

MORPHEUS LITERARY MAGAZINE

SPRING 2024



Morpheus Literary Magazine

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Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

I am pleased to share the Spring 2024 issue of the *Morpheus Literary Magazine*! As we present another edition of our literary magazine, we extend our sincere gratitude for your continued readership. Your support does not go unnoticed.

This year, we have continued our writing competitions and were fortunate enough to host the first-ever campus-wide art gallery and competition with the help of the Berg Events Council. Through this partnership, we have had the opportunity to feature the gallery within our pages.

In this issue, we've curated a collection of literary gems that express the various styles of writers across campus. Within these pages, you'll encounter voices both familiar and new, each offering a fresh perspective. As you explore the issue, we would like to provide a gentle notice regarding the content of our fiction section. Several stories delve into themes of horror and suspense, which may contain content that could be unsettling for some readers. We encourage you to approach these stories with mindfulness and self-awareness, prioritizing your well-being while engaging with our publication.

To our contributors, thank you for entrusting us with your words and allowing us to share them. Your stories enrich our pages and inspire us. And to our readers, thank you for embarking on this literary journey with us.

We thank you for your support throughout this school year as we've expanded the publication and the group's presence throughout campus, and we hope you enjoy the Spring 2024 Edition of the *Morpheus Literary Magazine*.

Sincerely,

Emma Wright
Editor-in-Chief

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ART GALLERY COMPETITION

Judges: Professor Harry Melroy, Coordinator of Student Accessibility Services Alyssa Kontak,
and Graduate Student Megan Vesley.

Artists were given a month to create a painting of their choice. No prompt was provided.

Mixed media was permitted.

The Stories We Keep

People's Choice: L Helms

THE VOICE OF THE SEA IS SEDUCTIVE,
NEVER CEASING, WHISPERING, CLAMORING,
MURMURING, INVITING THE SOUL TO WANDER
IN ABYSSES OF SOLITUDE - KATE CHOPIN.

BEWARE, FOR I AM FEARLESS AND THEREFORE
POWERFUL - MARY SHELLY

LAUGH AS MUCH AS YOU CHOOSE, BUT YOU WILL
NOT LAUGH ME OUT OF MY OPINION. - JANE AUSTEN

THE HEART IS AN ARROW THAT DEMANDS AIM TO
LAND THAT WILL BRING BASHFULNESS
THERE IS NO GREATER GONY THAN BEARING
AN UNTOUCHED STORY INSIDE YOU - MARY ANGELOU

BOOKS DON'T OFFER REAL ESCAPE, BUT THEY
CAN STOP A MILD SCRATCHING ITSELF
RAW - DAYD MITCHELL

NOWADAYS PEOPLE KNOW THE PRICE OF OSCAR
EVERYTHING AND THE VALUE OF NOTHING - WILDE

OPEN YOUR EYES AND SEE WHAT YOU CAN WITH
THEM BEFORE THEY ARE GONE FOREVER - ANTHONY DOE

BEFORE ALL, TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY - ANNE
MITCHELL

