their bones. Venus stood there, suspended in time, watching the three stones. Is this what he expected, the stones he envisioned? It did not matter. He needed to hear them, and he would. One moment stretched into many, and he held his breath.

Nothing happened. That long moment collapsed into the present, and he exhaled.

How much longer could he wait?

Would they move? Speak? Offer something more than wretched silence

amidst the howling of the wind? He waited for nothing.

He stepped closer to the stones, limbs taught, fingers digging into his palms.

“I’ve come for your wisdom,” he said, before realizing he could not hear himself over that wind, that all-consuming roar of the sky. He repeated it once more for good measure, louder.

The stones heard nothing, did nothing.

“My mother warned me about you, the Rock People. She said you were liars and deceivers, offering nothing in place of wisdom. I know she was wrong; she must be. She is dying, and you must help me save her.”

He knew how it sounded, even in his hopeful mania. He knew his words fell like little things at his feet, gathered like hatchlings at the foot of a tree, having leaped from their nest far too soon. Killed by their own folly. The stones, silent sentinels over an empty mountain, heard nothing. Did nothing.

Venus hobbled closer to them, so close that he could kiss these monuments to shattered hopes. He searched them with his eyes, his hands. Had he overlooked something?

Surely so. Surely, they could offer him more than the wisdom that comes from blood spilt in the name of delusion.

They did not.

There was no hidden detail, no arcane secrets beneath the ragged surface of stones long eroded. On that mountain, there was nothing more than a boy who thought of the dying mother he left behind. What a terrible thing it is, to know what you have done.

Venus fell to his knees, unable to stand beneath the weight of his own hubris. His body racked with sobs. "You were supposed to help," he cried into the wind. "You were supposed to save her, help me save her. Why didn't she tell me what you were? What you were not?"

He was screaming now, trying to dig his hands into the unyielding mountain beneath him, slamming his fists into the bases of the stones. He would make them speak, he thought to himself. He would make them beg him to stop. It was a gift, what Sisyphus had—never reaching the top of his hill, never seeing that there was only you, and that boulder, and that hill you tried so desperately to climb, and nothing else. Nothing. One must believe Sisyphus smiled when his rock fell again

and again.

Are you smiling while you read this?

The stones did not beg for mercy, and they certainly did not speak. They were only stones, after all.



For Stella

Stephen Pierce

Allow me to paint you a picture of a charcoal heart and weathered bristles.

A man perched on a stool sweeps broad strokes across the canvas, the brush poised limply in his dulled hand. Charcoal lines carve wrinkles on his body, but his eyes swirl in fiery pastel.

Light streams onto the easel from a glass landscape in the wall. Cross-hatched shadows spread from the corners of his tiny room, threatening to consume the artist dwarfed in front of them. The door at his left is uncompromising, dark spirals carved into the thick wood.

His canvas is gloomy, splashed in deep shades and tones of blues and purples. An empty house rests near the painting's edge, the scent of rotting wood wafting off its boards. Not even the faintest breeze can be heard from the countryside, barren of even a stroke of green. The ashen landscape surrounds a dense white void in the

center of the paper, from which can be heard delighted laughter and a cry of agony.

The artist touches his paint-covered brush to the emptiness. Life slows to a fraction of a moment. Red velvet spreads its tentacles across the canvas. Rainbows shimmer in the sweat beading on the artist's forehead.

Then a knock on the door rings out. The artist's hand jerks, turning his careful stroke into a splash of bloody expressionism. He turns and scowls at the door, his edges hardening, and shouts a command of entry with the destructive force of paint thinner.

A woman in a white apron opens the door, her face composed of pointillist dots placed too far apart. She speaks in pastels, handing the artist a meal of rich stew and glistening fruits. He sets it on a nearby table, but all he can see is the easel before him and those bright dots of crimson. They remind him of a scene he

doesn't like to picture.

The sky was a canvas filled with strokes of purple. Stars hung like eyeballs in the air.

The village spread across the horizon. Each wooden wall delicately placed, and each bright window arrayed in a constellation of life.

A dark shadow loomed in the foreground, like an approaching wrath. It threatened to strip the houses away and reveal the empty parchment beneath.

The kindly woman presses a hand on the weary painter's back. He brushes it away, his senses numb to her touch.

The artist picks up his tools and returns to his craft. He masks his error with long, sweeping strokes of red, setting to work on the subject of the canvas. The woman looks on from the background, seeing how his stare had turned monochrome. She wishes to look into his mind and see what manner of nightmare lies within that compels him to see the world from behind its frame, but all she can see is the thin gray strokes of his hair.

The door closes silently, and the room is empty again. The plate of food remains untouched.

With frenzy, he weaves hue onto the world with his wand, and a figure begins to emerge. First a red dress cascading to the wasted soil. Then her long hair, black as night, standing like an angel in the rapturous void.

A crystal-clear teardrop forms in the corner of his eye.

In the cobblestone square lay a tangled mass of bodies, limbs emerging at uncomfortable angles. Death hung in the air like a dense cloud.

An artist and his wife in a gloomy bedroom, their faces like scrambled puzzle pieces, gazing in horror at the withered girl on the bed.

Fractals of flame drifted into the air from a pile of scorched bones. A group of beaked men approached with another diseased corpse, strands of black hair covering its face.

Night has long fallen. Moonlight falls on the weary artist, still painting by the light of his candle.

Soon warmth touches his face. He smiles, letting the brush slip from his hand. It hangs in the air before landing on the floorboards.

It is finished. She stands in the ruined remains of her village, holding a bouquet of blue roses with a vague smile on her face. In her beautiful red dress, she looks like the woman she would have become if God had been more merciful.

“Father! How I’ve missed you so!”

Her voice rings out in dulcet tones as her smile broadens into a grin. It is the clearest voice the artist has heard in years.

He merely stares in awe as the watercolors flow across the canvas into new arrangements, shifting her arm in front of her and out toward the viewpoint.

“Please, take my hand. Mother and I have been so lonely.”

The artist’s mouth opens into a dark pit, but not a sound can be heard within. His hand wavers as he reaches for the painting, pressing his fingers into the surface.

Then the colors jump from the easel, splashing and swirling around his arm, pulling it deeper and deeper within. He grasps his daughter’s painted hand and

feels the smoothness of her skin and the warmth of her blood for the first time in years.

Their eyes light up in joy. She drops her bouquet and thrusts her other hand toward him. Layers of paint rise from the easel and spiral through the air, forming fingers that grasp the artist’s shoulder. The artist dives forward, letting the paint surround him like the waters in a mountain spring, drawing him into his daughter’s arms. They wrap each other up tight, delighted laughter rising high into the stagnant air.

“Oh, Stella, my beautiful girl! I’ve been lost without you!” the painter gasps.

“It’s alright, Father. We’re finally together, and now I’ll never lose you again.”

He beholds with joy the greatest work of art he has created. He recognizes all the features he loved about her mother, but with eyes that spark in every hue. They are his eyes; those that see beauty beyond what lies before them.

Despite the ruined state of the surrounding village, he is overcome by extraordinary senses. The croon of the wind across the land, the faint taste of smoke in the air, and the scent of the

roses on the faded grass.

The artist glances at the bouquet, stuffed with sparkling roses as blue as sapphires. He picks them up, takes a delighted whiff, and hands them to Stella.

“Blue roses, Stella. Just as you always wanted.”

She takes them and brushes them against her cheek, smiling.

“I’m surprised you remember,” she says, “I said that so many years ago, and you told me that they weren’t real.”

“Not quite. I said that as an artist, I could bring the unreal to life.”

She chuckles pleasantly.

“You certainly have. Now come on, let’s go. Mother will be elated to see your face again.”

Stella takes his hand and leads the way, off to a worn-down cottage on the edge of the vanishing point. They speak warmly and rapidly, making up for decades of lost time as they steadily cross the wasteland. For as long as he can remember, the artist had never felt the Sun kissing him so delicately.

Behind him, a black void shimmers in the air. But in a splash of color, it fades into the endlessly sprawling background.

The window was a light blue rectangle in a field of empty brown.

The easel was a section of warmth in a mosaic of desaturation.

