

# ARGENTUM

The Art &  
Literary  
Magazine of  
Great Basin  
College  
2021

Transformation





### **Pinecone Eggs**

*Medium: Pinecones and Resin*

Tim Terras

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### **Thoughts on the 2021 Issue**

The one constant in this year of the pandemic was change. We thank the contributors who embraced these changes and transformed their experiences into art. Special thanks are also extended to Angie de Braga, Dr. Josh Webster, Jennifer Bean, and Frank Sawyer for helping to bring this issue to fruition. This year's edition features audio recordings of selected pieces, thanks to the efforts of John Patrick Rice, Ph.D. We are pleased to showcase the voice talents of Scott Glennon, Kate Rhoswen, and John Patrick Rice, with sound design by Dawn Bartlett. We hope you enjoy this year's publication, and consider submitting to the 2022 issue. Our website is [www.gbcnv.edu/argentum](http://www.gbcnv.edu/argentum) and staff can be emailed at [argentum@gbcnv.edu](mailto:argentum@gbcnv.edu).

*Jennifer Stieger and Dori Andrepont*  
2020–2021 *Argentum* Co-Editors

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### **FRONT COVER Sun Tunnel Sunset**

*Medium: Photography*

Kim Otheim

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# Argentum Selection Committee



## Kaitlin Dempsey

*Artist and Educator*

Kaitlin holds a Bachelor of Arts in both History and Archaeology from Western Washington University. Currently Kaitlin teaches science programming at the Museum of Flight in Seattle, Washington. She feeds her lifelong appetite for art by developing science/art programs for the museum, and with a variety of creative extracurriculars. Kaitlin served as art editor for the illustrated poetry anthology *WHEEL: A Heart's Hike Through*. In her free time, she is working to hone her oil painting skills and has dabbled in the exciting world of printmaking.



## Erin Jensen

*Associate Professor*

Erin is an Associate Professor of English at Belmont Abbey College. Previously, she taught English at Great Basin College. While she mainly teaches technical writing and digital writing, she also loves to read creative writing. Her focus is on encouraging students to write and to explore using their words to create meaning. She appreciates the opportunity to engage with student and community creative writing.



## Janet Winterer

*Artist*

Janet is an artist, sculptor, potter, wood worker, leather worker, jewelry artist, and glass lamp worker. She has done metal casting, various types of weaving, spinning, sewing, fiber arts, lapidary and mosaics. She has produced thousands of works of art both large and small, been represented by an esteemed art gallery and won numerous art competitions. She served as assistant sculpture teacher at Antelope Valley College in California and is currently an active artisan member of the Society for Creative Anachronism. She plans to never have a day in her life without art.

*We thank our 2021 Selection Committee as they took time from their busy schedules to review and choose this year's submissions to be included in this publication. Their willingness and effort is deeply appreciated.*



**Blue Skies in a Valley of Fire**

*Medium: Digital Refraction Photography*

Angela Hagfeldt



FIRST PLACE IN STUDENT ART

## Wings of a Different Color

*Medium: Graphic Design (Composite)*

Shania Brown

# The Hunger

by Rani Clark

THE WINTER WIND bit at her face as she ran, the branches of the trees clawing at her clothes, trying to pull her back. She panted, fearing her legs would give out the longer she ran. The cold burned her lungs as if she were inhaling knives. A blast of wind knocked her to the side and sent her into the snow. She scrambled up, stumbling towards the frozen river. Shrieking burst through the air. It was the howl that followed her through the trees, weaving in and out of the branches until it reached her. It was a solid thing, grasping at her clothes and threatening to bring her down into the snow.

*Come back, Maggie*

She slowed for a moment, recognizing that soft voice. A voice that she had grown up hearing. Maggie reached down and touched the gun at her side. She shook her head and picked up the pace. It wasn't her father calling to her, she knew that much. She had seen the life fade from his eyes only a few days ago in the darkness of the forest. Those words couldn't be from him.

The hunger gnawed at her insides, eating away at any stamina she had left. Her body was telling her to give up, to let it happen, but she wouldn't. Maggie slipped on the ice, falling down hard and bashing her elbow. Rather than focus on the pain she focused on standing up and getting across the river. Another howl, this time closer. She climbed up the bank and jumped over a fallen log. Up ahead through the trees, she spotted a flickering light. With each step it came closer and closer until she burst from the tree line. Ahead of her was an old hunting shack. Could she make it there?

Her father's voice spoke loudly in her mind. *Keep running, Mags. Don't ever look back, don't slow down, because it won't slow down either.*

And it wasn't slowing down. Maggie didn't look back as she ran across the field towards the shack. The high-pitched howl pursued her, moving towards her like a wolf chasing her down for its evening meal.

"Help!" she screamed, pounding on the wooden door. "Please!"

"Who's there?" a gruff female voice spoke through the wood.

"I—I need help! Something's chasing me!"

After a beat, the door slowly opened a crack and an eye peeked out. Maggie didn't wait before pushing her way

inside. She grabbed the door away from the woman who had answered and slammed it shut. Gasping for breath in the warmth of the shack, her whole body shook with the effort. The gun, her father's gun, felt heavy against her hip as she fought to stay on her feet.

"What in the hell?" the woman demanded.

Maggie opened her eyes and looked at the woman she had pushed out of the way. She was standing there with a rifle and a frown, her long hair tied into a rough braid. Her face was weathered and her clothes were dirty, as if she'd been walking for a few weeks. A traveling bag leaned against the wall next to an old rocking chair. A fire was crackling in the small fireplace.

The woman kept the gun trained on her, "You have five seconds to get out of here before I fire," she snapped.

Maggie held up her hands, "Please. There's something out there."

She didn't lower the gun, but she didn't complete her promise to kill Maggie either. Maggie motioned with her head, "Do you have something I can put up against the door?" The woman motioned to the rocking chair. Maggie grabbed it and wedged it against the knob. Tears rolled down her frozen cheeks as she put her forehead against the door. For the first time in weeks, she looked down at her hands. Scraped bloody and raw, they throbbed as the warmth from the fire brought the feeling back into them. A touch of frostbite blackened her cheek.

"Something's following you?" the woman asked, eyeing her. She sniffed and took a step back as Maggie sank to her knees. "What's your name?"

"Maggie. You?"

"Emma." She sidestepped to the window, "What, exactly, is chasing you?"

"I don't know. It—it knows my name, I..." she shook her head. She could feel her stomach gnawing at her, filling her body with a violent buzzing.

"Your name?" Emma glanced out the window before turning her eyes back to Maggie. She took in her ripped clothing, her sunken eyes, and cracked lips. The smell that filled the cabin reminded her of a deep sickness that there was no coming back from. A rotting, stinging smell that stuck to the roof of her mouth.

Maggie licked her lips with a dry tongue. She looked up. The woman, Emma, was still aiming the rifle at her.

Wind battered the cabin, causing the wood to creak and groan. The wailing started up again. It moved from the trees towards the cabin. *Maggie. Let me in. I'm hungry.*

Her father was hungry. She had done everything she could to make sure he had had what he'd needed, trying to keep the sickness that had devoured him at bay. She shook her head, "No, no, I won't," she rasped. That wasn't him, it couldn't be him. He was just a pile of bones in the woods now, nothing but a memory she wanted to hold on to for as long as she could.

Emma looked out the window, wiping the fogged up glass with her hand, "That screaming..."

Maggie snapped out of her thoughts, "You can hear it?"

"Of course I heard it." She knew that noise. She tried to remember what it was, what she had been told about these woods. It was on the tip of her tongue as the winds howled outside.

Maggie pushed herself to stand. Having sat for even a moment, she realized just how weak she was. How much of her body was deteriorating from her weeks in the cold and the snow. She leaned against the window and looked out across the field at the tree line. A shape stood hunched in front of the trees. In the glow of the moon the shadow of sharp antlers stretched towards the shack. Shrieking shook the door as the shape began to move, lurching towards them. Her heart hammered in her throat.

*You are so hungry*

The words pushed forward with the howling wind.

*You are so tired*

Emma was speaking, but all Maggie heard was that horrible, aching voice. That voice that wanted more than anything for her to follow it. It had been there since her father died, since the moment she'd had to decide between death or using the meat his body had given her. She'd told herself that he would have been alright with it, that he would want her to live. She had repeated it to herself over and over while she ate. That voice had appeared, telling her it was alright and that she should fill her belly with food to keep her strength up. The voice had quickly turned into a scream.

The door creaked as the wind pushed up against it. Emma took a step back and aimed her gun at the door. She knew what it was, what was at the door. A gun wouldn't kill that thing. "You brought that thing here!" she snapped at Maggie.

"I didn't—"

"Get. Out." It wouldn't stop until it got what it wanted, Emma knew that much. It might go away if she could get Maggie out of the shack.

*Sweetheart please*

*We can be together again*

*Remember when I taught you how to shoot*

*We camped in the field afterwards*

*We can do that again*

It wouldn't have known about her father teaching her to shoot. It couldn't know. Maggie stood and stared at the door, her breathing turning labored. She reached forward and pulled the rocking chair away from the knob, tossing it back into the wall. Emma shouted in surprise as Maggie yanked open the door, snapping it off of its hinges.

The shack filled with an icy wind as an antlered shape skulked into the room. Snow blew in, surrounding the creature in a white swirl of cold. Its rotting flesh clung to its emaciated form, its distended stomach gurgled loudly. Jaws filled with rows upon rows of broken and jagged teeth stretched out towards her. Maggie felt her stomach begin to growl as the thing reached forward with long fingers.

*Mags*

*My little girl*

It spoke in a soft voice as it laid its warm hand on her cheek. Maggie didn't want to run from it, she wanted it to speak to her again. "Dad."

*I have a gift for you sweetheart*

*I've been trying to give it to you*

"A gift?"

The thing that chased her took her in its arms and leaned in. It sank its teeth softly into her shoulder, the jagged fangs slipping deeper and deeper into her flesh. Her stomach gurgled loudly, the hunger creeping into her body until all she felt was that hollowness in the pit of her stomach that would never be satisfied. The thing growled and released her, blood dripping from its jaws. It pulled its mouth into a grotesque, bloody smile and stepped back out into the cold, beckoning Maggie to follow it.

The bang of a gunshot ripped through the air. Maggie turned to see Emma holding her rifle and aiming it at her. She growled and jumped forward, ripping the gun away from her. Emma ran towards the door, bursting out into the night. Maggie growled and followed, the smell of fresh meat filling her senses. Emma stumbled in the field, her foot catching on a protruding rock. She scrambled up, but wasn't quick enough. Maggie leapt at her, clawing and punching at her with jagged fingernails. She bent down and ripped into her throat. Blood sprayed across the ground, dying the snow crimson. Emma let out a gurgle, her body twitching as the light vanished from her eyes.

*Good job, Mags*

The voice was behind her again, the creature standing over her as she stared at the corpse.

*You've made me so proud*

*Eat up, sweetie*

Maggie growled and dug into the fresh meal. She felt a soft hand on her back as coppery liquid poured down her throat. The cold no longer bothered her, the wind moved over her skin like a warm summer breeze. It was the perfect night. ■



# Evisceration

by Richard A. Sanchez

Honor was given, but all was in vain,  
from royalty to broken creeds we're all  
skeletons in chains.

The Ferry-Man, The Hooded Figure,  
his face is a relief.

To be left alone, finally,  
the thought of death it brings  
me peace.

Please,  
Purge from me these worldly ambitions,  
pardon my soul from this never-ending  
prison sentence.

Stripped from my rank, my past so near,  
Yet so distant.

Abandoned by my love, I walk alone in  
this existence.

So much did I invest, only to be blinded  
like Samson.

Beckoned, and crushed against the stone by  
this siren's enchantment.

I was there for the fall, the first one  
to indulge.

Everyone I showed loyalty to, left me to  
the crows.

You entered my home, I eased your suffering.  
Shared meals with you, embraced you as brotherly.  
I shed blood for you, and kept you from harm.  
And in the end you hurt me, well beyond wrong.

Their stories exaggerated, they conspired  
with envy.

They forgot all that I've done for them,  
and called me their enemy.

I've stolen the fire and paved us a path,  
it freed all my people but kept me entrapped.

For this,  
my hands were tied behind my back,  
and I was thrown into the moat.

The witch was burnt at the pyre,  
by the people of his home.

It takes effort to smile, I've grown numb  
I concede.

I've adopted the attributes of  
Carpathian breed.

Black this sun, keep me entombed, allow me  
to sleep so that I may heal my wounds.

And as I dreamt in solidarity,  
time brought the fruits of strength and clarity.



## Sky, Sea and Tradition

*Medium: Photography*

Erika Martinez

# Of Tequila and Coffee

by Ariana Stadlander

TEQUILA SCORCHES MY THROAT as I throw back my head and down another shot. My second of the night. I pound the glass on the counter and call out to the bartender, “Another.” As he sidles up to my side of the counter, I flash him a smile. “This one’s for you,” I say in my most seductive voice before I press the cold rim of the glass to my lips and scorch my throat again. I feel the tequila’s warmth as it travels down my esophagus and fills my stomach. I don’t know much in this world, but if there’s one thing I’m certain of it’s that I feel less empty when there are three shots of liquor in me.

“You might want to slow it down, Gwen,” Daniel says as he takes a seat beside me. I look at him, roll my eyes, and motion the bartender to pour me my third.

“Are you gonna judge me or join me?”

“Awww, come on, Danny,” Cierra says as she strides over to us and lays her head on Daniel’s shoulder, nuzzling into him. In that instant, she reminds me very much of a cat. “If anyone has the right to sit there and drink to her heart’s content, it’s Gwen.”

“Damn right,” I reply as I throw back another dose of tequila. I lick my lips and toss my curly red hair out of my eyes. “And you guys are my friends, or did you forget? So, here, drink.” I wave at the bartender and hold up two fingers. He wastes no time in coming over with two new shot glasses in his hand and a fresh bottle of tequila.

Cierra and I clink our glasses together and drink. Danny just looks at me with sad eyes, puppy-dog eyes. I hate it when people look at me like that, but it seems like it’s the only way that people know how to look at me these days.

“Stop looking at me like that, Dan,” I snap.

He’s unfazed by my tone. He places a hand over mine. The word *faith* is tattooed in black ink across his knuckles. “You’re not okay, Gwen. You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m an adult. I can do whatever I want. And what I want to do right now is drink.”