ALL HUMAN WISDOM IS SUMMED
UP IN THESE TWO WORDS - WALT ANDREAS

- ALEXANDRE DUMAS

I WISH AS WELL AS EVERYBODY ELSE, TO BE
PERFECTLY HAPPY; BUT LIKE EVERYBODY
ELSE, IT MUST BE IN MY OWN WAY - JANE AUSTEN

ANYTHING WORTH DYING FOR IS CERTAINLY
WORTH LIVING FOR - JOSEPH HELLER

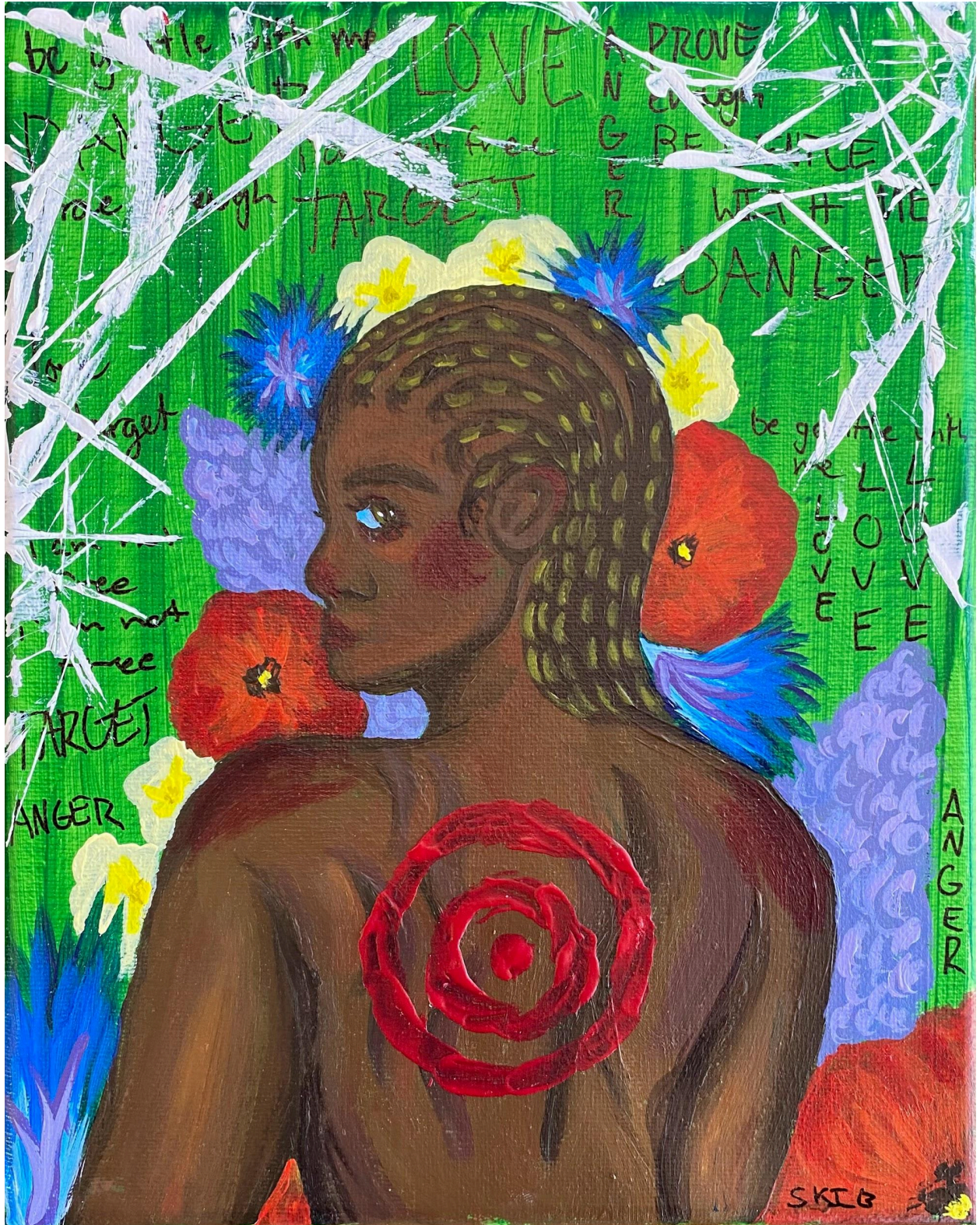
Your Mom

Third Place Winner: Kelly Peterson



Target

Second Place Winner: Alyssa Kordish



The Great Cats

First Place Winner: Madeline Moore



POETRY WRITING COMPETITION

Judges: Dr. Barry Devine, Dr. Emily Isaacson, and Parkhurst Marketing Coordinator Amanda
Overy.

Writers were given 30 minutes to write a short story based on the provided prompt.

“Pick one of your favorite songs. Take a line from the song and use it in your poem or draw
inspiration from it to write a poem.”

Over a Cliff

Third Place Winner: Austin James

Please, stop
I've worked so hard
Let me play my card
This isn't what I thought

Please, stop
I've done my best
Why is this a test?
Unless you just forgot

Please, stop
You made your case
Don't pick up the pace!
I can barely keep up!

Wait,
Wait!
I said to stop!
I can already hear
All the falling rocks!

Stop!
Stop, you'll fall...
Slow down...
Please...

Stop.

I guess

You're already gone
Where did it go wrong?
Was it my fault
That you kept going on?

I knew it.
You knew you would fall
From the very start

Guilt By Association

Second Place Winner: Isaiah Shiley

I do not run the factory farm,
The ones containing crying children,
But I am still a slaver.