On the stool was an empty frame, and not a soul was in the gallery.





Dream World

Amanda Clark

NON

* 2022 Creative Writing Contest

***Timeline of a Breakup* ***

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***Riverbank Bloodline* ***

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Redsboro Night School's Rules* *

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** 2021 Creative Writing Contest

FICTION

Timeline of a Breakup

Kayla Eberhardt

THE DAY WE MET: Met up in a Starbucks. Walked up and said hi. She went in for a business-like handshake. Felt superbly awkward but blew past it. Probably should've known right about then. Small talk has never felt so painful. Then, a light shining at the end of the tunnel: we had a scary number of common interests, a similar sense of humor, and she was super nice. I decided that the awkwardness would fade over time.

A WEEK IN: She invited me up to her dorm. I hesitated. Again, blew past it—this time with a barrage of jokes. She didn't laugh. Again, should've known right about then. She told me she wouldn't do anything to put me in an uncomfortable situation. We headed upstairs and spent hours talking and getting to know each other more.

A MONTH IN: I wasn't really looking for anything, which I had said from the

start. She wanted to address the "what are we?" situation. Told her exactly how I was feeling. She said it was fine but the dread started to sink in, an insidious snake spooling in my stomach. She was looking at me in a way that said she wanted more, much more, but I wanted less, much less... I just didn't know how to tell her, when she had already been so accommodating of my feelings so far.

A MONTH BEFORE: Went to the homecoming festival. She didn't want to do any of the rides because she was too anxious. Sat awkwardly on the sidelines, making conversation. Felt the heavy stares of everyone walking past. Went home and wrote in my diary, irreconcilable differences??? like a wine mom trying to get out of marriage to a husband who paid a little too much attention to his "buddies" and "work" and "babe, not right now, the game's on."

A WEEK BEFORE: Went to a couple of parties with her friends. Learned she was a sentimental drunk but could not deal with weed. Crouched in the corner consoling her paranoia, wishing I was anywhere else. The room was dark around us, sweaty, grinding bodies pushing in close, “Super Bass” by Nicki Minaj shaking the sticky floors. Felt terrible about the entire situation but was finally forced to face the music. This wasn’t working, and it wasn’t anyone’s fault, but that’s just the way it is, sometimes. Reached this realization as she told me, sloppily, in front of all her friends, “I’m so glad I met you.” Felt like I was going to throw up. Promptly ignored the realization—how the hell was I supposed to tell her I didn’t feel the same?

THREE DAYS BEFORE: Bought concert tickets together. This, unpredictably, is what sealed our fate. Instead of being excited about seeing one of my favorite artists, King Princess, I immediately began thinking about the two-hour drive. What was I supposed to do alone with her in a car for two hours? The one time we had been in a car together she drove 35 in a 55. It wouldn’t be a two-hour drive. It would

take years — like, 84, to be precise. Would we die? Would she ask me to make things official at the concert and then I wouldn’t know what to say and then we would have to drive back in silence for two hours? Or maybe I would just have to hitchhike back? Or just permanently take up residence in Asheville? *Fuck*, I realized. *I need to break up with her.*

TWO DAYS BEFORE: Tried to schedule the breakup, like it was an event. When was a good time to pencil this into my planner? I couldn’t do it before the semester was over. I had a class with her best friend and that would be awkward as hell. Okay, no, I couldn’t wait that long. Well, I obviously couldn’t do it before the concert. What was I supposed to do with the tickets? But I couldn’t wait until finals week because that would just be unnecessarily cruel. Okay, I wrote. Right before Thanksgiving break, it is. And then promptly realized I needed to do it before the concert, which was in a week. I had the feeling that going to that together was going to solidify her feelings for me even further. I couldn’t keep stringing her along while I knew it was never going to work.

6:30 PM, THE DAY BEFORE: Googled “how to break up with someone” and took copious notes in my diary. Phoned a friend. Took a long, hot shower because I felt disgusting and physically dirty with what I was about to do.

10:00 PM—7:00 AM: Slept restlessly, plagued with anxiety about how she was going to react. My chest was tight, painful, tingly—a thousand pent up feelings ping-ponging around my heart.

7:30 AM, THE DAY OF: Went back and forth about what to wear: *Do I leave her with a last image of ‘yeah, you had this...but not anymore...sucks’? Do I dress in all black as some weird kind of symbol of the death of our relationship? Or do I dress messy, like I feel bad about what I’m having to do?* Said “fuck it” and put on a gray turtleneck, black jeans, and combat boots. Possibly gave off ‘suit-of-armor’/‘going-to-war’ vibes.

8:00 AM: Went with my roommate to get breakfast at Starbucks. Only ate three bites of my favorite cinnamon raisin bagel because I felt sick. Felt like my pores were clogged with dread. Thought about how I knew she was going to cry. Thought about how I’m the worst person alive. Thought about every single thing that could possibly go

wrong. She could murder me. A little bit dramatic, but possible. She could hate me forever. Much more feasible. She could tell everyone on campus that I’m the worst person alive. No, she wouldn’t do that. She would be hurt. That was the worst one to think about.

9:05 AM: Went to several classes but didn’t pay any attention to the material.

3:10 PM: Headed to her dorm. Walked a little slower than usual because I didn’t want to be in the moment of reckoning just yet. The sun beaming down overhead—bright and warm on my skin—felt like it was mocking me. Where was the bone-chilling rain and dark skies? As I trudged up to the dorm, three girls with matching gray North Face backpacks and judgmental expressions stared me down from their perch on the balcony. I was feeling a bit dramatic, so I pictured them as the Fates, cruelly smiling down on me, deeming me a terrible person for life for putting my own feelings over someone else’s.

3:20 PM: Stood in front of her door for a minute, avoiding eye contact with the students rushing by on their way to class. Took a deep, shaky breath. Knocked on her door. Avoided a kiss but gave an awkward hug.

She was wearing a gray turtleneck too. Made a joke about how we were matching. Walked around her tiny dormroom, feeling like the walls were closing in, examining her bookshelves like I hadn't been in there at least twenty times. Like I didn't know they were stocked with all the Harry Potter books and her favorite graphic novels. Like I didn't feel every memory we had created in there washing over me at once, pulling my skin in tight. Asked if we could "talk." Cringed because of how it sounded. Sat down on the navy-blue beanbags she had stationed in the center of her dorm. I was positioned uncomfortably, sunk too deep into the cushion, the floor pressing up against my back. I didn't move, though. I felt like I deserved that.

I could tell she knew what was coming as soon as I said that, maybe even as soon as she opened the door. Her hands were shaking ever so slightly, and I could see that her eyes were beginning to water.

Weirdly, I got the sudden urge to laugh. I shifted awkwardly. "I know this is really shitty timing," I began, thinking back to my diary entry that I had titled

Lights, Camera, Action: Break Up. "But it would be unfair to both of us if I didn't say it now."

From there, it really got out of my hands. I remember I did a lot of looking anywhere but at her. At the bed where we had watched a movie a couple of nights before; at the plush gray carpet where we had gotten ready for a party together the previous week; out the window at campus, where everyone else was just going about their days—cutting through crowds on skateboards, joking with friends, booking it to class.

I couldn't look at her, though. Not with her lip quivering like that and her cheeks stained with tears. She was the physical manifestation of pain that I had caused. I hated every second of the seventeen-minute-long ordeal.

Honestly, I was surprised I had even gone through with it. I probably set a world record for "number of times attempted to speak oneself out of something." For weeks I had wrestled with these feelings. How could I do this bad thing without it making me a bad person? Would valuing my feelings over someone else's make me feel worse or finally at ease?

3:41 PM: I closed my best friend's door behind me. "Well?" he demanded. I breathed out a sigh of relief, fighting the urge to smile, and sank down onto the couch. My body felt lighter than it had in weeks.

FIVE DAYS LATER: The biting, cold breeze felt healing against my skin; although it was night and the temperature was nearing a brisk 40, the windows of our car were cracked, and King Princess was blasting from the speakers. After a slightly dirty feeling Venmo transaction with her, I was in possession of both concert tickets and had given the other to a friend. Unable to stop smiling, I belted the lyrics at the top of my lungs as we blasted down the highway at 85 MPH.