“Let me take you home.”

Angry and feeling the buzz of the alcohol, I pull my hand out of his. “I don’t wanna go home. I’m happy here, Danny. Can’t I just be happy here? Please? *God.*”

Danny nods his head. “Fine. Do what you want.”

“*Thank you,*” I say in my snippiest tone and instantly regret it. But I don’t say sorry. Apologies are overrated.

“Uh, Gwen,” Cierra calls, “I hate to say it, but I think your night’s about to get worse.”

My brows furrow. Following her gaze, I see Cierra staring at a man, and my blood turns to ice. I would recognize his tall, slender form anywhere. *Rylan*. His face is slim and angular, his eyes are dark but piercing, and the black bangs of his hair fall just slightly across his face. His deep purple button-down does a good job at hiding the toned muscle underneath. I know, because I’ve seen him naked once before. Now, *that* was a very drunken evening best not remembered or repeated. I push the shot glass far out of my reach and sigh. I guess this is as drunk as I’m getting tonight.

“What a jerk,” Cierra hisses under her breath as she turns back to face me.

I nod my head but don’t reply. I just watch as Rylan picks up a pool cue and bends over the billiard table, preparing to take a shot.

Rylan catches my eye from across the room. The right corner of his lips tugs up into a smirk, and he winks at me. I remember the first time he winked at me — back when I was his brother’s girl. I remember how it made me feel, too. I remember how my skin suddenly felt warm and tingly, how my throat turned to cotton, and my cheeks became flushed. I wondered how he could get such a reaction out of me. It was all downhill from there, from that one tiny, little wink.

Reaching up, I feel the heat in my cheeks and notice that Rylan is still watching me. I frown, clear my throat, and look away.

“You feel alright, Gwen?” Danny asks, noticing my flushed complexion.

“What do you think?”

“Do you want me to talk to him for you?”

I scoff. “And tell him what exactly?”

“To leave you alone.”

“Yeah, alright, good luck with that,” I chuckle, but it’s a bitter sound.

“I’m serious,” Danny tries again, more persistent this time. “I don’t care if he’s going through a hard time right now. That guy’s put you through hell, and I’m not going to let him get away with it. Will wouldn’t want that.”

Tears prick at my eyes, the same way they always do whenever Will’s name is mentioned. And I’m a *teensy*-bit

drunk, which doesn't help anything. "Don't pretend like you know what Will would want."

"Will would want to know that you're being protected, even if it's only from his deranged older brother."

I shake my head and wipe away the tears. "He's not deranged," I argue.

"Who are you kidding, Gwen?" Danny asks and takes a swig of tequila.

I sigh and turn my head just slightly so that the corner of my eye catches Rylan's left side. Through the fuzziness of my own tequila-ridden mind, more memories swim to the surface.

One in particular catches my attention. It's of me standing in the rain. I don't remember why or what for, but I was soaked from head to foot and just standing there on the sidewalk out front of Will's house. I must've been waiting for him or something because he wasn't there. But Rylan was. Will's mysterious older brother came outside, umbrella in hand, and for the first time since I had met him, his rakish and unnerving personality was gone. Instead, he smiled softly at me and stood there in the rain with me while we waited for his brother. We talked. I don't remember what about — it isn't important — but that was the beginning of our very unexpected, though not entirely unwelcome, friendship.

"Well," I say as I shake the image from my mind, stand up, and grab my coat. My movements are a little clumsy as I work to steady my balance. "The fun is officially over. I'm going home."

"You're in no condition to go home by yourself," Cierra says as she grabs my arm and forces me to stop. "Let us call you an Uber or something."

I shake my head. "No, I'll be alright. I'll, um, call one from the street. I just really need to be alone right now."

"Gwen..."

"I'm sorry," I sigh. "I just need to call it a night, get some sleep. I'm sure I'll feel better in the morning." I fake smile as I try to reassure Cierra. I won't be better in the morning. There is no 'better'.

Cierra offers a sad smile and a comforting pat on the arm. I fight the urge to recoil at her sympathy. I don't even bother looking at Danny. I know he must be looking at me with those puppy-dog eyes again. Either that, or he's judging me. He's always expected so much of me. I must be such a disappointment to him now, the way that I've let myself go since it happened. I've just given up.

Without saying another word, I turn and walk away.

I WATCH HER from my place beside the billiard table. I can't help but look at her. The woman's presence consumes me; she's more intoxicating than the glass of scotch sitting by my side. Some guy who's name I can't be bothered to

remember shouts at me to take my shot. I shoot him a warning glare before bending over the table and lining up my cue with the orange-striped ball. I draw the cue back and am just about to release it forward when I see her stand up, walk across the bar to the exit, and slam the door shut behind her. She doesn't offer me a second glance or even a wave goodbye.

Without a second thought, I set my cue down and follow her. The guy calls out to me, telling me that I have to finish the game, but I ignore him and head toward the door. I feel a hand on my shoulder. I close my eyes and groan.

"What do you want, Dan?" I ask, knowing who it is without even turning around.

"I don't know what you're thinking of doing," Daniel growls into my ear, "But stay away from her."

I smirk. "Why? Jealous?"

"No. Concerned."

"Well, don't be," I say with a fake grin as I turn around to look at him. Honestly, Gwen's friends have always been so annoying. Of course, it doesn't help that they've never approved of me as appropriate dating material for Gwen. I've always been branded the 'bad brother' just because I was the one with the edgy look and the lackadaisical mannerisms. "I promise that she is in the best of hands." I turn to leave, but Daniel just grips my shoulder harder. I frown. "You don't want to do that," I warn.

He scoffs. "Believe me, I think I do."

"No," I say as I turn around. "You really don't." In one fluid motion, I push Daniel's hand off my shoulder, grab him by his shirt collar, and push him against the wall. The room grows quiet as everyone turns to look at us. I see Cierra walking towards us, and I roll my eyes. I take two steps over to Daniel and hold him loosely by his neck. "If you know what's good for you, you won't follow me," I growl. "Leave us alone. We're none of your concern."

I release him, open the door, and walk outside.

"Gwen!" I call out as I jog up behind the curly redhead. She's wearing a dark blue cashmere jacket, bootcut jeans, and ballet flats. She either doesn't hear me — unlikely — or ignores me, because she keeps walking towards the curb. I roll my eyes and jog faster. "Gwen!"

She looks over her shoulder and flashes me an irritated glare, before pulling out her cell phone, dialing, and pressing it against her ear.

"Hi, I need someone to pick me up," she says. Her words don't slur, but by the slight droop of her eyelids and her wobbly stance, I can tell that she's drunk.

"Gwen..." I begin, but she holds up a finger and motions for me to wait.

"Yes, can you bring it by Motley's Tavern? Thank you." She presses the button to end the call and continues to look out at the street. I wish she would stop avoiding me.

I miss her gorgeous eyes and the way they used to look at me. "What do you want, Rylan?" she finally asks.

"C'mon," I smirk in order to hide the hurt I feel at her steely tone. "Let me save you some cash. I'll drive you home."

There was only one other time that I drove her home. It was after she and Will got into a fight over something stupid, like they always did. Angry, Will abandoned her at Giovanni's, her old-favorite restaurant. I was surprised to get her call. I could tell by her shaky voice that she was crying, and my heart lurched inside of me. I wasted no time in getting to her, and she wasted no time in spilling all the details of her and Will's argument over a dish of pad thai at her new-favorite restaurant, Sukhothai Noodle. Afterwards, I drove her home. Before she opened the car door to leave, she took my hand and thanked me for being there for her that night. Then, I told her I loved her — in my mind, not to her face. The words wouldn't form, but it was in that exact moment that I knew that I'd fallen for my brother's girl.

Gwen scoffs. "I'm not going anywhere with you." Using her shoulder, she pushes me out of the way, but I reach out and grab her arm. She tries to wrench free, but I've got her tight in my grip. Just tight enough to hold her still, but not enough to hurt her. She groans. "Let go of me, Ry. I'm not in the mood."

"Oh, this is a surprise," I reply sarcastically, "Imagine. Gwen Robbins not in the mood. Because she's just been so pleasant to be around these last few weeks."

"This coming from the man who doesn't even know what it means to be pleasant."

I pull her close to me and bend down to whisper in her ear. "There've been times that you would fervently disagree with that statement." My lips tug into a victorious grin when I feel her shiver just slightly against me. I love that I can produce such a reaction from her.

Angrily, she wrenches her arm away and begins to walk down the sidewalk, stumbling just slightly as she goes. Never one to give up, I follow her. Sensing me, Gwen stops, sighs, and turns to look at me.

"Please, Rylan," she pleads quietly. The anger and irritation are gone from her face. Now, when I really observe her in the sharp, fluorescent glow of the streetlight we're standing under, I see how worn she looks. It stops me dead in my tracks. "Please," she continues, "I'm tired, and I'm drunk, and I just need to go home. Not with you. Alone."

I can't resist her when she looks at me with those eyes, green like a spring day after it rains. I nod my head. She mouths the words 'thank you' and then turns around, not even waiting for her Uber. She leaves me alone on the sidewalk. I put my hands in my pockets, heave a sigh, and watch as she walks away.

MY HAIR FALLS WET AND COLD down my naked back as I wrap a fluffy white towel around my body and step out of the shower. I glance at myself in the slightly fogged mirror and sigh. I look so damned tired. Bed. That's what I need. I need to fall asleep and whisk myself away to a realm that is hopefully full of sweet dreams and forgetfulness.

My hand grips the doorknob, and I open it. I gasp in shock at what I see on the other side of the door and only just manage to catch my towel before it falls to a heap on the ground.

Rylan's in the doorway, leaning against the frame, with his usual sardonic smirk plastered on his face. When he sees the clumsy way that I fight to grab my slipping towel, his look turns smug.

My heart's rapid thumping returns to normal as I scowl at him. "What are you doing here? I told you I wanted to be alone."

He crosses his arms over his chest. "You didn't really think I would let you walk the streets alone at dark, did you? I followed you to make you sure you got home safe."

I frown. "And then you let yourself into my apartment?"

"C'mon, I've been in your apartment lots of time."

"Yeah, by invitation."

"Well, if you're concerned, you can phone your friend Dan right now to come to your rescue," Rylan challenges me.

"I don't need rescuing."

"Precisely. And why do you think that is, hmm?" His eyes flash with silent pleasure as he sees me concede. He knows perfectly well the answer to his own question. I feel safe around him. I know that he would never hurt me.

I sigh. "Well, if you're going to be staying for a while, I'm going to put some clothes on."

"Don't feel like you have to," he replies with a mischievous grin. "I like you this way."

I roll my eyes and grumble, "Be right back."

SHE ENTERS THE CRAMPED living room of her too-tiny apartment. She's dressed in black leggings and an oversized flannel that I instantly recognize to have once belonged to my brother. Her hair is still wet and falls in limp curls across her shoulders and down just below her collarbone, where the swell of her breasts begins. She isn't wearing any makeup and there are dark crescents under her eyes, but she stills looks fresh and beautiful to me. The sight of her nearly leaves me speechless.

Nearly.

"You want a cup?" I ask as I wave a mug in front of her eyes.

Gwen wraps her arms around her torso, looking almost as if she's giving herself a hug. "When did you have time to make coffee?"

"I had to do something while I was waiting for you to get out of the shower. I figured you didn't want me joining you." My quip brings a slight blush to her cheeks and then a frown to her lips.

"Why do you have to do that?"

"Do what?"

She takes a seat beside me on her couch and grabs the mug from my hands, caressing it between her fingers and sipping it quietly. She looks at me and says, "Make those wise-ass comments of yours."

I shrug my shoulders and take the mug back from her. I swallow the warm, murky liquid. "Why not?"

"I don't like it," Gwen replies honestly.

"Well, it's what I do. I thought you'd be used to it by now."

She doesn't say anything, and I begin to grow uncomfortable with the silence.

"So, how much did you actually drink tonight?"

"Why do you care?" she asks tartly.

I roll my eyes. "Just trying to make conversation. You don't have to get snippy with me."

Gwen's eyes grow sad, "I'm sorry."

I offer her some more coffee, and she nods her thanks as she yet again nurses the mug in her hands. "How are you? Really?"

Gwen takes another sip of coffee, and I can't help but think she wishes that it's something stronger. She takes a deep breath to steady herself for what she's about to say. "I miss him," she admits, and it's the most real and honest I've heard her be in a long time.

I frown. It's painful to hear, as the truth so often is. "I know."

"I know I should be stronger than this, that I should be able to get over it and move on. I mean, Will was *your* brother, Ry, and I don't see you falling apart. I was just his girlfriend."

"Just his girlfriend? Dammit, Gwen, you were more than that. I mean, anyone will tell you that you loved him far more than I ever did."

She looks at me, and I see the tears sparkling in the corners of her eyes. My heart lurches in my chest. She opens her mouth to speak but decides against it.

"What?" I ask. She shakes her head, refusing to answer.

"What?" I push harder.

Gwen hands the mug back to me. "You were just mad at him because he met me first."

Her words silence me, especially since I know them to be true. In the last months of Will's life, our relationship was plagued by anger, jealousy, rivalry, and guilt. The last words my brother and I ever exchanged were spoken in hate. I told him that I hated him for having Gwen just

because it was his dumb luck that he had met her in some coffeehouse before I could. He had told me to back off and leave her alone, that he didn't want me seeing her or talking to her ever again.

"I was so terrible to him about it," I whisper as I grow sad with the memories.

Gwen places her hand over mine. "We both were."

I turn my head to look at her. Tears sting at my eyes. I blink them away and swallow hard. The feeling of her thumb caressing my skin sends my heart into overdrive. Her touch spreads flames throughout my entire body. Just as it had the night she took my hand after I'd driven her home, and as it had all the times after when she'd let her fingers stray across my skin. God, I've missed her touch. I reach up to wipe a stray tear that's fallen down her cheek, but I can't bring myself to stop. I slide closer to her. I want to kiss her. I want us to lose ourselves in each other, to forget the pain, to remember the good times.

Leaning down, I come so close to touching my lips to hers. But then, she pulls away, and I'm left feeling cold.

"No," she says in a hard voice and bolts off the couch. She walks out of the room, slamming the door to her bedroom shut behind her.

I PACE THE EXPANSE of my room. Considering my bedroom only has a few feet of open floorspace, it's more like I'm treading small circles into the already faded rug. I ball my hands into fists and bury them into my face. "Oh God," I gasp. I feel like I'm having a panic attack, but I know it's just me being dramatic. I'm too dramatic. I've always hated myself for it.

A strip of light casts itself across my bed as the door opens just a crack. "Gwen," he asks in a concerned voice. "Are you alright?"

"Go away, Rylan."

"Not gonna happen," Rylan responds. He opens the door all the way and stops as he sees my pacing. I want to run away from him, but I can't. I feel like a caged animal.

He takes two steps forward and reaches me. He grabs both my arms and forces me to stop. "Gwen," he shakes me slightly. "What's wrong?"

I push him away.

"Is the thought of kissing me that bad?"

I shoot him a glare, hoping he'll take the hint that I don't want to talk about it.

Instead, he takes a seat on the edge of the bed, laces his fingers together and places them in his lap. He raises an eyebrow at me, his hair falls just slightly across his one eye, and the light coming from the living room illuminates him in a soft glow. My voice catches in my throat the longer I stare at him. "What's really wrong?" He asks. "Because I know it's not that I just tried to kiss you."

I throw my hands in the air. “That’s the problem, right there!” He looks confused. “The problem isn’t that you tried to kiss me. It’s that you *have* kissed me. It’s that I know how you kiss. I know the way your lips feel and the little tricks that you do to make a woman melt. I know how you drag your fingers up my back, my neck, until you’re touching my cheeks. I know all of that, and I shouldn’t because I wasn’t supposed to be with you. I was with your brother. With Will. You remember him?”

I see realization beginning to dawn on him. “This is about —”

“Of course, it’s about that, Ry! What’d you think it would be about? I can’t even mourn for your brother because I’m feeling too damn guilty about what you and I did.”

“We had sex.” He says it so matter-of-factly that I’m momentarily caught off guard.

I recover quickly. “And you don’t see a problem with that?”

He scoffs. “Yes, because sex with you is such a big problem.”

I groan and cover my face with my hands. “It’s pointless trying to explain this to you,” I say in exasperation.

Suddenly, I feel his gentle fingertips gripping my elbow, and I remove my hands from my eyes to look at him. His eyebrows are furrowed in a sympathetic glance, and he’s frowning slightly. “I’m sorry.” He drags me closer to him and then pats the bed. “Here, sit. Tell me.”

I do as he says and let out a deep breath. I look at him and my voice quivers as I speak. “Will died in a car accident,” I say. Rylan nods. Of course, he does; he already knows this. “Will died in a car accident before I could ever tell him about you and me, about what we were doing behind his back. I never got to look him in the eye and tell him that I’d caught feelings for his brother and that

I wanted you more than I wanted him. It started out so slowly, you and me. I didn’t think it could be dangerous. But I couldn’t reverse the effect you had on me, and the more of you I got, the more of you I wanted. Until I got everything . . .”

“You feel guilty,” he says, and this time he gets it. He understands.

“Don’t you?” I ask. “Your brother died, and you were sleeping with his girlfriend. What isn’t there to feel guilty about?”

“I guess I just push the guilt down, ignore it in favor of remembering the good.”

I shake my head as I begin to cry. “We were no good.”

“Yes, we were,” Rylan insists. He takes my face in his hands and forces me to look at him. “We were all the good I could ever have hoped to have because you were good, and I had you. Not my brother. I hope that in our short time together I was able to show you how much you truly mean to me.”

“Ry, I know you love me. I’ve always known. I’ve tried to imagine what it would be like if I had seen you first instead of Will. But I *loved* Will. I really did. And I betrayed him.”

“It was my fault. I’m sorry.”

“No,” I respond. “It was something that we did together. It’s just that I’m never going to forgive myself for it.”

He sighs, “Well, you have to.”

“And then what? I get to be with you?”

“Do you want to be?” He poses the question so softly that I barely hear it.

Without thinking, I rest my head on his shoulder. “I don’t know.” I feel his cheek resting against my hair, and I wrap my arms around his neck. I close my eyes. “I just want to be happy again.” ■



# My Angel of Music

by Jacqueline C. Bertot

Off in the distance an echo is heard.  
My attention is drawn, my soul is stirred.  
A sound in the night I search to see.  
Where is it coming from?  
Where should I be?

My heart yearns for the songs I seek.  
Searching long, searching hard for that stirring beat  
I follow down a beaten path.  
In search for my soul's hidden past

The closer I am drawn, the stronger I feel.  
Only a breath further to the light I kneel.  
The sound I hear has my heart in tow.  
Then an angel appears with a violin and bow

That sound I hear that moves me so  
My heart it beats and away I go.  
Such ease, such grace that love he shows.  
With each strum his face so ever glows

Every note he plays, he closes his eyes.  
A beautiful sound will then arise.  
You are in a trance and afraid to move.  
As tears roll down, the heart is soothed.

A strumming sound sets your mind at ease.  
A world of longing, love, and peace  
A blessing is this man for the music he makes.  
A blessing is this man for the new world he creates.

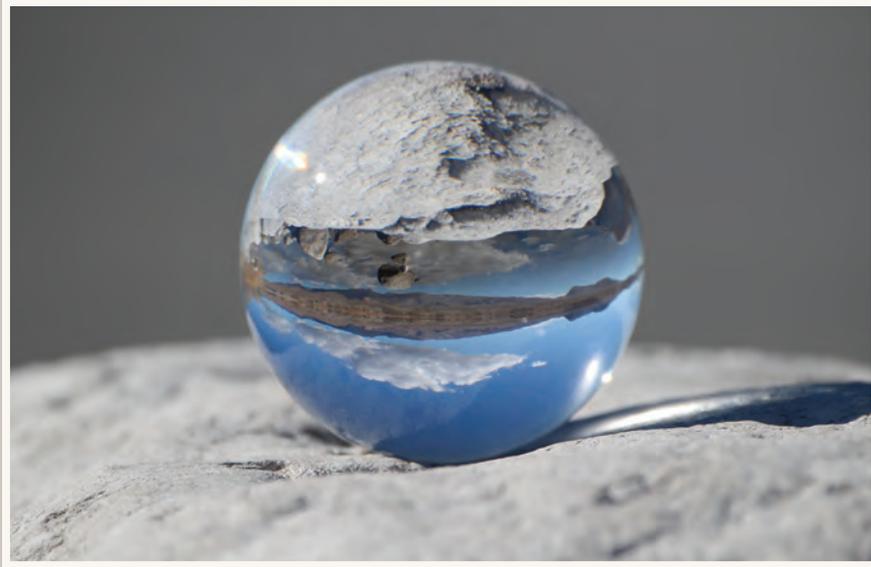
My Angel of music you have touched my soul.  
For the longing of love, I have found my goal.



## Tolstoy's Transformation

*Medium: Found Object/Assemblage Art*

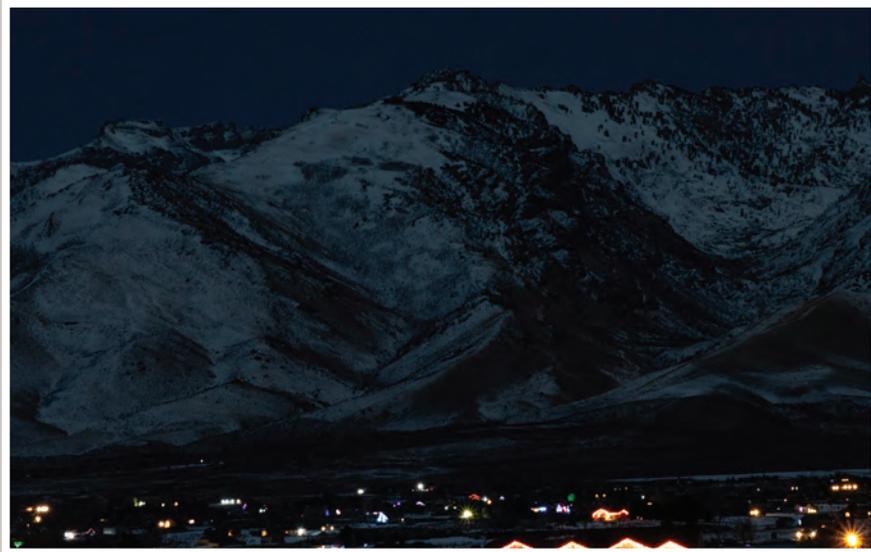
Simone Marie



**The Upside Down**

*Medium: Digital Refraction Photography*

Angela Hagfeldt



**Night Descends on the Rubies**

*Medium: Photography*

Kathi Griffis

# The Price of Victory

by Anonymous

VICTORIA CRADLED HER ROTTING right arm as she wandered through the heaps of piled garbage. The stench was unbearable and it wrapped around her like the second skin she never wanted, but it was the one chance she had to look for food and medicine. Wherever she walked, she cringed as each step she took sharp shards of broken glass stuck to her uncovered feet and the heat of the sun made her clothes sticky, which didn't help make the situation any better.

She rummaged through the nearest pile of trash on the left when she froze as the sound of a can thudding and rolling on the ground hit her ears.

"Absolutely nothing here that could benefit the fight," murmured a man as he kicked a smashed TV when Victoria rounded the nearest corner. He must've seen her from the corner of his eyes, because he whipped his head to look at her and she swore it almost flew off his neck. He stalked towards her, his coat swishing behind him. His dark hair and eyes made her want to run, but she was stuck to the ground with her bleeding feet.

"Nice arm," he pointed out with a slight laugh in his voice. She didn't answer and stepped back with a wince.

Her throat was so dry that she could barely manage to say something above a whisper. "I'll leave, sir. So please don't bother me."

"How about . . . no?"

She whimpered and he laughed.

"Gosh, you're too tense. Relax, will you? I'll help you," he said. "Your arm is suffering from necrosis, right?"

"How can I trust you?"

"I could've killed you with my gun right here." Victoria's eyes flickered to the gun holstered on his waist that he gestured to that she wasn't aware of. Her heart started to beat faster.

"Plus," he said, pressing on. "you wouldn't want anyone seeing you in such a vulnerable state where they would attack you and you can't fight back, right? You look barely fifteen."

Victoria stared at the ground beneath her feet.

"I swear I'll make you better," he said, holding his hand out to her with a smile that resembled her mother's. That smile was all Victoria needed to see and she took his hand.

He took her to his house, which was more of a bunker than a home. Its white walls were covered with soot and

ash. There was machinery working and fires crackling in the background, and the sound of metal scraping against metal. The area made every part of her body feel sweaty and uncomfortable and looked like every single heavy machine would burn her skin to the bone. But then they reached another door at the end of the room and there was an untidy living room with a homey hearth that extended to a kitchen that had several plates of unclean dishes stacked at the sink. At the corner of her eyes, she saw stairs that led to what she could assume was a bedroom.

Victoria remembered very little that happened after that, but she knew the man had kept his word and he had fixed her hand. He even bandaged her injured feet.

The man had introduced himself as Maker, which she thought was an odd name, and she had introduced herself back.

Victoria rotated and ogled at her new arm with fascination. Metal sprouted from her shoulder with wires and tendrils of red zigzagging over the structure until the tip of her new, smooth metallic hands. It was also tinted with gold that made it prettier. She opened and closed it and it obeyed her will. She felt her foot, which was cleaned from the debris of glass and wrapped with white bandages.

"Thank you so much, Maker!" she said like she was filled with a bundle of sunlight and warmth.

He smiled and said, "No problem, Victory."

"It's Victoria," she corrected and he laughed it off and told her to try and have fun with her new body parts. She hopped and laughed around his house, bouncing from every piece of furniture with great speed until he had yelled for her to stop as he looked at her with amusement.

"Now that that's done," he said. "Can you do something for me?"

"Yeah," she said with no hesitation. He had asked nicely, after all, and he had given her warmth and even a new arm. She would do what she could for this man to repay him for what he has done for her.

"I want you to meet someone. He has five stars displayed on his shoulders. He'll know what to do with you when you say my name."

"I'll do it for you," said Victoria with a grin on her lips.

He grinned back. "Great. You'll leave today. And be careful, okay? I don't want you damaged after I fixed you."

She nodded.

“Here’s your suitcase. It has some clothes in it.” Maker shoved a suitcase to her chest and pushed her to the stairs, out the door, and into a car.

He smiled at her one last time and whispered in her ears, “Win for me.”

Her arm whirled with glowing energy, and she felt a weird tingle down her spine. Victoria sat in the car and thought, why is my arm glowing?

But she didn’t question it anymore. The car had already driven away and she waved at Maker through the window.

Victoria couldn’t see who was driving since the front was blocked with tinted glass that obscured her vision. She gazed at the road, fiddling with her new arm, as the surroundings became whiter as the snow came down like sunlit glitter.

“Wear this,” a voice said as the glass between them rolled down. A long-sleeve and a glove were tossed to her. “It’s to cover up your arm and hand.” The window rolled back up. She carefully changed herself.

Victoria exited the car, and it drove away in the direction it came from, leaving her in the sight of an array of green tents that covered miles in the cold, frosted ground of foot-printed snow. Her body already felt cold, making her shiver and shake and feel nothing but the icy numbness. Soldiers of camouflage white with long rifles and sturdy helmets talked and laughed amongst each other.

One of them approached her.

“Are you lost, little lady?” asked the man, peering down on her short stature.

“I guess,” she said with a shrug. “I’m here to talk to the man with the, er, five stars on his shoulder.”

He frowned. “I don’t think that’s possible for a lady like you.”

Victoria rattled her mind trying to remember what she was supposed to say. “Tell him Maker sent me.”

His eyes widened. “I’ll humor you,” he said before running off.

Victoria met the man with five stars on his shoulders, as Maker told her, ten minutes later. He gave her a strange look, grabbed her right arm, and tapped it before nodding in satisfaction. He gave her a long rifle, white clothes that matched with the other men with a helmet and boots. He had introduced her as Victory to the soldiers.

She tried to say that her name was Victoria and not Victory, but he ignored her and shoved her into a tent, and told her to sleep.

VICTORIA DIDN’T KNOW what was happening the next day when she was ushered to get dressed and follow the others with her rifle and several magazines filled with bullets. She didn’t know what to do, so she followed them into the armored vehicles where they drove for an hour until she heard the distant sound of gunshots firing in the air.