** Runner-Up of 2022 Water Works Contest*



Slipping Through Our Fingers

Macy Ormand

Riverbank Bloodline

Kaylee Cook

Summers in North Carolina are hot. Anyone who lives here can tell you that much. It's the kind of heat that penetrates deep within you, making you feel as though you're melting from the inside out. It's not made much better when you spend your days being babysat by grandparents who only have one small air conditioning unit in the kitchen of their log cabin home and a grandfather who likes to burn wood in the heater even in the middle of the summer, the habit of an old man who grew up with nothing, but still one that we've never understood.

The dark wood house with rough, brown shag carpeting is as hot on the inside as the world outside of it. The shade of the house is the only thing that is tempting enough to make you want to stay inside, and even that is emulated by the pine and oak trees that stand guard around the home. So, in a house with

no cable or internet, my cousins and I were left to entertain ourselves with nothing but each other, our imaginations, and the nature we were surrounded by, which included the Jacob Fork River.

The Jacob Fork is the bloodstream of my home. I've spent my entire life on its banks in the middle of nowhere South Mountain, North Carolina. Its waters run through the veins of my childhood and has shaped me the person I am today. It provides everything in South Mountain with life and breath. The giant pine trees that hold deer stands, the trout that makes it home in the water, even the nature of the landscape and our homes; it's all possible because Jacob Fork's waters have never slowed down, they've been there long before any of us and will be long after we're all gone. My entire childhood occurred on these banks, and

my personality formed from its waters. The Jacob Fork serves as a gathering place, a place full of summertime memories, and a symbol of love and life and loss.

The Jacob Fork River begins at the High Shoals in the South Mountain State Park, which sits 15 minutes from my home and about one minute from my grandparents'. Running its way down through woods that held the kingdoms and worlds of my imagination, it makes its way through the back acres of my grandparent's home. It's here tucked behind a curtain of trees, off the beaten path, and deep in the "backwoods" of North Carolina that the best parts of my childhood took place.

Don't get me wrong, we had plenty of fun playing in the woods. My cousins and hauled grandpa's rusted old tomato cages from behind the peeling, red building and up through the four-wheeler paths to a clearing in the garden. It was there we stacked them one on top of the other, hooking their bent spikes into one another to build our castles. To the average eye, they were flimsy, unprotected castles, but to us they had a sense of magic to them. They secretly had solid stone walls and

giant drawbridges that only we could see.

When we'd get bored with this we'd leave the cages, despite grandpa telling us to bring them back, and race back through the woods to grandpa's old beat up, broken down, blue Ford truck that we'd then use as a classroom, the winner got to be the teacher. Then, taking the flat pieces of wood that laid about grandpa's woodshed, we turned them into textbooks. English, History, Science, but never math because this was supposed to be fun, and math is not fun. We even stacked them against each other to create laptops, a type of computer that none of us could afford but wanted so bad we'd make our own.

But on the days when the tree's shade was not enough to block the sun's angry rays, and the metal bed of the truck felt like a stovetop. We found ourselves piling into the rusted red trailer on the back of grandpa's four-wheeler and heading off through the woods to the banks of the Jacob Fork River. The hard, blunt metal edge of the trailer pressed painfully into my back as we bumped over roots and rocks because I was always stuck against the back so that the weight was balanced. But the pain never mattered much to

me because as soon as my head went under the cold waters of the river, everything else washed away.

It was only in the river that we could find relief on these days. Not just the days where the sun's rays made it feel like we were melting, but relief from arguments and being pitted against one another. We were all smart, very smart, and my aunt never failed to make it known how smart my cousins were. My parents never pitted me against them, but it always felt like she did. But even this pressure and rivalry we had created would be washed away once our heads dove into Jacob Fork. All of my parent's arguments, great-grandpa's cancer, my brother who left the go live with his real dad, it all could be swept away in the river's current.

With the giant pine tree stretching across the banks like a diving board, the smooth rocks made slick from the moss that grows in the river's cold water, and the horseflies whose droning buzz is the only warning before their bite. This is where the heart of our imaginations lived. It only took one jump from the diving tree for three normal little girls, with abnormal problems, to transform into mermaids, ocean explorers, or the

queens of a magical underwater kingdom.

This river is where my dad taught me how to cast a fishing line for the first time. Where, as he muttered under his breath and rolled his eyes, he took my line and hooked and baited it for me because I was scared of it, I thought it would slice my fingers off, and I didn't want to stab the hook through the poor, defenseless worms. I know it annoyed him, because he had to do it every single time for almost 12 years, but he did it anyway because all of that annoyance would be swept away in the warm summer breeze as I screamed with glee that I caught a fish.

This riverbank is where my grandpa told me that corn is better than worms because it's cheaper and the fish like it more and my dad got into an argument with him because they're the two most stubborn people on the planet. Refusing to acknowledge that they're exactly the same as each other, neither wants to be wrong and refuses to let anyone tell them otherwise. I'm honestly not sure if I believe that there's a difference between corn and worms in terms of which the fish like more, but I always beat my brother when fishing with corn

so maybe there is something to it.

The River," that's what we called it, is where we celebrated summer birthdays in the family, grilling hotdogs and hamburgers then eating them while we were soaking wet, water dripping onto the splintered, carved wood of the picnic tables housed in the state park. It's where my grandpa taught us how to swim and where mud fights and real fights took place, lots of real fights because three girls who are becoming teenagers fight a lot... with everyone. Tears and laughter echoed throughout the holler as grandpa screamed at us to be nice. Every good and bad memory lives within these glassy waters. Summer days spent by the water still sit prevalent in my mind, even years after we stopped riding out there.

It may seem hard to understand how a simple river can make you who you are. But this one did. Not because it changed my life in some drastic way, there were no near-death experiences or some significant realization that occurred in it. If anything, I found myself become bored with going there every day as I got older, but it is the center-point of my community and my childhood.

When I look back at my memories and my life, this river is the setting for most of them and I find myself appreciating it more and more as I get older. It serves as shelter, entertainment, a source of income, and relief from the heat for all of us. It's where stories of a time long passed were shared, where lifelong bonds were made, where poetry has been written, where tears have been cried, where an appreciation for my home was formed, and it's where I eventually found myself again when I'd lost my way.

The Jacob Fork River made me and my family who we are, it brought us back together despite the fact that my cousins and I always tried to out-do each other, or that my parents fought most of the time, or that my dad and grandpa argued at ever birthday and get together. It was the one thing that we all had in common. Growing up on its banks, swimming in its waters, twisting an ankle on the mossy rocks, it's what makes us Cooks. It's in our veins, our minds, and our hearts. It is our bloodline.



The Ink-Bleeding Sunset

Demetrius Willig

Excited laughter fills the air. Pastries are exchanged between employee and customer, the plastic crinkling as it's moved from one hand to the next. A glass is being cleaned at a sink behind the counter— the gushing of water is subtle but clear. The sound of a blender pitcher falling into the sink soon follows after it, the employee simply discarding it for later cleaning.

"Have a great night!" a woman behind the counter says to a leaving patron. As the café's doors open, for a split second the colorful sky can be seen, giving a hint of the setting sun. A pen is nestled between my fingers as I sit, content to watch as the ink flows over the notebook's pages. I am still in my seat, my fingers twirling my pen as I sit, thinking. I need to make sure that whatever I capture will be meaningful and would imitate a true experience.

"You're twenty years old..." is spoken in a surprised— and perhaps outraged— tone from a different corner of the coffee shop. Beneath the sea of unclear voices comes a soft jazz music which is soon followed by a softer Indie musical tune which is followed by a modernized county artist. Across from me, I take notice of two peers of mine of whom I've never met conversing in a foreign language, and I do not even attempt to guess as to what they are talking about. A kitchen timer goes off.

"Would you like the fruit pieces that come in that?"

The lights in the café shine on the table, providing an unexpected tone of comfort that I didn't realize I needed. The sky continues to darken as the minutes pass by, and my gaze follows the colors as they bleed into an inky-black sky. I realize that it has gotten quite dark outside, and I place my pen down. I spent the next few

minutes watching the sky carefully, observing ever closer how the sky changes with each passing second.