“Go, go, go!” screamed a man, and her heart pumped as everyone pushed against each other to get out. She cried out when she was knocked on the ground and was covered with the cold and disgusting snow.

Getting up quickly, she picked up her rifle that felt weightless in her hands. She didn’t know who was guiding her, but they threw both of them into a trench filled with muddy snow and a foul stench that made her want to vomit.

“Start shooting,” they hissed.

Victoria’s metallic right hand moved against her and she started firing bullets with deadly accuracy. She couldn’t move herself or her hand as she watched in horror as each person she pointed at dropped dead on the ground. Her feet moved like it had a mind of its own, and maybe it did. Victoria tried to fight against it, but she was moving across what the soldiers called No Man’s Land. Soldiers dropped dead around her like flies, so it wasn’t ideal for her to try and retake control of her body when bullets were flying.

She didn’t know days had passed when the opposing side retreated, yelling, “Monster!”

Victoria, the fifteen-year-old girl, someone too young to face war and death in the face, stood amongst a battlefield of dead soil, dead dreams, and dead men.

She looked at her human hand that was shaking and wiped her tears away. She wasn’t the one that killed the soldiers. She didn’t want to be someone like this.

“Monster!” the opposing side had yelled.

She wasn’t a monster. She was human.

Victoria looked at her metallic hand. Her eyes stung and her heart dropped to her stomach.

A human turned monster.

“Victory!” The others yelled as they advanced the trenches. She didn’t know if they were talking about victory or her, but she was carried anyway by cheering men.

She didn’t even know what she was fighting for.

It’s for Maker, isn’t it? The one who sent her away? The one who told her to fight?

Victoria tried to piece it together. The fact that Maker already had clothes packed, her vehicle ready, the five-

star man knowing who she is, and the fact that she can't control her own body anymore . . . this was all planned when he fixed her arm, and she never even had a choice to begin with, right?

VICTORIA WOULD ALWAYS wake up from her slumber with her body hurting with each movement and her nose filling with the scent of rust.

Victoria has been having strange nightmares of earth and soil, of blooming flowers and trees being engulfed in metal like a shell over something that was meant to be normal. She couldn't move in her dreams, watching as the metal would reach her body, but she would wake up each time without knowing what would happen. It was both terrifying and relieving.

And she was having another dream.

Victoria saw sprawling hills and trees, but it was void of life except for her and a woman.

"Mother?" Victoria asked.

Her mother smiled at her, radiating the warmth of the sun. Her mother's smile is made of sunshine and songs, like a hug during a cold, winter night. Victoria found herself smiling back, a flutter of happiness appearing in her chest. They run for the hills, laughing and tripping over their feet. They played tag and tumbled down the hills until a scent hit Victoria's nose.

Everything suddenly reeked of iron and rot. There were fumes in the air. Strange whispers came from the ground that spoke of betrayal and hurt. In the corner of her eyes, she saw 50-feet of metal making its way to her like a tsunami.

She had to admit that every time she saw it it looked majestic with its alloys of different metals and the melodic sound of scraping as it made contact with the trees. It would've been quite a beautiful scenery, she supposed, if she was in any sort of situation to admire it.

She tried to pull her mother, but she stayed rooted to the ground, smiling happily. The metal reached her and her mother. There was ringing in her ears before the metal engulfed her and she found herself fading, being pulled apart, being one with the metal.

Victoria woke up, trying to gasp for breath.

Sitting up from the bed, Victoria patted herself down — a normal routine after being in a war for too long to check for injuries — when she hit a metal plate at the side of her stomach. She pulled up her shirt and nearly screamed when what used to be skin was now replaced by metal. The metal from her arm spiraled downwards to her

stomach, wrapping it like a gift. Rust gathered in swirls of patterned streaks and every time she tried to twist she found herself wanting to vomit.

The feeling reminded her of the time when her mother accidentally fed her expired pie, and she got sick for two whole days. It wasn't the fondest memory she had with her mother.

Her mother?

Did she have a mother before, or was it part of her imagination? In fact, why was she even in this cold, green tent?

Vaguely, Victoria remembered a man who had fixed her arm and sent her here. She tried to picture his face, but it came out blurry. She was given an order by the man.

Win for me, a voice whispered in her mind.

All she knew was that she needed to win all the battles for him.

Victoria fought battle after battle. Dominated battlefield after battlefield. Her only goal was to win. Half of her body was already encased in metal, hidden in the uniform of camouflage white. Victoria felt stiff, yet she moved easily. She learned not to care for herself since she was invincible. Every bullet bounced off her, and the metal made her stronger and better, and it helped her win and achieve her goal.

The battles had been won easily, and the war was over. She found herself hunched over on an empty battlefield, holding her rifle in a tight grip. The surrounding soil mixed with snow was disturbed and a tattered flag waved at her from a distance. There was a familiar scent of rotting bodies in the air.

Victoria's body had been eaten away and replaced with metal. Every time she moved her body squeaked. Rust spread through her.

But she felt content. She was victorious. She had achieved her goal. That was all that mattered.

Victoria felt the metal infect the last part of her mind.

She saw an image float from her mind to her eyes. It was a familiar woman smiling at her, but her eyes were pure black. Numbers made from neon green ran across her eyes, repeating patterns of zeros and ones, and she briefly saw a square box accompanied by the sound of distant static before it all faded away.

Victoria felt her eyes become hollow, her lips become grey, her body lifeless—dead but at peace. She is a statue of dead dreams and dead memories. A statue of alloyed gold, metal, and rust. A statue made from the price of victory. ■



**Turtle**

*Medium: Welding*

Charity Rios



**Emotional Mess**

*Medium: Photoshop*

Leora Brown

# Fine Mischief

by Josh Webster

FALTWILL STOOD ALONE in a glade, before a stone circle, feeling an utter fool. No small feat, given his profession of court jester to The Duke. Faltwill spent hours hauling the stones across the ground as the wise woman instructed, arranging them in a circle over the cold iron chain hidden with grass and leaves. He owed the blacksmith a ridiculous amount of coin, but, fool or no, Faltwill needed help.

He'd never intended to become a Fool, to waste his days and nights performing for The Duke's Court and the aristocrats who composed it. Who dreams of a life standing on one's head while over-powdered and under-educated nobles glut themselves on the spoils of the kingdom, their hindlers affixed to gilt chairs soiled with their own filth?

Faltwill started out in the world as a scholar, a scribe at a nearby abbey where a parent (he assumed) left him in his infancy. The monks taught him to read and write not long after he gained the agility to hold a quill and the strength to lift the bound tomes and folios chained to the library shelves. From then on, he spent his days perfecting his script, copying the mostly Latin texts that composed the abbey's one-hundred and twelve volume library. Faltwill knew the scriptures, too, of course, and copied them, but he preferred the so-called "pagan treasures", as the head of the abbey often called them, of writers such as Ovid, Horace and Cicero.

In his fourteenth year, the library burned. Faltwill turned his head from the blazing abbey in fear he'd inhale the ashes of wisdom, somehow tainting himself with the foolish cruelty of the soldiers joyous at the conflagration. The Duke desired the abbey's wealth, and cared little for the meddling of the learned monks, who had a nasty habit of feeding the peasants and teaching them dangerous concepts such as charity and stewardship. To remove a nuisance and increase his coffers, the royal had become a fly in the ear of the bishop, whispering of heresy. The bishop, a dunce as fine as any to wear a crown, allowed The Duke to strike against the abbey and its inhabitants, then claim it as his own. In keeping with his legacy as boor and a dolt, he ordered burned anything he could not fathom, and fated the learned monks to imprisonment and execution.

Faltwill became a Fool when, brought before The Duke and asked to confess his crimes and beg for forgiveness, the boy said he wished for none and would much appreciate a clean and uncomplicated death executed by an able

and experienced professional. The Duke, impressed by Faltwill's brio and failing to recognize he spoke the simple truth, laughed at the boy, the rest of the court joining him in forced and hideous glee. The sound still rang in Faltwill's ears each time he stood in the presence of the court.

But the wrath of a teen gave way to the resentful wit of an aging man and his jests grew ever sharper, until he could no longer keep his tongue from cutting deep, even as he knew true blades threatened him. The Duke suffered offence from none, and the jester, it seemed, could offer nothing other.

Faltwill did not wish to die. He wished to survive and escape, perhaps make his way to the Mediterranean, its crossroads of people, nations and ideas. His pagan texts still existed in other lands, were celebrated even, and the scholar within the jester forced him to carry on in hopes of gazing upon their pages once again.

And so, with a heart unwilling to die and a tongue leading nowhere else, he went to the wise woman, who knew the secrets of the land. If Faltwill sought to survive the court, he reasoned, it would require the advice of the finest trickster and jester of all. He needed the wisdom of the fae, in particular, that of Robyn Goodfellow, the one known as Puck.

Having completed his preparations for the summoning, Faltwill lay on his back watching the sky, the grass cooling against his ears and cheeks as he waited for the appropriate moment to begin the litany that would lure the fae to the glade. He dozed in and out of wakefulness, until he opened his eyes to see the moon at the apogee of the heavens, holding court over the stars. He stood, faced East on the border of the stone and chain circle, and chanted the old words of the isles, the language of the people who dwelt in these lands when the fae roamed free, before the church and the Romans and the invaders. As he intoned the spell, his tongue grew quick, less fumbling and hesitant of the strange syllables, his confidence and volume increasing. The air crisped and charged, grew thick and strange with a metallic scent and taste. The soft moonlight bent and swirled into a twist of darkness in the midst of the circle, a miasma of claws and teeth and eyes resolving into a creature.

The fae stood taller than any man Faltwill had met, even the captain of The Duke's guard. Its arms and legs

sprouted from its body as saplings, knotted with bone joints at strange intervals, its fingers and toes curved and sharp as scythe blades. It smiled at him with needle teeth, eyes rubies and blood in turns of the light. Black fur drank the scant illumination, and the monster leered at the man, its smile a wracking shudder.

"I am Puck, descended from The Tuatha Dé Danann, Jester of the court of King Oberon and Queen Titania, rulers of Faerie." Its voice scraped Faltwill's ears, the words tasting of blood and char. "Some call me Goodfellow, though I am neither, and yet you called, Duke's Fool, and I answer."

It knew him. Faltwill pushed the fact away, and forced power into his voice. "I have summoned you, mischief maker, and by the power of the stones and binding chains, you will answer me truthfully."

It laughed in the tones of vexed hornets and growling wolves as it extended a hand, then a single claw, beyond the edge of the protective circle. Faltwill stood frozen, his imminent death dawning in his consciousness, and wondered if it would prove better than a hangman's axe?

The claw stopped an inch beneath his chin; it carried the same scent as a skinning blade. "The death I offer would be more dignified," Puck answered, lowering its hands and sitting back on its haunches. "A servant of mine removed the chains as you dozed. My ears hear in all places, Faltwill. Your thoughts included."

"You will kill me for my impertinence?"

The fae shook its head, the edges of the needle grin arching higher. "I'm rather a fan of impertinence. And I only appear to a summons if I choose, and I have chosen. What do you wish of me, Jester?"

Faltwill couldn't think, the creature's voice and presence a constant ache in his teeth, a roiling in his stomach. He heard the fae possessed uncommon beauty and charm, but before him stood a monster.

Puck stood, stretching its form into the night, its moonshadow cast far across the glade. "Am I not beautiful, Jester? Am I terrible? Might not that be a thing of beauty among my kind?"

"Perhaps," Faltwill answered.

"Or perhaps I am simply hideous, and the obvious is true. In all cases, the job of the Fool is to point out the truth in all its absurdity. Take your Duke for instance; do you find anything royal or grand about his personage? Some suggestion of Divine Providence in his rule?"

Faltwill thought of the beard dyed purple with spilled mead, the stained royal robes, so much food thrown from smacking lips that the castle rats grew fat. A man no more worthy than his sycophantic and ignorant retinue. "No."

Puck stroked its chin, twisting the hairs in its claws. "And you speak this truth, and now the Duke considers your death, yes?"

The jester nodded.

"I will assist you, Fool."

"Why? What do you ask in return?" Faltwill, like all men, knew to fear the terrible bargain of a fae.

Puck shrugged. "Nothing. Consider this a gift, for I am a maker of mischief, and in you I see fine mischief." It leaned forward, until it loomed above him. "Now tell me, and speak the truth. When you make your jests, when you aren't fumbling apples through the air or rolling about with the royal hounds, what do you hope your words achieve?"

"I hope my words entertain."

The fae sniffed the top of his head. "A lie produces such a rich scent. If your kind only knew. Do you truly think you've buried all the aspirations of your scholarship, the catechisms of your youth? Do you think yourself one who simply entertains?" It tapped a claw on his forehead before he could recoil. "What...do...you...want?"

"I want them to become better. To learn." Faltwill only considered the words as they fell from his lips.

Puck sat back on the grass with a sigh. "And there we have it. The truth. How do you feel?"

Faltwill felt a child's embarrassment, for hoping for such a simple thing from those who offered him no respect or dignity. "I feel a fool. Truly."

He expected laughter, another question, but Puck offered neither. It only nodded, let the silence sit. When Puck spoke again, it did so in soft, simple tones, in what might pass for kindness among the fae.

"I have been Jester to the Faerie Court for eons, Faltwill, and I have learned much of my role and its nature. The most important thing I learned, though, I learned from a mortal." It gestured to the grass, and Faltwill sat. "Many years ago, a spy of the court, one of my proteges, returned to Faerie's emerald fields with tales of a bard, a woman whose incredible voice and masterful songwriting enraptured not only her patrons and the people of her land, but those all around. Wise men, barons, clergy and aristocrats from all over the isles, and even some from across the sea, traveled to hear the finest musician their age knew.

"Now, a fine voice and swift fingers require both talent and training, but technique is but a road with beauty as its destination. Achieving the true grandeur of music requires the opportune coupling of technique and subject, as a song of the ages must resonate with the ear and the heart. The bard in question understood the vagaries of the

spirit as the star understands the night, and she crafted ballads of sorrow, joy and the beauty of human emotion. Her melodies transported the souls of listeners to the grandest heights or the darkest corners of humanity at her whim.