"Alright, thank you," is uttered. The whirr of a coffee maker can be heard. I can almost begin to imagine the smell of the freshly ground beans, despite how far away I am from the counter. I can't help but feel so impossibly in the moment. I lean back in my chair and watch the room once more.

"...just drive." The music over the speakers gradually grows louder and louder. The clinking of ice cubes falling to a plastic cup is hard to mistake, as is the familiar cleaning spray of water that comes next. I realize that writing what is around me seems to be pointless. While my ink might convey the wanted experience, nothing would quite match the satisfaction of living it all in real time.

"Caramel," is spoken in monotone politeness. A door shuts loudly from another room, perhaps even outside the coffee shop. Minutes later, the words "can I have a drink holder with that?" are spoken between customer and employee once again.

I take a final peek through the windows. Now the night sky is settling

in and I can see the faint glimmer of the stars. A smile engraves itself onto my face and a feeling of gratefulness overwhelms me.

What a shame it would have been to have missed the sunset.



Who Bit the Apple?

[Censored Version]

Stephen Pierce

This apple tastes like [poop]. I mean, really, how incompetent do you have to be to [goof] up an apple. You just pull it off the tree, man. It ain't hard!

Wait, that reminds me. Did I ever tell you about the apple-biter mystery?

Fifteen times? Don't pull my leg, man, I know I ain't told you yet. Anyway, here's how it went:

So about three weeks ago, back when we were working for Anchovy Joe's I got called to deliver a pizza to my best friend Wayne. Now Wayne's a total [meanieface], but he knew how to get the good stuff, you know? And by the time I got there, I think he'd had too much of the good stuff cause him and a load of his friends were passed out on the floor. This was about typical for Wayne, and I knew I didn't want to be around when he woke up. So I left the pizza in the minifridge, which was totally empty 'cept for an apple, and then I head out.

So next day I get a call from Wayne, who's freaking the [freak] out because apparently someone took a bite out of his apple. They didn't even eat the whole thing, just a couple tiny nibbles from the rind. And I'm like 'dude shut up, why would I eat your apple? I don't even know where you been. I'd probably get syphilis if I looked at that thing funny.'

But apparently after I was gone, his girl tried to get some milk from the fridge and passed out in front of it, blocking the whole door. Wayne's mom was there, completely sober, for some reason, so she could confirm no one else went into the kitchen.

Since the apple was still intact when I looked, that means the only one who could have bit it was me. But obviously I didn't. And it couldn't be the girlfriend cause she's allergic to apples. And everyone saw Wayne open the door, so it wasn't him. So who bit the apple?

Frankly I didn't give a [care], but Wayne had this vid of me losing to him in strip Tic-Tac-Toe, so I had to keep that from getting out. So I had to clear my name. I headed over to his [dirty] apartment and looked around. I didn't notice anything weird about the fridge. No secret compartments or removeable backs or nothing. I asked him what happened to the milk cartons his girl was trying to get, but he said he threw them out cause they started to smell like death. So yeah, typical Wayne stuff. He never even closes his cartons back up, the lunatic...

Hey, where you going, man? The story ain't over yet. Get back here! No, you don't need to feed your gerbil. You don't even have a gerbil. He died three weeks ago, remember? Geez, get over it, man.

Anyway, where was I? So yeah, basically I couldn't figure nothing out cause the crime was seemingly impossible. Some like John Dickson Carr [stuff], y'know?

Based on your expression, I'm guessing you haven't heard of him. He wrote stories with impossible crimes like this, but less stupid. Anyway, I headed to the library to see if they had some of

his stuff there so I could get some ideas. Most of it looked pretty old and confusing, and I was really struggling to make it through one sentence.

I did get talking to the librarian though, and she apparently knew more about these so-called locked room mysteries than anybody probably should. There's apparently only a few ways a crime like this can happen. I forgot most of them, but it was [poop] like the apple getting bitten remotely, the apple being made to look fresh after it was bitten, or the apple biting itself. I guess she didn't know much about locked fridge murders, cause all her ideas sounded pretty stupid out loud.

It was getting obvious that this was a waste of my time, so I headed out through the back entrance. I did check out *The Three Coffins*, but it disappeared at some point. Think I dropped it in a drainage grate. Either way, I ain't going near that library again.

And wouldn't you know who I ran into on the way home? It was Wayne with one of his buds. Some big burly dude holding a tire iron, and I don't think he was planning to iron any tires.

...Dude what are you doing? Stop checking your pockets. Your gerbil's not

there. He's gone. You shouldn't have him in your pockets anyway! That's what got you fired from Anchovy Joe's, remember?

Ugh, whatever. Anyway, Wayne was still certain I bit his stupid apple, and the worst part is he had a point. I was the only one who could have. Only argument I could make was how stupid the whole thing was. I tried to tell Wayne that if I was really gonna pull a prank on him, I'd do something a little more interesting.

Anyway, he didn't like that too much, probably because I called him a "crusty-[bottom] [nice lady]-baby" in the middle of it. He whispered something to the big brute, who sprinted over to me before I could react. To make a painful story short, I wound up lying against an overflowing dumpster with both my knees busted. That's why I'm in this wheelchair here...

Why do you look surprised? Did you not notice me wheeling up to the table? Geez, you're a real interesting fellow, you know that?

Whatever. So I was lying in that alley hoping I didn't bleed to death when I saw this really grody apple core on the ground. Honestly, now that I think

about it, it might've been the same [fucking] apple. But I couldn't tell, cause this dirty rat was devouring the thing. I watched it nibble the core to pieces, [poop] in a Starbucks cup, and leave.

And you know what, in that moment, I really felt like one of those old sleuths.

See, I was hit with a sudden epiphany. All my memories of the case came flooding back to me, and I figured it out. I identified the real apple biter!

So how about it? Who do YOU think the culprit is? And how did they do it?

...

...

Think about it this way, man. No one could have opened the fridge door after I closed it, and I know the apple was intact when I put in the pizza. That leaves one option—when I closed the door, whoever bit the apple was already inside!

Sounds crazy right? Well, it's the only thing that makes sense. No one could have opened the fridge door while Wayne's girl was there, but they couldn't bite the apple without opening the fridge door.

But that leaves the obvious question. How did they get in and how did they

leave? Well, there's only two things that entered and exited that fridge. Those must be how our apple biter got in and out.

But then, who bit the apple? Putting everything together, it should be obvious, right?

...

...

It was your gerbil, man. He bit the apple.

Don't get so defensive. Just think about it. There's no way a human could have hidden in that fridge and bitten the apple. It had to be something small—an animal. And I should have known from looking at the apple itself. They didn't take one massive bite. They took a bunch of smaller ones.

How did the gerbil get in? Simple. You and I were working together at Anchovy Joe's that day. You had your gerbil with you, cause you're a [flipping] lunatic. That's also the day you lost him. Strange coincidence, right? I think he jumped into my pizza box and slid under the pie without me noticing. Then I took him off to Wayne's place and put the pizza box in the fridge.

Once the gerbil was in there, he must have gotten hungry. The pizza

probably wasn't appealing to him, but he smelled something outside: an apple. He crawled out of the pizza and took a few bites! But there was a problem. He was locked in the freezer, and Wayne was too [goofed] up to open the door.

I'm sorry, man, but I think your gerbil froze to death in there.

Yeah, man, just get it all out. It's alright to cry, especially cause the rest ain't any easier to swallow. But you know what, maybe it's for the best?

Without having to look after that gerbil so much, you could finally get some [nice ladies].

You're probably wondering why we didn't find the dead gerbil. Thing is, Wayne kept his milk cartons on the bottom shelf of the door, usually with the tops open. At some point, the gerbil must have fallen down there and sunk to the bottom. That's what caused the cartons to stink up so bad. The smell was so revolting that Wayne tossed them without looking inside. Your gerbil was taken off to the dump the next day.

It was really the perfect crime. So perfect that I got my kneecaps busted over it. I even called Wayne about the whole thing, but he just didn't care. Said it was my fault for putting the gerbil in

the fridge. Ain't no chance of me getting more weed from him, I guess.