“Of course, the fae desired to hear such songs, as our kind envy mortals nothing but their emotions. The fae know lust without love, beauty without passion and even our wrath is cruel and cold. So a chance to hear songs distilling the fine vintages of the heart? King Oberon declared, in the name of his Queen, that the bard would sing for the court on the coming Beltane.

“Oberon kept his promise, with some assistance from myself, and, as the summer began, the bard stood before a grand banquet of the court, dressed in a gown sewn by Titania herself, holding the finest lute fae enchanters could craft.”

Puck paused, considered the grass. “I spent a fair amount of time with the lass in her time with us. She spoke of her craft with clear joy, and observed the world and the people within it with an aware heart, calibrated to what truly mattered in a human life. I rather enjoyed her company, I must say, which I cannot claim for most of your kind.”

“Present company included?” Faltwill asked.

Puck continued. “She did not belong in Faerie, and I knew her time with us would bring, as for so many of your kind, nothing but ill. But a jester remains a jester and a king remains a king, as you well know.

“Faerie is a land of glimmering things and creatures with jagged edges and sharp teeth, and a kind spirit such as the bard could see nothing in our kingdom or its inhabitants but the merciless seed from which all springs. Such vicious grandeur threw her soul into the deepest of despair, despite our many attempts to deceive her with lovely pretenses and baubles.

“And so, come Beltane, as she stood before the gathered royals of the fae court, she brought her fingers to the strings and inhaled a deep breath rich with perfume and enchantment, bearing full knowledge of the heartless creatures who sat in rapt attention, drunk on the deception and despair of her brothers and sisters. With sorrow in her hazel eyes, she began to play, to sing.

“I believe,” the fae said, loading a pipe produced from the midst of air, “she gave her finest performance that night. She summoned all she knew of the frail grandeur and rich pools of mortal experience, and distilled from this the hurt and pain the fae might cause a mortal heart. She sang of the suffering of husbands, wives and children who lost their beloveds in the endless mazes and forgetting mists

of our traps. She spun slow reels capturing the cruelty of fae tricks, of the human ruins we leave behind to shamble through wasted days. Tears fell from her lips as they sang of children stolen from their beds, the agony of mothers and fathers knowing their own body, blood and hearts were far away, lost to the hands of cruel, capricious slavers. She sang the sins of the fae, and she sang them true.”

“And they killed her.” Faltwill whispered, hopelessness upon him.

Puck puffed at his pipe, letting the jester’s sour fear settle.

“They laughed,” the fae said. “They laughed uproariously, the decorum of the court forgotten as they doubled over, wailing with joy. She proclaimed them monsters, and they knew no finer amusement.

“I watched her shatter. I felt it, tasted it. It was as acrid and bitter as smoke.

“Before the sun rose, I led her home, away from our lands. She walked beside me in silence until we reached the edges of Faerie. I saw her stare out upon her world from the border of my own, nothing in her eyes but a profound loss. She knew what sorts of things dwell in the edges now, and she would not forget. I wanted to apologize, but that, of course, isn’t our way. The hospitality of the fae does not extend to kindness.”

“What became of her?”

“She played, but her songs contained no beauty. They sounded from her with bitter rage and callous disregard, inspiring nothing in the listener but quarrelsome spirits and mead hall brawling. Her patrons fled her, and, in time, no village would welcome her voice as anything other than speech, if at all.

“The once musician found another calling, though. She sold the fine lute and clothing the court gave her and commissioned a talented smith to craft her weapons – arrows, daggers, a sword – of cold iron blessed by a wise woman, a cunning man and a bishop who knew of our kind. For the remainder of her life, she hunted us with no small success. Oberon tasked me with tracking her down and punishing her transgressions, but...” Puck shrugged, “...I’ve been known to fail now and again.”

It stood, stretching in the moon’s slim light. “Now then, Faltwill. Do you savy the meaning of my little tale?”

He nodded. “I will fail. To change them, I mean.”

“I’m afraid so,” Puck said, his voice now soft as a morning’s breeze. “You cannot appeal to virtues or sentiments long forgotten or abandoned. My people never possessed the quality you call humanity, but for your kind, to forgo it as so many do...” It spit on the grass, shook its head. “I changed as well that Beltane. I was once as

beautiful in my seeming as any other member of the court, donning all the glammers I could muster, but after leading the bard home, I returned in the form you see before you. Oberon and Titania demanded I make myself beautiful in their presence, but I refused. This shape unnerves them, angers them, so they pretend I'm at another lark, a ruse I will forgo in a few centuries."

Puck cackled, his edges sinking into darkness, vanishing into the night until nothing but his needled grin remained.

"They are wrong," the smile said. "And I am rather done with jokes."

Faltwill stood alone in a glade, before a stone circle.

HE SOMERSAULTED across the stone floor of the banquet room, his muscles sore, his skin red from slapping against stone. He hated it, the entire show, the expectation he would fall for them, debase himself, at their whim.

Still, in the months since he'd summoned Puck, Faltwill had improved in his tumbling, his juggling. He learned to craft witticisms that appealed to The Duke's false sense of inborn worth and value, jests that justified the way

the nobles treated the farmers, craftsmen and merchants, let alone the poor and the sick. They adored him for it, showered him in applause and praise. Puck spoke true, and gave fine advice.

It gave even more, as Faltwill learned when he awoke one morning to find hemlock seeds in a bag on his windowsill, a dream of how to prepare and use them fresh in his memory. After all the training and practice, his newfound agility made it a simple task to creep into the kitchen, undetected, and his quick hands poured the poison into the banquet mead with incredible grace.

A sack of his clothing and possessions waited near the cottage of the wise woman, and, if all went to plan, his feet would touch the shores of the Mediterranean Sea before anyone knew the wiser.

Faltwill rose from the floor, noting the noble faces going pale, the sweat gathering on brows. He smiled and bowed, imagining the sea salt breeze on his bruised skin, the feeling of linen page beneath his fingers. Puck spoke true, indeed: when the time came, Faltwill made fine mischief. ■

## In Your Arms

by Ariana Stadlander

That special place of mine,  
The safest one I know,  
Where I can pass the time,  
And time just seems to slow.  
It's where I feel so warm,  
A place I can't outgrow,  
A shelter from the storm,  
From rain and sleet and snow.  
It's where I can transform  
Amid this darkened world  
Take my sadness and conform  
With happiness emerged.  
It's a place I call my own,  
Where I can be at peace,  
My metaphoric home,  
Where love will never cease.

# Echoes of the Earth

by F. B. Lee III

TODAY WAS HARD. Most days were hard, but today, specifically, was really tough. The weather was fine; he'd prefer if it was a little greyer, though. Not really... Hoping for worse weather wouldn't make this day any better, but at least it would be fitting. Well, for him it'd be fitting, but not really, because then he'd be mad that even the weather seemingly conspired against him. It could be colder, though. It was a little too warm; some might call it beautiful, the weather, but not him, not today. Today was the kind of day where the littlest thing would get him going.

A smooth little area of pine needles under a nearby tree was nearly the perfect size for him to settle into. Some roots must have taken his measurements in the years prior, a time where they would be spaced perfectly and not just a little tiny bit too tight for him like they were now. He was here to meditate, though, so the idea of a little physical discomfort was fine and plus: between the ends of the pine needles trying to burrow into his legs and the roots applying the world's weirdest pinch to his backside, he had inadvertently created an acupuncture mat. Mats like that are supposed to help alleviate pain, when paired with meditation, and that is what he was there to do, so how could a little helping hand hurt?

Breathe. Deep breaths, and focus. Be mindful. These were the mantras that she'd taught him when they first started doing yoga and meditating together. He felt as though he was missing a lot of the steps, but really, those were the only ones that mattered. They're the ones that start the whole thing off. Well, there's also this whole part about knowing where you are, but that's kind of under the purview of mindfulness. In fact, most stuff fits under the category of being mindful. If you are aware of something, you are mindful of it. That is probably a deliberate choice. Mindful. Awareness. Breathe. He focused on his breathing. The key was to forget language and focus. The breathing ceased to be breathing and instead became an action, an action inverted at the end of the cycle. He kept his eyes open to stare at the stone a few feet away. It looked so unnatural, so wrong. It didn't belong, but yet it was perfect in every way. There were markings, but he'd forgotten what they said. The longer he stared at them, the more they looked archaic, like something someone, or some group, a million years ago chiseled into a cave

wall to say, "I was here." The phrase probably wouldn't even have been conscious, but the thought, the need to know that they left their mark, that they did something important, would be all too understandable of an instinct, and although he was forgetting who he was, he was mindful of that truth.

The rock. He. They were one and the same. Was he the rock, or was the rock him? He didn't know. He didn't know anything; his sense of self was absent. Rock. Rock. Where did it come from? Probably a mountain. Yeah. Definitely a mountain. He came from the mountain. A ledge. It was a ledge, and he was born when it broke free. There was a crack. A loud crack. A visible crack. It happened and then he tumbled. And then it was a race. And he won. He got farther faster, and no one else came close. He was on the side of a hill. By himself. In the sun. In the rain. He was a boulder, then, and a lonely boulder at that, but he didn't care that he was alone, because he'd won. He'd earned his place, halfway down the hill.

There was a stream down there. It curled and it bent. He hadn't. He'd shot down the hill with gusto, no grace, and he jumped and skipped and planted himself right where he was. The stream was slow, and steady, and slithering. It looked scary. He had no eyes, but he knew the stream looked scary. It rained; it snowed; it shined; it froze. He felt all of them. Season after season, year after year. He remained constant, though: strong and serene, not like the stream, which rose when it rained, and hid when it snowed, and shimmered when it shined, and stopped when it froze.

Then one day—years, decades, millennia later—a bird came and sat on his head, and he felt alive. See, this was one of the few exciting things that happens to boulders; some get annoyed, but he wants to help with the deed: he's more than willing to headbutt a seed. This bird pecked and pecked, but the seed did not heed, so the bird dropped what it brought, and left it to rot, but that little seed was tough as a knot.

It sat there like a tiny little boulder, until one day, it sprouted a green little thing. To a boulder, time is not right, so seemingly overnight a tree did grow. There they sat, he and the tree, and together they talked. The tree, she, would sway, and her branches would brush, and the boulder was glad that he could not blush.

There they stayed, together on the hill overlooking the stream, and the boulder grew comfortable. Her roots had gone and sought out his face, and there they rested, snuggling his base. The tree was getting older, but still could form leaves, when black birds came and acted like thieves. They pecked and poked and stole out her sap, and he could do nothing. Nothing. He was just there, and then one day, after the birds, he saw her leaves all fall a season too soon. She was losing light, he could tell by her roots, but there nothing he could do.

Some time later, when she was barely still there, a storm rolled through and lit up the sky. A flash and a bang and then she was aflame. She was on fire, and he was just there. Her roots held him tight as she told him that it'd be alright. He wanted it to end. She was hurting and burning and this wasn't right. The sky must have heard him, because then there was rain, and out went the flame, but there was sizzling and smoldering and hissing and pops, and pops, and pops, and CRACK. The branch that had swayed and brushed him all day had broken and fallen and smacked him asunder.

He fell from her roots and tumbled. And tumbled. And then, there he was, a boulder engulfed by the stream, constantly wet and shoved and slapped and scratched. The current was unyielding and he started to wear. Its kneading and knocking and all of the rest took a toll on the boulder and reduced him in size. A boulder no more, he'd been debased to a stone.

That was his world: abused by the stream. The water continued to flow, and he continued to roll, until all his

edges had rounded and smoothed. Tiny now, he could fit in a palm. The once mighty boulder, the no-longer stone, was plucked by a little hand, straight off of his throne.

The hand held him up and brought him to light, where the sudden warmth made him shiver and shudder. A strange reaction for sure, but it'd been so long, eons had passed since he'd last been awake, and he was startled by how quickly he began to bake. He'd shed his stone and grown back his skin. He wiped the stream from his cheek and pulled her close. She hugged and he squeezed and snuggled her face.

"Do you know what today is?" The man was not sure she remembered, she was even littler then, but she looked back at the stone, hugged him tight, and proceeded to say, "Momma's birthday."

He held her tight and said, "She loved you a whole lot." The tears started back, and silence set in. There they hugged and sniffled some more. The little girl teemed with new life. Watery eyes and a big brand-new smile, she grabbed daddy's hand and tugged for a while. "Daddy, I know what Momma would do! She loved ice cream and I do, too! Let's go get ice cream. We can get that one that she loved with the marshmallows and sticks and stuff!"

"That's a wonderful plan," he said as he stood. He kept hold of her hand as he grabbed Momma's stone. The girl tugged and tugged, but he finished his thought, "I love you, and miss you, and so does she." He gripped the stone tighter and squeezed out the code, "There was no one better to ride with on that rocky road." ■



## Depression

*Medium: Digital Photography*

Courtney Gomez



THIRD PLACE IN STUDENT ART  
**Glacier Transformation of the Valley**  
*Medium: Digital Photography*  
Hillary Lara



# The Largess of a Memory

by Tracy Ballard

Everyone carries with them their personal store of memories: some good, some bad. These memories are made from life experiences unique to each of us: experiences that help shape who we are. Although many memories get lost or forgotten with the passing of time, some of the more important ones remain. For me, one of the important ones is a happy memory. Some of my fondest memories from childhood were of my time spent at the mountains with my family.

There were seven of us: two parents and five kids. For our parents (I am sure) taking us to the mountains was a frugal way to entertain us. For us children, however, it was a point of interest in our everyday lives. We looked forward to our occasional forays even if it meant washing and waxing the family van when we got home.

I remember our family van with amusement. It definitely fit the times we were living in. With its red paint job on the outside, its red and black wall-to-wall carpet on the inside, and its eight-track player constantly piping out music from bands like Fleetwood Mac and The Steve Miller Band, our van was at home in the 70s.

Our family would load into the van and make the short forty-five minute drive out of the city. It wouldn't take long for the scenery to change; the streets, buildings, and houses would soon become stretches of desert and bush. These, in turn, gave up the dusty brown of desert for the greenery of the mountains. There was something different about the mountains that always created a welcome shift in the way I felt.

Of all the places we could go, our destination didn't vary much. We almost always went to our favorite spot, a place known as Deer Creek. It wasn't a large creek, but it seemed perfect to me. Its water was always cold and clear, gathered from the snow running off the mountains. It weaved its way

playfully over the rocks and twigs in its path. The resultant sound became a comforting trickle that felt like a gentle hum.