Well, point is I need some compensation for the hospital bill, man. I'm not asking for a lot, but I can't pay off all this [poop] myself. It's the least you could do, seeing as it's your gerbil that—

What? Seriously? That much? No way! That's so kind of you. Man, I'm sorry I said all that [poop]. You're a real friend, you know that? Still need to get some [nice ladies], but no one's perfect.

Man, that feels good though. I should solve mysteries more often. All it took was seeing that rat to figure out the whole thing.

You know what the best part of this is, though? Wayne was all on my [bottom] for biting his apple, but he doesn't even know about my true crime.

See, that same night I was fixing up that pizza of his. And right before I put it in the box, I grabbed one of the slices...

And I took a massive bite out of it!





Hero of Flowers

Amanda Clark

Redsboro Night School's* Rules

Morgan Winstead

GUIDING PRINCIPLES: *We commit to provide our students:*

- Challenging and inspiring academic programs that support students in achieving their potential in college and life
- A socially and economically diverse community that honors and nurtures relationships among students, faculty, and community
- Exceptional extra-curricular opportunities that enrich the educational experience

Each day, you will see students crying in the hallways, in the bathrooms, in corners of classrooms; they forgot to do a Latin assignment, or a Calculus problem, or a reading for Literature, where a pop quiz was handed out. They are made to feel like that is the end of the world, that they are doomed to *gasp* go to Community College, to be homeless... How will you ever get into UNC or Duke now?

All of the popular kids live down the street from the country club. They call the neighborhoods - inhabited primarily by people of color - near downtown "ghetto." They've not seen any of those neighborhoods... They've never been downtown at all.

Athletics are an extracurricular, but athletes are permitted to leave class early for practice or for games. The Arts are an extracurricular, but just

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY:

Redsboro Night School's educational philosophy is guided by evidence-based practices and cognitive research. Our vibrant learning community integrates the best of both progressive and traditional methodologies. We develop lifelong learners and inspire them to be their best intellectual, ethical and interpersonal selves.

DIVERSITY STATEMENT: *We are dedicated to cultivating a principled community of learners that welcomes diversity, including: age, culture, gender*

because you were in rehearsal until midnight last night doesn't excuse you from doing the homework for this class. Is my class not important? Why did you not do the work for my class? What makes my class less of a priority for you?

In the sixth grade you will participate in a "Slave Ship Simulation." Your science teacher will make you shove saltines into your mouths before running a lap around the Middle School. Then, the science teacher – dressed in overalls and a straw hat – will chase each of you down, drag you into his darkened classroom, and shove you into a compartment made by desks stacked on top of one another. The compartments will have goat shit and ice cubes in them, and he will pour water between the cracks of the desks onto you. You will lay there for 20 minutes, the lights will come on, and he will say: "That's a fraction of what slaves experienced when they were transported from Africa to America."

Girls are to wear shorts that reach fingertip-length. In the eighth grade, a group of boys will wear Nike shorts to protest this rule after the Vice Principal

race, faith, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ability. Redsboro Night School does not discriminate on the basis of disability in its programs, services or facilities, including in admissions, enrollment, and access to educational programs offered by the School in accordance with Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

of the Middle School says the boys can wear whatever they want “because they’re boys.” They will not be asked to change clothes. But the teal shorts you were so proud to wear, a gift from your stepmother... Those aren’t okay. You either need to change into a pair of calf-length neon orange basketball shorts – so graciously provided by the school – or go home.

A group of eighth grade boys will send one of your classmates – you’re in sixth grade, but she’s young for your class – lewd messages and pressure her to send them photos of her naked body. Her mom finds the messages and brings them to the school. The principal asks what their punishment should be. The mom says, “I want these boys to read what they sent my daughter to their mothers.”

The boys go into the office with their parents, one by one, and are forced to read everything they sent that 11-year-old girl word-for-word to their mothers.

This will be the only time the school does anything for victims of sexual harassment, though – what, you think you get more chances?

SCHOOL CORE VALUES: Wisdom,
Community, Respect

Wisdom (noun): the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment; the quality of being wise. Examples of “wisdom” in a sentence:

It takes a certain degree of wisdom to know when money and donations mean more to a school than doing what is right.

(Know when to give up. Know when it’s not worth fighting anymore, know when you need to step down, know when to stop).

Respect (noun): due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of others. Examples of “respect” in a sentence:

When you see your teachers make fun of the weird kids, respect them by turning a blind eye. They favor the athletes, the girls with perfect skin, the students who spend their weekends stealing Grey Goose from their parents’ liquor cabinets and trying, yet showing off, to conceal a cocaine addiction. Respect the administration, even when they advertise “83 STUDENTS OF COLOR!” as a bubble-letter-font on the school’s website, all while allowing students of color to be bullied frequently. The Black principal

of the Middle School will deal with racist remarks from white parents (and their children) on a regular basis.

Respect the technical director when you report another students' threats to physically harm you and she says, "You weren't meant to see the threats, so there's nothing we can do."

Respect when a group of students chose to hold a walk-out protest against abortion the day after the International Walk-Out in memory of the lives lost at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018.

Community (noun): a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. Examples of "community" in a sentence:

When you graduate high school, you'll take the yellow rose you were given to hold as you received your diploma and rip off the petals one-by-one. You'll walk out of the gymnasium after the graduation ceremony, and only a handful of people will have said goodbye to you. You'll drive for a while around your hometown, out into the country and past the wildflower field (bulldozed now) you would wander into on the bad days. That night, there will be a

graduation party for your class. The popular, pretty people will have gotten drunk at one of their houses beforehand (the parents hosted a cocktail party), and you can tell who is cool and who is not by how slurred their words are. Guests are allowed, and a group of girls – friends with the popular pretty girls – will show up. The guys in your 70-person class will be entranced by their presences. A band will play cover songs in front of all of you. Towards the end of the night, one of the guest girls, drunk, will get onstage, take the microphone, and say: “Congratulations on graduating from Redsboro Night... You paid too much money for your education, so good job, I guess.”

And you leave, and no one from your **community** turns to say goodbye.





Amanda Clark

POETRY

* 2022 Creative Writing Contest

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** 2021 Creative Writing Contest

& ART

Where I'm From

Emma Dingle

I am from dishes in the sink,
From animal feed and 7th generation cleaning spray.
I am from the mountains and woods that encircle my house.

(Dense, majestic,
a never-ending sea of blue, brown, and green.)

I am from the Daffodils
the Sarvice Berry
whose flowering buds remind me
Spring is on its way.

I'm from day trips to Fontana and athleticism,
from Doodle and Margarette,
from Bubba and Boot (Boo-et, as they say in Charleston).

I'm from natural jokesters and hearts to share what God has blessed us with,
from "Come get Mama or Daddy if you have trouble!" and "Time to come eat!"

I'm from the 45 minute drive to church on Sundays,
with songs and stories I can recite by heart.

I'm from the wind blowing across my face, pulling my hair back or swirling it around,
from blazing sunsets and summer nights lit up by fireflies.

I'm from Alarka and the Deep South rooted in antebellum past,
homemade cornbread with our own ground meal, Friday night pizza, and
ooey-goey brownies.

From the childhood love that brought my grandparents together,
The step of faith my mother and father took to move here
away from their families.

Under the table where the parakeet cage sits are
baskets full of photos stretching the breadth of my parents' lives,
and snippets from my childhood.

These moments in time show me who I was, who I am:
the heritage I carry forward.

Longing

Aaron Ray

I don't miss you,
I miss what you were.
The paper airplanes you flew
and the reality you deferred.

A head lost in dreams,
like you're stuck in Candy Land,
and a smile, bursting at the seams,
never asking for a helping hand.

Not a clue about life.
Never a doubt about love.
Not an ounce of strife,
and everything to prove.

Where went that jolly friend of mine?
Where went those brilliant eyes?
Off to have your adventure, blind,
as you skip across star-scattered skies.

Now you stay at your apartment and sit
in that tattered and battered chair,
already packed for the trip
you think about when you despair.

I'd like to see you again, if you don't mind.
I'd like to visit your sad little home.
We can clean the rooms and polish to a shine
and talk on how we've both grown.

We can take a walk through Main,
or stop by your favorite store,
and we'll learn to share the blame
for the weight you always bore.

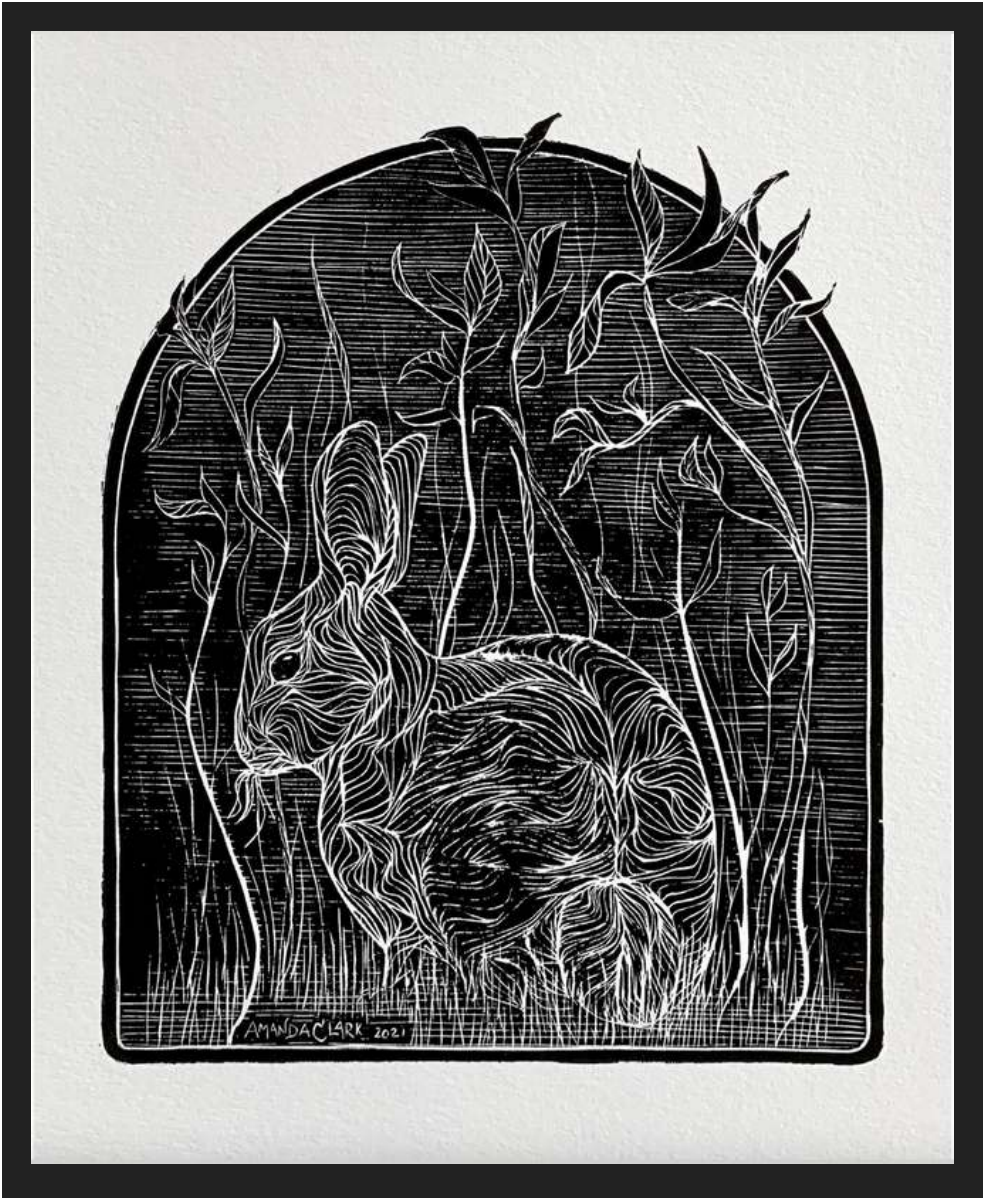
This Crab was Sponsored by Crest Toothpaste

Audra Wisor

Meet our good pal Sheldon, a regular hermit crab just like you.
And just like you he struggles to find the perfect shell to crawl into.
But now he's found our latest model, what an innovative design!
Our patented polypropylene will keep him safe and looking fine.

Our new toothpaste styled shell will keep you safe for sure.
It's affordable and weightless and your safety is assured.
You'll be the talk of all the crabs in the seven seas.
And in case you're not convinced, nine out of ten dentists agree.

This shell is all the rage right now! Our competitors are in danger!
Our production rate is so much faster than good old Mother Nature.
Not to mention this stylish shell has such durability.
It'll last four hundred and fifty years, or your money back guarantee!



Cottontail Block Print

Amanda Clark

Beginnings and Endings

Bethany Combs

Many stories take place with sad beginnings and happy endings.

But not this story, not our story.

In our beginning we were blissfully happy,
That was only meant to be for a fleeting moment,

Or at least so it seemed.

Then you decided to wreck the stage,

Recast the scene to make you the lead!

You shattered my heart and broke my soul,

You left me bleeding and without a home.

You'll tell your story and I'll tell mine

Maybe one of these days they'll actually align.

So, here's to all the happy beginnings

And their even sadder endings.

Oxbows and Tributaries

William Crooke

Life is a river of time.
Born from a mountain spring,
Running clear and cold through youthful headwaters,
Cascading over rapids and falls,
Into a naive creek.
Whose days are spent meandering through valleys and hollers
Aging into a river,
a river with no end
and no chart to map its route.
Whose bends outnumber its years.
A wise and timeless river.
A river in search of the sea,
Whose age is measured in miles and sights seen.
Running through towns and farms,
In its search for the sea.
At times stagnated by obstacles and challenged by topography,
Diverted to swamps and oxbows.
On down the mountain, the river goes,
Headed South where it grows muddy and wide.
Now devoid of rapids and falls, the river is long and wise.
It nears the sea, spread thin by preoccupation
Breeding children of tributaries,
Its last hope in escaping the sea.
The river flows slow,
Dragging its feet as the end grows near.
The feet dragging stops at the meeting of the river and the sea.
Here begins the blending,
Of salt water and fresh,
Of heaven and flesh.

Battered Like a Coral Reef

Victoria Ackerman

There I lie
Cradled between life and death
The unflagging waves, they slam until I have all but one breath
But still, there I lie

A chorus of unsung heroes live within the twists and turns of my body
They've lived for years on end between the rigid grooves of my shell yet, oddly
It's getting harder and harder to live in harmony
But still, there I lie

Others like me, the subjects to whatever man wants
He goes wherever and whenever, he taunts
He lurks in the depths of these icy blue waters just waiting to strike
But still, there I lie

The outer mold of my body, bleached and crushed
Though each time I am able to speak, I'm hushed
The chords of my soul have stretched so thin, they're mere threads
But still, there I lie

Every wave I take, a crescendo of fear is further ingrained within
There's pain that extends to the tips of every branch, every limb
But still, there I lie, His hands around my throat
Unable to deny
There I lie.

THE NOMAD PRESENTS:

TALES FROM THE LAB

A COLLECTION OF STORIES AND COMICS IN COLLABORATION WITH ARTLAB

INSTRUCTIONS
ON
BACK!

FEATURING SOME
HAUNTINGLY
COOL STORIES,
ART + ANIMATION
WITH AUGMENTED
REALITY!