When tired of playing in the creek, you could always hike or climb. There was a huge rock jutting from the mountain face that called to me. I visited it every time we came. I would climb up the rock and just sit. Looking out over the trees made me feel untouchable. I gathered their strength to me. I always loved the trees. They felt so alive to me. I would close my eyes and listen to the wind sighing through their branches, singing songs to me, whispering secrets to my soul. If you got close enough to their bark, they even smelled sweet, like butterscotch.

I remember snippets of other things too, like hunting for edible pine nuts, gathering pine cones, or drinking icy water from the creek. We used to like to pretend we were Indians moving stealthily through the trees, trying to see who could sneak up on whom. There was always something fun to do and always new things to explore. We filled our time well. Then, all too soon it seemed, our day would be over and we would be on our way home.

On the surface, memories like these may seem insignificant. The significance of the memory cannot be found in the details of the experience, but in what you as an individual take away from it. It is in the smells you remember. It is in the small pleasures you remember. It is in the feelings and thoughts that are hard to grasp. It is those elusive moments that add to your character. Sometimes it is hard to understand why some experiences and memories stand out for us; why we choose to keep some memories and not others. I know why I chose this one. My time at the mountains let me feel my connection to things bigger than myself. Although I haven't returned to Deer Creek in many years, my memories are always with me, continuing to give. ■



**Serene Sky**

*Medium: Digital Photography*

Angie de Braga

# Badger

by Chelsey Pennell

SHE LIKES TO RISE EARLY — watch the sunrise cast shadows on the gangly Joshua trees, spilling its light onto withering yucca to finally spread like water over sand. The Desert is awake. She treads to the kitchen quietly to grab a mason jar from the cupboard and to see if any food made it home with her mother last night. Nothing. Her belly grumbles at the suggestion so she closes the cabinet firmly in reply. As she reaches the front door, the vision of her mother asleep on the couch comes into her peripheral. Her dark hair is matted across her face and her body is slumped over to one side, her feet still planted on the filthy carpet. She puts the mason jar down on the floor and gently guides her mother's legs onto the couch and spreads a blanket clumsily over her. Her mother shifts and opens her eyes for a moment, "Mona, brush your hair," she scolds, then buries her face into the cushion of the couch. Mona reaches to her hair self-consciously and is reminded she plaited it herself the night before.

Outside the air is still crisp and she can see it rained the night before, the concrete darkened where the sun hasn't yet reached. It smells of sage and wet dirt. She walks across the quiet street and places the jar next to an anthill roughed up by the rain. One by one the large crimson ants emerge, sluggishly assessing the damage of their once domed entrance. She will find the Queen today. She was lucky once and got close when she dug up fine dirt and uncovered tiny white eggs. Raymie ruined it by sloshing a bucket of water over the hole, sending the ants and their eggs over hot asphalt. Raymie was always doing things like this. He followed Mona around like a shadow, quiet and close, waiting for the right moment to stir trouble.

Mona knew she was short on time. Raymie would be up any minute and she had to get digging if she wanted to find the Queen. She used a flat pointed rock to dig out from the eye of the nest, careful to avoid crushing any one ant purposefully. She knew from her Grandpa Joe that the Queen would have wings and would be bigger than any of the worker ants protecting her. She also knew the Queen could be deeper than she could dig with a rock. She was always surprised after digging for a while that the tiny tunnels burrowed by the ants would collapse in new directions and she would have to change course again.

She could hear the screen door smash against the side of the house and knew Raymie would be standing there,

barefoot and in nothing but his underwear. He was five, and Grandpa Joe called him "hoo-nah". When she asked him what "hoo-nah" meant, he squinted one eye and pointed to her from across the table,

"Badger. Raymie ain't nothing but a badger dressed as a boy!" His gruff voice echoed in her head this morning as she eyed Ramie from across the street.

"I'm hungry!" Raymie shouts, hugging himself from the chill of the morning. Crouched over the anthill Mona sighs and stretches upwards, grabbing the jar and kicking dirt back over the small crater she'd made. She hated weekends. Weekends meant no lunch from school and she'd have to walk Raymie to Grandpa Joe's across the tracks nearly four miles away. The air was already losing its bite, and the asphalt was starting to get warm.

"Hurry up and get dressed, we gotta walk to Grandpa's." Mona shouts back as she walks toward the spigot in their yard. She fills the mason jar to the top and caps it, then sits back against the house to wait for Raymie. Their yard isn't much to look at except for a handsome oak that reaches taller than the roof. It was here when they moved in a few years ago and she had seen owls and birds of all kinds making their home in its branches. She had never seen anyone water it, yet it reached higher every year. She wondered then if the roots reached as deep as the tree did high.

Raymie barrels out of the house, his shirt tautly tucked into his underwear and his pants pulled over the top. Mona sighs, trying to flatten his thick, black hair still tousled from sleep. "Stop! That hurts!" he whines, dipping away from her into the yard. "I don't wanna walk," Raymie groans, folding his arms in defiance.

"If you wanna eat, you're gonna walk. I don't wanna hear any of your whining either, Raymie." Mona chides, grabbing his hand and walking him out to the street.

"We could take the short cut?" Raymie pipes, pointing to the water tower on the hill just above their house. Mona didn't want to walk any further than Raymie did but knew they weren't supposed to cut through the desert. Grandpa Joe warned them of the dangers in not knowing the land like they used to. Stepping on a rattlesnake shading itself under brush or rock, stumbling upon wild burros not keen on company, or tantalizing some large cat holed up in the surrounding mountains. The short cut was half the

distance though, and they had done it once before when Raymie cut open his arm climbing through a window.

“Alright, let’s take the shortcut, but you have to hold my hand Raymie. No running ahead or dodging around in the brush.”

Driven by hunger and heat, they scurry quickly enough through the narrow spaces between sagebrush and shrubs, careful to step cautiously near boulders and burrows.

“Does Grampa have sausage?” Raymie asks, stopping to pick burrs out of his long white socks.

“I dunno— maybe. He had those sausages outta the can last time, member? Ones that looked like little grey fingers.”

Raymie looks up with a sigh, “I don’t like those. They’re slimy and taste gross. I want cooked sausage.”

Mona wipes sweat from beneath her bangs and squints toward Raymie, “You ate them just fine last time, asked for more and everything. We’ll eat what we’re given then ask what needs to be done.” With that she gave him the jar for water and let him drink it nearly gone before snatching it up to wet her lips.

“Mona, look!” Raymie shouts, pointing toward a sand dome as tall as he was.

Large red ants furiously crawl in and out of the dome carrying various things of shape and size. Mona’s eyes widen at the sight as she squats near the base of the dome. The dome wasn’t just made of sand and dirt, but a collection of desert scraps like sticks, dried flowers and what looked to be stray strands of animal hair. Mona slid her finger along the base of the mound where she imagined a Queen would be tucked away in some dark chamber guarding over her eggs. Her heart quickens as she looks around for a stick or rock to fall the hill layer by layer.

Raymie beat her to it. He let out a holler before kicking into the center of the hill, then pushing his hands through what was left. Dust envelops his form, and he emerges with a thin layer of dust and ants all over his body. Tears fill her eyes as she feels hunger claw its way to her chest and grip her throat in rage.

“Hoonah!” Mona cries, kicking remnants of the ant hill into Raymie’s face. He reaches fingers to eyes more in surprise than pain, stumbling back from her. “God dammit, Raymie! You’re always ruining things. You ruin everything!” Mona spit, lurching forward to scream directly into his face. Raymie is wailing, deep gulps and sputters of air and spit, confused and hungry and tired. Always tired. She screams so near his face she can feel his

hot breath on her lips, “I hate you!” and pushes him as hard as she can to the ground.

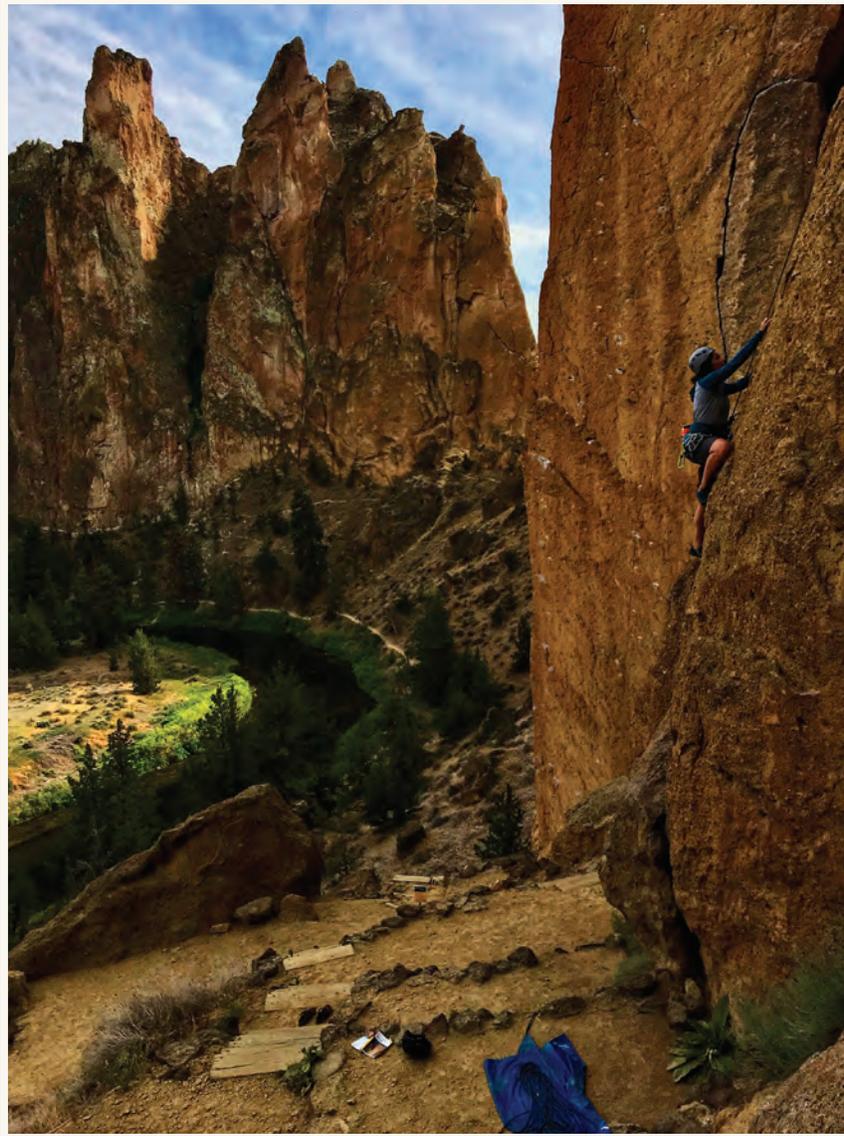
Raymie scatters to his feet in bewilderment, hands clutching at his bleeding elbows. Mona’s anger lifts as she reaches for him, but he pulls back, fear and anger muddle across his face like something wild. All the wild he could never quite tame, the hunger deep in the middle of his brain, the ache to be held, to be rocked and sung to. A song he couldn’t seem to remember. He ran that day deep into the wild of the desert. He ran and he ran, and he ran. She stood, immovable and watched him.

Mona would tell a version of this story over and over again to the people looking for him. To her weeping mother who beat her for losing him. To the police and social services with their clean hair and fingernails, their sideways glances and hollow hearing. They all searched the desert for him. For days they searched. Their best guess was he fell down an unmarked mine shaft and was killed. Her mother left soon after the search had ended. Dropped Mona with her grandfather across the tracks and never looked back.

Her grandfather asked her once, many years after he disappeared what happened in that desert between them. She told him the truth as she sat across from him at his knotty kitchen table. She wept at the calloused words that spit like venom that day, she wept for her brother who was just a baby and needed her, and for her mother whom she never knew. As she wept, her grandfather began to sing. She didn’t understand the words, but the melody got inside of her. It rose and fell like grief, was slippery like the memory of Raymie. He sang it until her tears had dried up and the ache in her chest lifted. His eye had gotten worse over the years and seemed always to wince when he spoke.

“That’s the song of the Badger, I never sang it to Raymie. It’s time we put that boy to rest, Mona.”

That night Mona dreamed of a jar filled with Queen ants resting aside a deep hole in the desert. The jar shook from the quivering of their wings, threatening to plunge down into the darkness. A large silver badger emerged from the hole and took hold of the jar in his padded paws, he carved a hole in the top with his long talons and the ants flew out, becoming cranes. Those cranes flew toward the moon while the badger rolled the jar away from the edge of the hole. As he turned to disappear into the shadow of the pit, he turned his head up toward the moon and sang his song as he swallowed the darkness. ■



## Sunset Desert Climb

*Medium: Photography*

Hillarie Lara



# Munificent Betrayal

by Richard A. Sanchez

I am the albatross, who was shot into the sea,  
by the one who won my heart and curiosity.  
Sinking into the void, waiting to be consumed,  
by all the other creatures who live under the moon.  
I embraced the darkness, the stars simply last their appeal,  
and the veil was finally lifted exposing what's concealed.  
There,

I looked into the eyes that turn pyramids into sand,  
he who lives on pillars built by gods and man.  
I held his robe between the roads of kingdoms conquered  
new and old.

We climbed the steps of sacred winds,  
the world was red and at its end.  
Upon the precipice I turned to him,  
to a knowing glance and flashing grin.

He spoke in thunder, not in words;  
"Betrayal and death, they bring rebirth.  
These who suffer will claim the Earth,  
and all who hurt you will feel my curse."

Then,  
a tunnel formed of 9-million souls,  
naked figures with eyes of coal.  
I passed by them and they felt my pain,  
they pointed fingers, saying, "rise again!"  
Suddenly,

enlightenment was found within,  
and from the ashes I did ascend.  
To fly beyond Apollo's reach,  
I found a garden which promised peace.

By treachery, this rose adorn,  
I burned the petals and kept the thorns.  
And through this storm I was transformed,  
because one must die to be reborn.

# Gone and Forgotten

by Raya McAnany

I FELT THE LOW RUMBLE rising from the ground even in my sleep. Popping my eyes open, I saw the fan on my bedroom ceiling gently swaying in the moonlight. *What a funny sight. A dream?* No, it couldn't be a dream. The sounds of the walls creaking and the floorboards shifting were too real, too close, too unsettling. Dreams, even the worst nightmares, were never as scary as real life. Never ever.