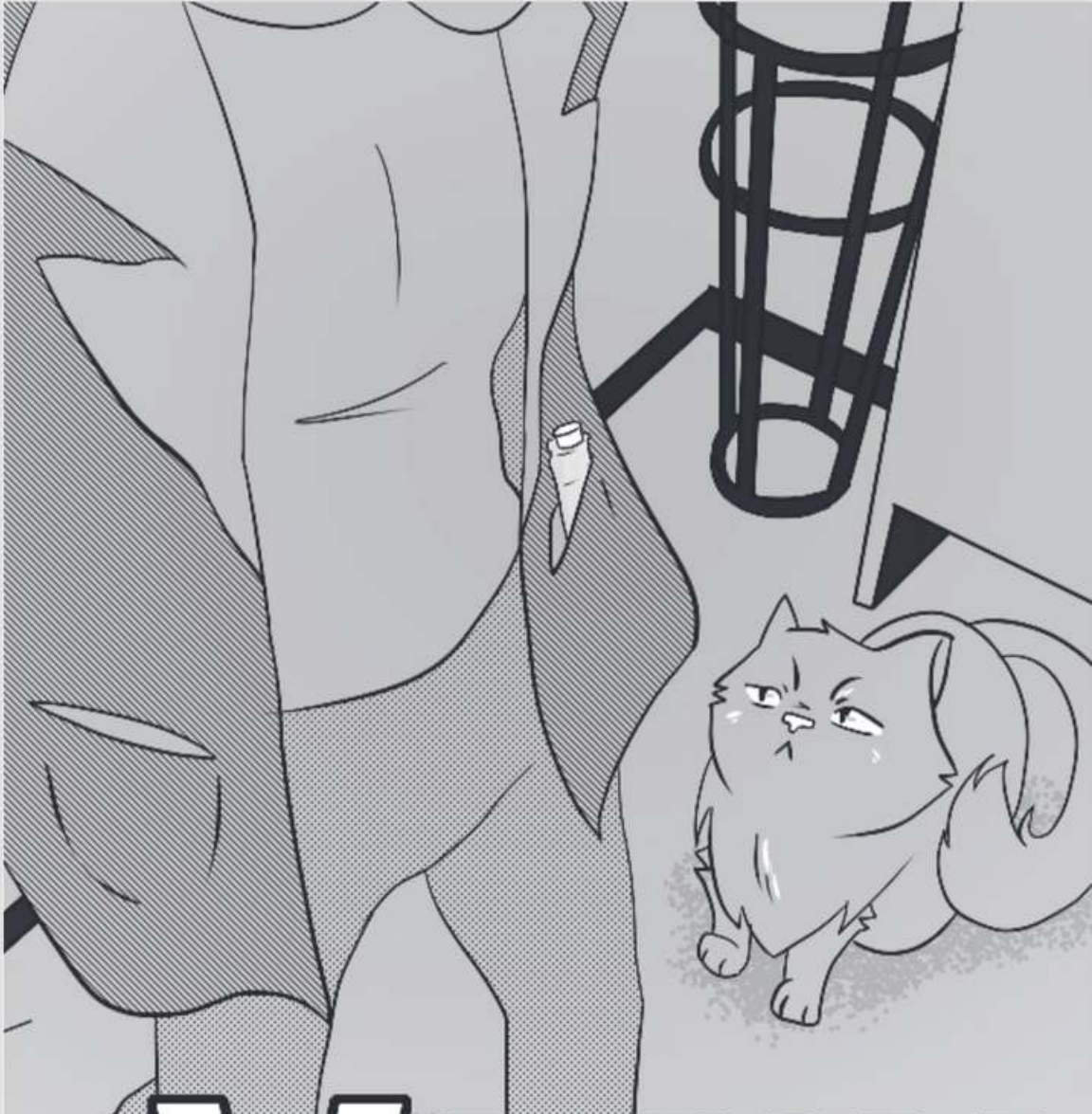
SCAN
ME!

6583 3254

INSTRUCTIONS

1. OPEN THE APPLE APP STORE
2. DOWNLOAD THE ARTLAB AR APP.
3. GIVE THE APP PROMISSION TO USE YOUR PHONE'S CAMERA.
4. ONCE OPEN, SCAN THROUGHOUT THE THE VARIOUS COMIC PAGES TO ENGAGE WITH AR CONTENT.

**Only combatable with iphone, ios 12 and up*



WATCH CAT

STORY BY
OLIVIA BEVIER





DAMMIT!

OH! RICHARD!

CRASH!!



SERIOUSLY E, WE GOTTA START KENNELING HIM. THATS THE THIRD TIME THIS WEEK HE'S RUINED BREAKFAST!



KENNEL HIM?! BUT HE'D BE SO UPSET!

HE IS MY BABY!

YOU'RE BABYING HIM.

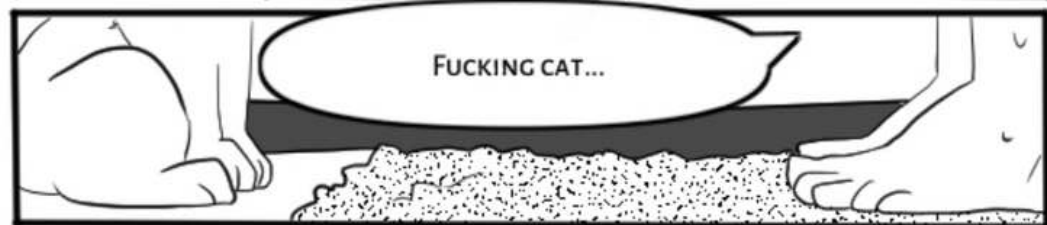
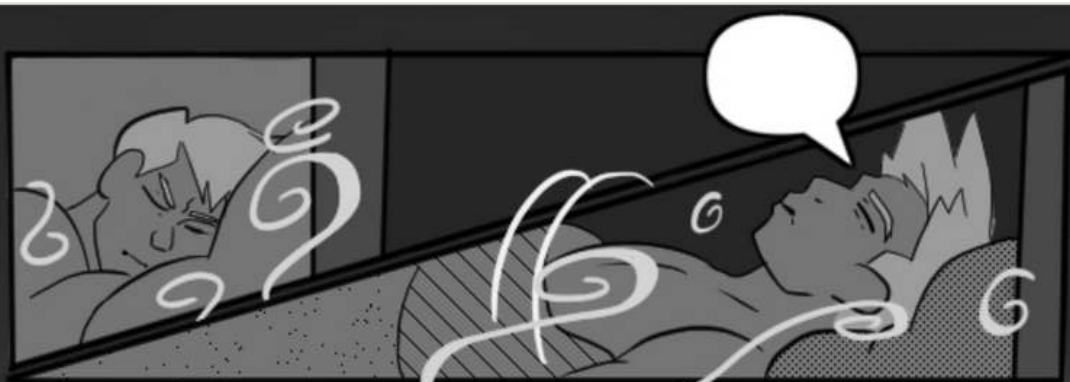


HONEY, DON'T YOU THINK HE'S BEEN A BIT INTRUSIVE OF OUR TIME TOGETHER?

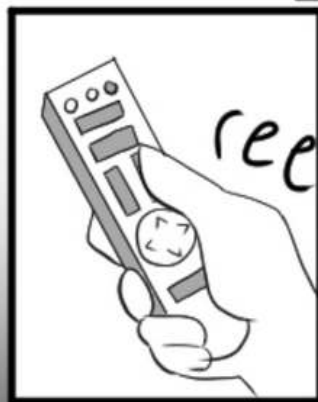
IT'S LIKE HE HATES ME BEING WITH YOU.

DON'T BE RIDICULOUS.

HE DOESN'T HATE YOU, HE'S JUST NOT USED TO YOU YET...









END.

THE BLACK MARSH



Written by Stephen Pierce
DRAWN AND TONED BY
SKYLAR OWENBY
LINEWORK BY RAY MATLOCK



IN MY DREAMS—

I SAW AN ABYSSAL MARSH—

STRETCHING LIKE A PLAIN FROM ALL ENDS OF
THE HORIZON—

INTERRUPTED ONLY BY—

GNARLED BROWN TREES—

LIKE BROKEN LIMBS REACHING
FROM THE DEPTHS...

AND SUBMERGED IN THE MARSH
TO MY ELBOWS AS I WAS—

I COULD ONLY STARE—



THE TOPS OF BALD MEN FORMED ISLANDS IN THE OOZE.



AND HAVING NOTHING

ELSE TO DO...



AND A MIND RIDDLED WITH THE FOOLISHNESS OF DREAMERS



I DROVE MY FACE INTO THE MARSH

AND PEERED BELOW ITS DEPTHS.