I balled the grey comforter in my hands and shifted my gaze to the window. The blinds were up, and the window propped open. The cool summer air filled my room with the scent of nature. Something else was there too. Something sharp, throaty. *Something wrong.*

The house let out a scream as a wave of pressure, a force so strong I couldn't breathe, rolled over me. I clutched onto the comforter and pushed myself farther into the bed wishing I could escape the feeling. The window rattled in its frame, and I feared the glass would shatter and sparkle my room with a thousand tiny fireflies. *Beautiful, deadly, terrifying.* I felt the same about the shaking Earth. It was in my bones, rattling my heart around my ribcage. Unnatural in the most natural way.

An earthquake. An earthquake in the middle of the night, that's all it was. *No.* A nightmare, maybe, after all. Sometimes nightmares could be so convincing you forgot which way was up, which way was down, what was fake, what was real. It's real. If I was awake — if — then what was the rumbling (an earthquake)? What was the deep wave of pressure that had knocked into me and the house? And the light? *What light?* The light that originally stirred me from my sleep. A flash so bright I'd seen it in my dream.

I sat up, heart pounding against my ribcage. *What is happening?* An earthquake, that had to be it. But what if that wasn't it. What if it was worse, scarier.

*Mom.* I wanted my mom. She was asleep in the bed on the ground level of the house. Everyone in the house was asleep. No one else felt earth moving beneath them or adrenaline rushing through ice-cold veins. Was I the only one up because I'd always been a light sleeper or because it was all my imagination — a dream dripping into reality?

I felt my chest tighten and willed myself to wake up. *I'm not asleep. I need to run.* I didn't understand my own

panicked thoughts. They rode on the tail ends of the dreary confusion from being awakened at three-seventeen in the morning.

A sickening, burning scent filled my nostrils and my stomach flipped. It reminded me of burnt toast and campfires but it felt more final than that — it felt more brutal. *Bomb!* The thought sent another jolt of adrenaline through me and I pulled the comforter around my waist, looking out the open window, trying to make sense of what I could see in the dim moonlight. Where had the thought come from? *Bomb.* There was no bomb. I was in no danger. A little girl's fear of being blown-to-bits by a country lying in wait.

Light in the distance, past the folds of the night, but before the horizon. It was something other than the electric lights of the city. And the sounds that lived under the rumbling of the earth and the creaking of her house — police sirens, car alarms, screams. Too many. *The bomb. The big one. The atomic one.*

No. It couldn't be. If an atomic bomb went off I wouldn't exist anymore, right? I looked down at my hands and saw the creases in my palms. I saw the blue nail polish, turned grey by the night, and I saw everything they'd never done. Existing was what I needed to do. Only a teenager, I was too young. I wasn't anybody yet. A hollow shell of a girl yet to be filled.

Not existing wasn't an option. *Run.*

If it was a bomb, the blast hadn't killed me. It had been too far away. But if it had woken me, I was still too close. The radiation would kill me. *My life gone. Wasted on the failures of adults.* I needed someone to save me. A knight-in-shining-armor. Only knights-in-shining-armor didn't exist, and if they did they wouldn't want me. *Not yet, anyway. I am going to become someone soon. I promise.*

The world laughed, and a bright light filled my senses. It overwhelmed my vision and I was sure, in less than a millisecond, I'd been blinded; corneas scorched into nothingness. The light flooded my nose and throat and I choked on it. The light touched every inch of my skin and I felt it leaving the kisses of a hot stove. Panic flashed through my mind but then gave way to a volley of unconnected thoughts because, in that moment, thoughts were the only thing I had.

*Mommy, Mommy, please. Hurry! It hurts so bad. Don't die. I need you. Don't be dead. We can live through this. You're still asleep. You didn't even have a chance. You didn't even have a chance to run.*

The light wrapped me in a hug, gently laid me back against my bed, and tucked the covers over me. Without hearing, I knew the windows in my room shattered, and without feeling, I knew the skin on my face was boiling.

Give me a chance! I wanted to scream. *Give me a chance to become somebody. I'm empty still. I'm nobody.*

And it was true. I'd never fallen in love or made a bond with a friend so close they could never forget me. I'd never gotten a job, or driven a car. I'd never gotten drunk or smoked a cigarette. I'd never left a mark on anybody but the dying woman downstairs. Gone and forgotten. *A child.*

And then . . . nothing. ■



## Earned Patriotism

by Alex Johns

In time ago, in time gone by.  
There resided a red rose, stark in contrast to sky.  
Beside the cohesion of the earth, it was in faultless bloom and slightly wry.

Mocked among the land, and oft the sea.  
It sought holy men, the ones that plea.  
Oh God on high, hear my prayer. God on high, I return to thee.

Drifted on, hushed the sound.  
Scattered brothers, also bound.  
Spirits nearing their return, awaiting to be found.

In time ago, in time gone by.  
At high a cost, at copious a cry.  
Many angels came to earth, in search of those to take on high.

They conveyed the land, and oft the sea.  
Sought holy men, the ones that plea.  
Oh God on high, hear my prayer. God on high, I return to thee.

Drifted on, hushed the sound.  
Scattered brothers, also bound.  
Spirits nearing their return, awaiting to be found.



**Joy Comes in the Morning**

*Medium: Photography*

Courtney Gomez



### Lola's Transformation

*Medium: Found Object/Assemblage Art*

Simone Marie

# When They Come at Night

by Keith Wieber

MY EYES POP OPEN as they do when I've had a full night's sleep, just before the alarm would sound. Those days start without a hint of fatigue. It's not the time to start my day though. Instead of the sun's rays muted by the curtains in my bedroom, it's the glow of the moon, or the city's lights, or streetlights standing watch in the neighborhood. Perhaps it's a combination of all three. The indirectness of the source makes it difficult to assign credit.

I love this time of night. The softness of the limited illumination revealing and obscuring at the same time. The ambient noise from the world is subdued, and I can hear every minute decibel of the darkened morning. I won't register those thoughts tonight. There won't even be a recognition of what I'm missing. It's been only two hours since the last attack ended, and I have to be ready for this one.

The bed creaks, the yawn of the door hinges I neglected to oil, the footfalls on the tiled floor outside the room, all announcing my actions in miniscule sounds that would have gone unnoticed in the day, but are highlighted in the stillness of the early morning hour. I release the tension in my muscles as I reach a distance I feel is far enough away to prevent others from hearing the limited noises I'm making, and the fatigue crushes me. I lull my head back and a sigh escapes. I force my legs to move when all I want to do is lay down and get that sleep I know is going to be missed. My eyes go for the clock and see that it's just after two A.M. A couple hours of sleep before the first incursion, two more after, I reason that I might still be able to catch a couple more, if the assault is a short one.

The sound of my bare feet scraping on the floor irritates me. It's the sound of laziness personified, but I haven't the strength or the will to assume a more measured pace. One that raises and lowers my legs normally. I'm using all that energy on making myself move to my designated area. The sputum comes before the first wave. An index finger brushes under the right nostril and I place that same hand on the side of my head. The cold palm cups my temple as my fingers plow into my hair, disheveling it further. It's starting.

Pain hits hard and nearly drops me to my knees before I catch the kitchen counter and steady myself. It is as if a foreign object has formed between the brain and cranium,

laying claim to the occupied territory. It's bad. It's going to get worse.

There is a reprieve between waves and I have to take advantage of this one. I make it to the refrigerator and pull harder than intended. The items stored in the door rattle and clink from the sudden jostling. I register the shaking of my hand as it retrieves an energy drink. Every time that I go through this routine, I acknowledge the irony that I am using a product invented to keep people energized and awake as a means to be able to get back to sleep. Caffeine and taurine are supposed to shorten the headache episode. I'm going to tell myself it doesn't work, it didn't prevent it from coming back after the first time tonight, but I'm going to drink it anyway. The attack is going to last as long as it lasts, and there has been nothing I've found to stop it.

And yet it will end. That is the only reason I go through the motions in case those actions are the reason it paused for a couple hours. First, I place the cold can against my right temple. The pain changes to a sharp stab I didn't realize was occurring. As if I halted the insertion of a blade into my head, preventing its progress, but holding it in place. This type of pain is also debilitating, but it comes with a release of the inside pressure. I've just replaced one agony for another, yet it seems preferable. Maintaining the placement of the near-freezing object as I move on to pacing. Another natural remedy intended to help. This one makes more sense to me, as sitting and lying down intensifies the pain, the movement seems to be the body's intended response. And so I lumber on.

My pattern will take me in loops around the kitchen island and the breakfast table. Never too far from a solid object to steady myself, when the need arises. One lap in and the pressure is back. I remove the can to prevent feeling both variations of pain at the same time. It's difficult to steady my hands enough to open the drink. The crinkling of the thin metal as the top pushes in carries with it a promise of relief, but it's a lie. One that I want to believe. I drink nearly half of the product on the initial intake.

I save the remainder of the chilled liquid and press the lower half of the container against my temple, nearly crushing the aluminum. Now that it's open and the volume reduced, it becomes malleable. It shapes around the curvature of my head.

The wave lessens. My breathing is ragged and labored from the fight, but I force myself to push on. I finish off the can, mostly because holding it in place is tiring my arm. My mind plays back the different cycles. When they first started the summer after high school, coming in building intensity, I thought it was a brain tumor. A headache every two weeks, then once a week, every other day, until daily, then up to three episodes in a day. It seemed to be a warning. The pain heralding an impending death. The tests revealed nothing and eventually they went away.

They came back every two years. Every other summer was blissfully pain-free only to be replaced the next summer with another wave of attacks. There were so many theories offered, but they proved to be false when the pain returned in its pattern. No diagnosis for ten years until it was finally labeled. Cluster headaches. It was a relief to hear. It meant I wasn't dying.

I was fortunate. Mine were episodic. I learned that there were those who were chronic, and I felt a certain amount of guilt to count myself among their numbers when I found a support website. Tips and suggestions from others who fight The Beast, as they called it. It seems different for everyone. Some things work to various degrees, others it doesn't help them at all and they recommend something else. They continue looking and they keep trying, because the other thing that is understood about the attacks is that there is no cure. They could reduce in intensity and frequency with age, but when it wants to. I will have no say in when, or if, it happens.

My musings are halted with the next hit. It forces my eyes shut, my breathing stops, every muscle tightens as I brace. The foreign object now feels as if it is pressing against the inside of the bone shell. My hand returns to the side of my head forcefully, applying pressure from the outside, as if I can prevent the cracking of my skull. Each crease and indentation that has been present since the fusing of the floating plates in my infancy seem an indication that this time, I will fail. Tonight is the night when it will split open.

It doesn't. It abates. I reason the origins of trepanning. The process of puncturing the skull, a technique used as

far back as seven thousand years, "to allow the demons out". I imagine myself in millennia past and how I must look during an attack. The contortions of my body to find a position to relieve the pain. An inability to sit still. Striking my own head at the site of the focused ailment. Drainage from one nostril, eye droop on the same side. Even with modern reasoning, I look like I'm possessed.

And the pressure. That skull cracking pressure. As archaic and misguided as it all seems to the learned, in the throes of an assault, it makes perfect sense. In fact, it seems probable it was proposed as a cure for a cluster headache sufferer. Not only did the afflicted likely agree to the idea, I imagine they begged for it.

Archeologists have located skulls with the holes bored in, some with more than one. Two things struck me from that knowledge. The patient survived. Somehow, a piece of cranial bone was removed and the person recovered. Second, additional holes meant it wasn't the fix. The Beast came back, as it always does.

The episode continues its waned attack at lower intensity and decreasing frequency, triggering tears, sparking aggression, coaxing whimpers, until I allow myself to believe it's over. Pain is replaced with self-pity. Sadness accompanies the understanding that this was just a moment. The torture will come again.

Fatigue pushes the depressive thoughts aside. I'm weary and spent and creep back into the bedroom, gently lowering myself into bed, trying to avoid waking my spouse. I look over to her side and attempt to discern if I've wakened her. There is only a silhouette in view. My eyes close for the reward of sleep. It's coming up on four in the morning.

I'm graced with something else. The softest palm on my face. A gentle caress of her thumb on my cheek. The tenderness wells tears in my eyes coming so soon after the brutality of the beating. Despite the aggressive recurrence, the depression that accompanies the fear of knowing the demon will return, in this moment, I feel only blessed. A tear rolls down my cheek. It's all I can muster. I allow sleep to take hold. Normal life will come and I need to be rested. ■



**Seasonal Symbiosis**

*Medium: Photography*

Erika Martinez



# Love Addict

by Ciara Saint Vincent

SOME OF US MAY still be dreaming of the day where prince charming comes and takes us away. The day that our life finally feels like a fairytale. More or less, this is everyone's idea of love. Even if there is no actual castle, they believe that love makes them feel as if they have lived in one for years. However, what if love is not everything we have been told? In fact, what if it is the poison or the prick of the thumb that starts all difficulties in these stories?

Nobody thinks love is equivalent to sadness; however, it always leads there eventually. Whether it be the loss of feelings or even death, hurt lingers as long as love is present. The difference between fairytales and reality is that the prince never has to stop loving the princess. They never have to come home and look in their maiden's eye and see that the love that was once there is now gone. Their story stops before the pain is visible. We look at their reality and can do nothing but hope it is ours. We hope that one day we can feel the flame without getting burned.

All you need is love, some say. It is powerful and beautiful when found. However, many fail to realize how powerful it actually is. The dopamine being released through the body when one has that "perfect kiss" is only the start of the addiction. The withdrawal, relapse, cravings, all of the symptoms are present; yet, we still believe that love is the cure to all sadness, not the addictive substance we are taught to stay away from. We talk about how amazing it is to fall in love but are blind to the toxic qualities it possesses. We are all addicted. Just as an addict makes excuses for their "uncontrollable desires," we make excuses for ours. However, of course, there are far less drug addicts in the world than there are people looking for love so calling them out for their flaws is a lot easier than addressing our own, right?

The reality is that fairy tales should stay as bedtime stories. Stories that are read to children late at night in order to keep their dreams joyful and their imaginations thriving. Stories that give hopeless romantics enough motivation to keep their beliefs. Stories that are so far out of reach that they almost seem like reality. ■



## Dragon Fire

*Medium: Digital Photography*

Joe de Braga



# For Their Service

by Ariana Stadflander

Averted gaze and hidden glance,  
Please don't notice me staring.