IN THE GREAT

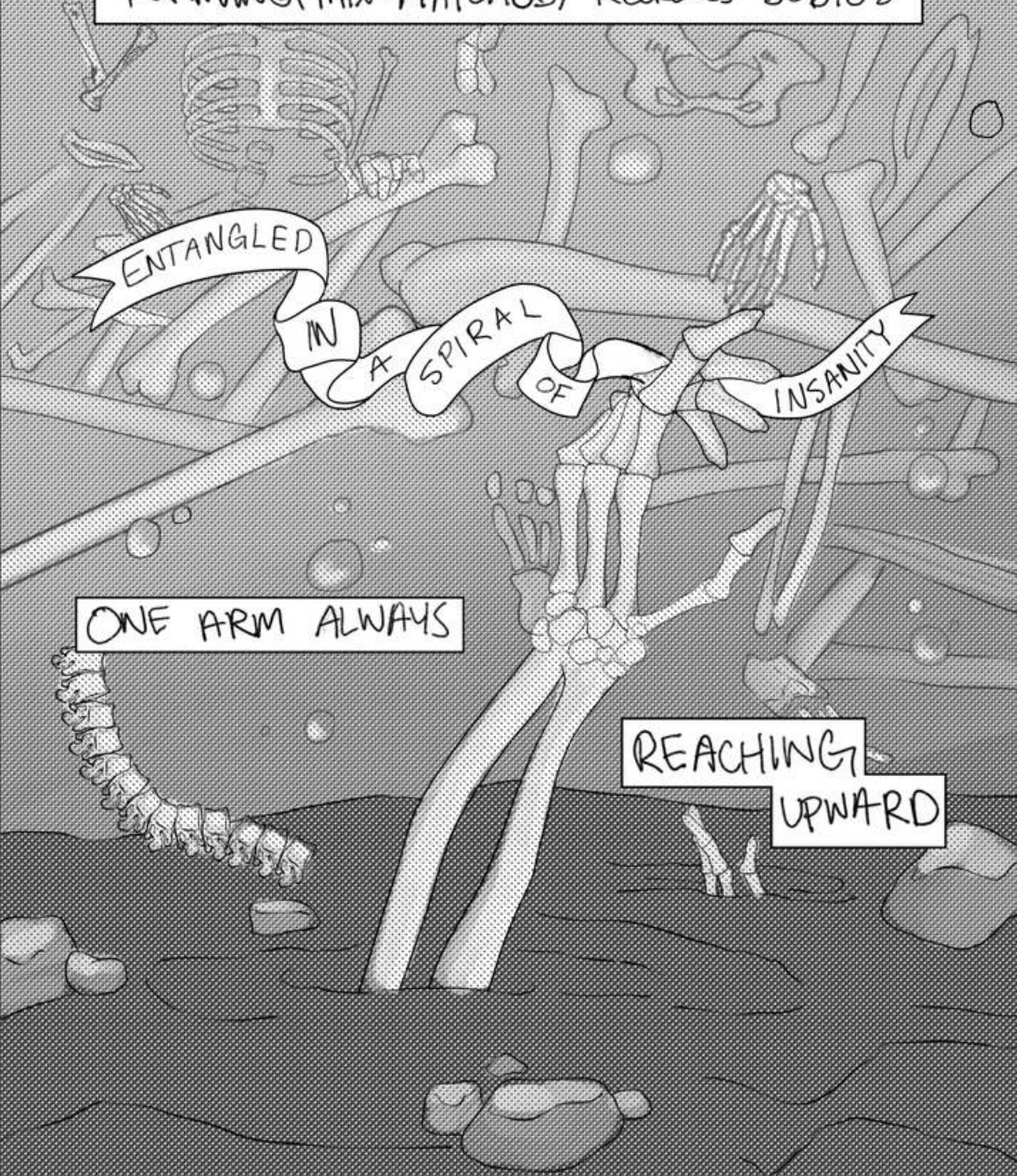
EBONY LAKE -

- I SAW GLIMPSES OF

IVORY...



LONG BONES FLOATING IN COMPLICATED ARRAYS
FORMING MIX-MATCHED, RECKLESS BODIES



ENTANGLED

IN A SPIRAL OF

INSANITY

ONE ARM ALWAYS

REACHING

UPWARD

TO THOSE LOST TO THE WORLD ABOVE.

AND WITH A GREAT

FLASH!

I AWOKE.



I THINK OF THAT MARSH AS I STAND ON MY BALCONY



STARING AT A GLOOMY MOOR

FILLED WITH ROWS OF GRAVESTONES,



WONDERING IF ANYTHING
I DO CAN EASE

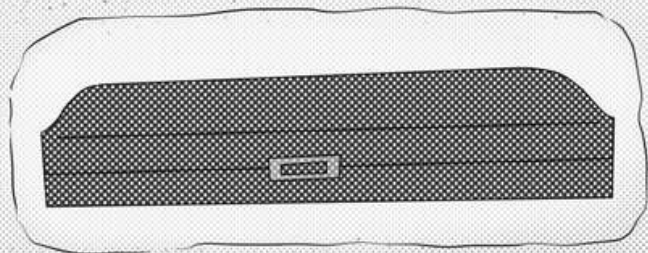
THE SUFFERING WROUGHT BY THE SCHISM WE FACE.



ABOVE THE MARSH IS SUFFERING AND ANGUISH ...



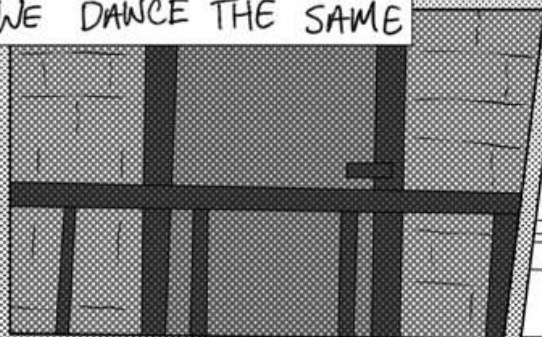
AND BELOW...



IS PAIN

AND REGRET.

WE DANCE THE SAME



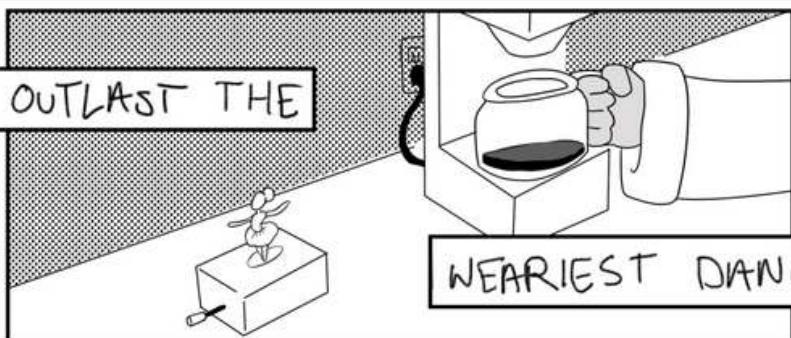
CAREFUL, LABORED STEPS

TRYING TO GRASP GHOSTS IN OUR HANDS,



AND HOPING THE BEAUTY IN THE SPECTACLE

WILL OUTLAST THE



WEARIEST DANCER.

I ONLY HOPE THAT WHEN IT IS OVER...





I CAN STILL HEAR THAT SOMBER MELODY.

⋮



END.

LIKE THE COVER ART?

For view, commission, and purchase work by the artist, visit

amandaclarkart.com

or browse her socials at linktr.ee/Amanda.clark.art

Amanda Clark

Amanda Clark was born in Western North Carolina. She is now a senior at Western Carolina University working toward her BFA with a minor in business and art. Her art focuses on the figure and the exploration of emotional and physical connections. She finds joy in empowering those around her. Her work is slowly emerging nationwide.

In June, Amanda organized her first solo exhibition. Titled "Regeneration," Amanda used painting and sculpture to explore the human reproductive system, celebrate life, and spark conversation about the beauty and pain associated with its creation. She plans to host another show featuring additional artwork in the Fall.

For information on future shows, follow the links above or visit her Instagram at [@amanda.clark.art](https://www.instagram.com/amanda.clark.art)