I just can't help myself.  
How did you get like this?

Your matted mane —  
Knotty, natted, ratted, tousled, tangled.  
Your scraps of clothing —  
Worn, torn, tattered, ragged, ripped.

You stand hunched over  
Like a spineless question mark.  
Your bony, spindled fingers are  
Curled into an incurable pretzel.

Your face is old and weathered,  
Your sad eyes a window to the past,  
To the hard life you've lived,  
To the hard life you will live.

How did you get like this?

Is that what I think it is —  
Pinned to your coat,  
The coat that's too big,  
Too big for your skinny shoulders?

It's lost its patriotic shine.  
The colors of our freedom flag:  
Dim, darkened, fading, waning, weakened.  
Like your battered spirit.

There's a story to that pin,  
The story of a soldier.  
I thank you for your service,  
Your sacrifice for my freedom.

But, tell me,  
How did you get like this?



# When Lambs Become Lions

by Richard A. Sanchez

Exposed,  
How many sobering events has  
this child witnessed?  
Living in constant fear,  
nothing certain in her existence.  
Her peers,  
wishing to grow-up too quickly,  
pushing her to do so too.  
It's unwise to go against the grain  
when the jungle writes the rules.

She cried more than she laughed,  
it's amusing how the mind tries  
to lock away the past.  
But the mirror refuses to  
let her forget.  
Eyes like fire, that have seen  
the depths of the abyss.

Manipulated, used, abused, unseen scars  
plague her heart.  
She took what happened to her,  
and turned it into rage.  
Changing from something innocent,  
to something that needed to be caged.

Poison becomes medicine, what was broken,  
is now whole again.

Steel sharpened steel,  
and hooves became claws.  
She is now the predator,  
no-longer the prey, defying all  
the odds.

# Forgoing Life

by Anonymous

WILLIAM WANTED TO LIVE.

He could start at any point in his life on why he wanted to live, but it all started one day when he found out he had an incurable sickness, in a faraway tower, in the middle of nowhere.

And there he was staring at a cauldron while stirring furiously in an attempt to dissolve the ghostly voices coming from it. “You don’t want this—turn away—you’ll regret it.” The cauldron said in tendrils and whispers of dread and sadness.

William ignored the warning and gazed at the only window inside the tower.

Out here in this foreign land that cannot seem to exist with its strange stars that sprinkled the sky, and the sunsets that covered the horizon; where the open fields meet woodlands; where fauna and flora alike flourish untouched. In this strange land lived a single human being: him.

An alchemist, he called himself.

An abomination of the sun, the moon, and the sky, others might say. But those insults don’t matter to someone like him. Someone passionate enough to bare their hands on the doors of death to pursue what they wanted the most. He wanted a cure for his disease that would devour him whole as his life progressed. He could have accepted that he was going to die painfully, but he refused to meet death with a brave stride and a noble heart.

William looked at his cauldron that turned cloudy white. Palmed in his hand was a glistening stick of glittery gold. It was something more valuable that not even all the money in the world could afford. Something more valuable than his life.

A branch blessed by the gods. The recipe for life.

He mixed it in and peered into it and saw many figures. They walk to and away from a figure that seemed to be very lonely.

He let the liquid boil until there was enough for only one person. There can only be one, and he didn’t want anyone else having what was rightfully his. He drank the remaining contents of the cauldron with cupped hands and relished in the feeling of being bathed in the tender hands of life, the sound of the strings of fate being cut, and the feeling of the doors of death being closed.

Lastly, he felt the dissolving burden hidden in the back of his mind as the disease disappeared from his heart.

There was no going back now.

“Immortality,” William breathed out in awe.

Once a man, now forever.

The alchemist left. He left his cauldron, his tower, and his old life to rot in favor of the real world. He promised to himself that he would live this eternal life of his to the fullest that it could ever be if he ever achieved immortality.

William smiled and moved forward.

The next following hundred years of wandering about were amazing. Friends came and went, but most didn’t last long since he moved from place to place to avoid suspicion from the fact that he had not aged yet. He saw society progress with his own eyes as the population increased with every year that passed by. He saw sights he thought he would never see. He never got hungry, and he got hurt but never felt a thing.

True bliss. It was breathtaking to be immortal.

He didn’t want it to end, and he knew it wouldn’t and that only served to make him happier.

THERE WAS A DAY William found someone that he didn’t leave for the first time during his travels. He had bumped into her during a festival.

“My name’s Ophelia. A pleasure to meet you!” she had introduced herself with a grin on her face. For whatever reason—whether or not it was from coincidence, the hand of fate, or the roll of chance—Ophelia couldn’t stray far from him without coming back.

After a few years, he had told her what he was.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ophelia said. “As long as we’re together.” She was like the sun, all big and warm, and made his world better.

He loved her.

She was his sun that he didn’t want to set.

But she did set, and he could only watch as he outgrew the sun that wasn’t meant to be outgrown.

William stood over a cliff as he watched the sunset. The snake bite that he tried earlier didn’t kill him earlier, but maybe the cliff would.

The scent of the sea was present in the air as he contemplated death.

Death wasn't kind, and death doesn't care. He knew that. Death will take what it wants, snatching people up no matter how good, evil, young, or poor. Death is not prejudiced against anyone. Without death, there is no life. Accepting death means accepting life, and he has bested death so he must honor life.

But will it take him? Someone who cheated death?

William doesn't want to live, yet he also doesn't want to die. He just wants to end the pain that he's feeling—an aching pain trying to split his mind into two.

William closed his eyes and, with a brave stride, plunged to his death.

At last.

But, unfortunately, he lived because death does not take kindly to those who try to cheat it.

Death will not take him, and he mourned for this fact.

Perhaps living forever wasn't as amazing as William had thought? But he crossed that out of his mind since he knew that immortality was the one that cured him of the burden of death. Immortality can still give him a life to enjoy. It even saved him when he tried to kill himself on the cliff. So he moved and continued with his life with a smile.

A small, faltering smile.

WILLIAM CONTINUED to travel east. Half a century has passed and mankind has expanded further and advanced in technology. They fought less with swords and shields and progressed onto guns with little to no effort.

William met a woman during those years. Isabel, she was called. She was someone that came far away from the sea. He remembered when he first met her when her long, chocolate brown hair slapped his face when the wind blew. She had laughed at him and he'd found it amusing that she found mirth in that. She reminded him of home and every little thing he never knew he loved. She smelled of the sea, the ground, and a long-forgotten memory hidden in the back of his mind.

*Ophelia?*

William married her as fast as he could after he had that thought. It was selfish, but he should be allowed to be selfish. He deserved it, doesn't he?

William remembered the day when Isabel took his hand, and he had a goofy smile on his face and his heart tried to leap out of his chest from joy.

Every time she laughed it felt like the first snow falling. He would feel his heart press against the lining of his ribs until his bones rattled with every pulse when he looked at her. He remembered the day she had dragged him outside and they danced underneath the rain, under the moonlight with nothing else but the stars and the earth between them.

It was five years later when Isabel asked the dreaded question he hoped to avoid.

"What are you?" Isabel asked suddenly, pulling weeds from the soil of their garden that they were tending. She must have put the pieces together because he hasn't aged a day. But she does not look at him like he is a monster but looked at him with simple curiosity like he is a puzzle with a missing piece.

He looked at her, with a tear-stricken face and a broken voice, and said, "Immortal."

He could see her heartbreak, but she just nodded and accepted it. He didn't know why, but he was glad that she did. She asked a few questions here and there and he tried to answer all of them.

They both sat under the sun, talking, pulling weeds, planting flowers, and smudging dirt on their faces.

William was content.

Then came the sickness. It was too sudden. Too fast. And he couldn't stop it.

Isabel was dying.

He looked sadly at his wife. Isabel still looked beautiful despite her pale face and greying lips. She was too much like Ophelia, except she resembled the moon. A comforting beauty that stood amongst the starlit heavens and shined with a bold glow. The moon that would watch over the land until the sun rose to give warmth.

But like the sun the moon sets, too.

William's hands were shaking. He tried to make his voice sound persuasive, hoping that she could be convinced to do what he wanted.

"William. . ." Isabel said, her voice scratchy and barely above a whisper.

"Isabel" — he caressed her cheek and gazed deeply into her eyes — "be immortal with me. We can live forever. Together."

"No."

"You don't understand —"

"No. You don't understand, William. You're being selfish."

William froze at her words.

"It's okay, William. Don't kill yourself thinking over it," she said, sighing.

He was about to stand up and leave, but her voice called him over. "William. Live for me, okay?"

"Okay," he said. "As long as we're together."

It wasn't okay when a few days after she had let out her last breath.

Why did it have to be you? he thought, blood pounding in his ears as he cried his heart out to the gods, to the stars, and the universe, and whoever was out there that was willing to listen and pleaded for them to give her back.

First, it was Ophelia, and then it was Isabel. Who's the next to die?

William hoped it would be him.

William tried not to look back to this day hoping he doesn't remember, and he continued forward.

William no longer cared. He lived in a different tempo of time from the rest of mankind. He wished that they should all just go wage wars and die already, and then perhaps he could continue the rest of his immortality in peace without watching any mortals die from and for stupid little things.

William tried not remembering.

Some might think: Forgetting people is easy. You have hundreds of years to do so. But that isn't quite true for him when he has so many regrets on his shoulders and so many infinite years he has yet to live.

Immortality was torture, William finally realized. Perhaps if he hadn't pursued the path of immortality, then he would have been long gone and happy. He spent every waking moment in his life worrying about the future that he could no longer enjoy the present.

Every time he fell in love — no matter how many times he fell in love — they would always leave him behind. He has attended so many funerals of people that came and went that it surpassed the years he has lived.

How many years has he lived? He wasn't sure anymore, but it has been a long time. A long, long time.

He has an empty, unfillable hole in his heart the size of a galaxy. Everything and everyone else that he has ever loved had long wasted away, slipping into the cold embrace of death.

There was a voice in his mind. "You should not have played God," it said. "You should have just enjoyed life to the fullest." He was greedy and selfish, he knew that. He wanted a lifetime of joy, love, and happiness, but only got regret, despair, and loneliness.

William could feel the roads extending all around him as he continued forward, time wrapped around his hands like a second skin. Death repelled against him.

Forward. And forward. And forward to whatever came at him.

Because it's not like he could stop.

William saw everything—not because he wanted to, but because he was forced to.

William saw the machinery he couldn't have thought would exist. Saw the war that unleashed a deafening bang as the sky was broken open into the heavens above accompanied by the huge fumes molded like a poisonous mushroom. Saw the footprints on a rocky, gray surface of rocks with a flag of red and white stripes dotted with stars. Saw the towers constructed from metal and glass that heaved and rose to tremendous heights.

Last of all, he saw all the messy and blurry faces and bodies walking beside him. People that he had met, that he saw die, that he had left, that walked to and away from him. He couldn't even remember what they looked like.

His heart ached uncontrollably.

William wanted to die. Because what is there to live when you have nothing to live for? ■



# Förvirrad

THIRD PLACE IN STUDENT WRITING

by Courtney Gomez

My sanity is bound  
in inglorious, hopeless pain,  
like a shoe too small for my foot.

My mind agonizes over  
emancipation from my cell.

I refuse to be enslaved by your tactics,  
destined to die  
in this rancid cage,  
wishing that you cared.

How sweet is the sound  
of a roaring, raving lion?

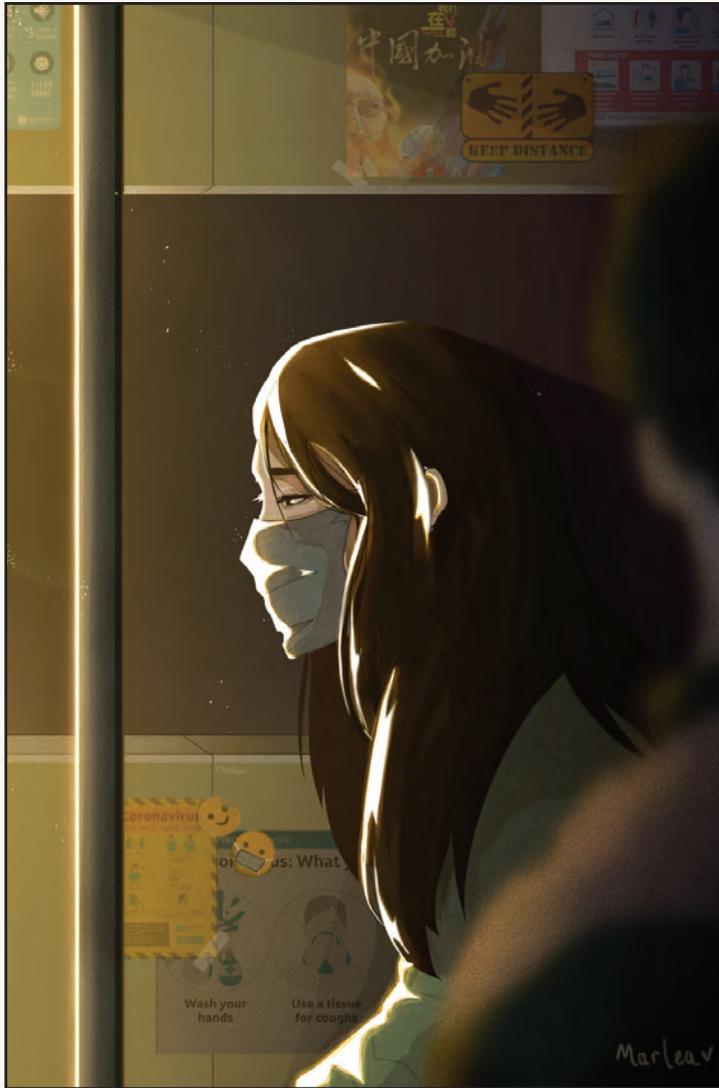
I will no longer be  
confounded by you.



**Winter Transformation**

*Medium: Digital Photography*

Angie de Braga



SECOND PLACE IN  
STUDENT ART

**Light at the  
End of the Tunnel**

*Medium: Digital Painting*

Marlea Martens

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