I do not wield the butcher's knife,
The ones extinguishing infant souls,
But I am still a butcher.

I do not control the global markets,
The ones perpetuating this madness,
But I am still a murderer.

I do try to stop the genocides,
The ones causing this mental anguish,
But I am guilty by association.

Divine (You)

First Place Winner: Brooklynn Wharton

Divinity is nothing more than pleading
It is on your knees, begging to be believed
You exist only as long as the worship lasts
Your life starts and ends in myth
You listen, quiet, when they question your existence
Are you real?
Are you real?
Do you really exist if your reality is determined
by others?
Who makes you real, if not yourself?
Who are you really pleading with in the end?
If you are as divine as they tell you
that you are, does an omen really send
you away or is that something you have
learned to do?
When did you start existing only in altars
and whispered prayers?
Is divinity really pleading or is that how you built it?
If the worship stops, do you really go away?
Have you ever tried to find out?
Do you need to be believed? Does divinity ever really fade?

POETRY

seventeen

Alyssa Kordish

“should we keep these candles?” my mother asks.

“no one is turning seventeen anymore.” my father replies as he tosses them into the garbage.

today, my youngest sibling turns seventeen. the final stronghold of my childhood crumbles. if they are growing up, so am i. i haven't been seventeen for a while. no one will ever be seventeen again.

their innocence is gone and so is mine. the complacency with the world vanishes and so has mine. their smile, the one with all the pearly white teeth showing, is lost, and so is mine. that smile will never come back to either of us.

but maybe, just maybe, we will find a new smile when we are twenty-one, thirty, forty-five, eighty even. a new smile that makes us not regret but rather cherish the time when we were seventeen.

Abroad

Jocelyn Everett

Qing wen? She says softly and flatly
To the teenage boy
Just trying to do his job
He makes a face and calls for his manager

In this single moment we've learned
The complexities of language
The outcomes we were most afraid of
The embarrassment we hoped to avoid

We didn't even make it out of the airport
Before one of us made a grave mistake
She forgot to use the fourth tone
And instead she used the third

She's just asked this boy to kiss her

A week later we would travel to a beach
And true to character I went in the water
I stood next to a couple and notice
The lady's sandal floating next to me

I return it to her as gracefully as possibly
Xie xie she says to me
Dui bu qi
I say back and head back to my friends

And in this moment I was reminded of
The complexities of language

Outcomes I was most afraid of
And embarrassment I hoped to avoid

I just said sorry instead of your welcome

But we carried on our trip
Continued to make mistakes

You're welcome (bu ke qi)

Baby Cracking Her Egg

Aiden Sullivan

Fitting red flannel
Baby blue jeans
Pretty white shoes
She's Ms. American Boy

On the golden-green hills
She stands demurely
With her hands clasped
Upon the dew of spring

As her peach-pink skin
Radiates in the evening glow
She prays with dovelly closed eyes
A smile speaking to heaven

May she forever be humbled
Under a crown of blessed roses
And may forever be warm
By her little, bumblebee heart

ratatatshit

Ryleigh Gorman

There's a wet rat shitting in my shower
I watched it shiver and grunt
I thought, "This creature's too blunt."
I cried from prolonged eye contact
His beady eyes held onto my power

These frugal thoughts are still in my mind
Would first love not be so divine
To hold and lift without a doubt
To eclipse the earth and show no sign

Be afraid to reach ahead
For heavens and hell are left to dread
My eyes and my soul begin to clout
The sun is shining above your head

The rat is gone.

I grab another roll of toilet paper

Going to Be Alright

Ben Neiberlein

In the morning, the sun was shining bright.
He knew today was going to be alright.
Walking to the table to feast.
Eggs, sausage, and all the meat to eat.
Papa is next to him, ketchup on his eggs.
Putting on his attire to whom he copied to be.
A young lad loved his Papa.
A gentleman of loving words and kisses to give.
Years have passed and he still loves him dear.
Love and kisses never went away,
When giving them to Papa of cancer and frail.
The young boy with gray inside,
Had to say goodbye.
Never to take care of Papa,
Never to let him go.
A voice he heard from a mother in despair.
Saying to him Papa is dead.
He shed his tears that could fill a pool.
Wishing to be there with him, how he wished he could.
The young boy can hear him sometimes, sometimes in his dreams,
Sometimes on a walk, missing the smell of him.
The boy struggled with the tragic gray inside.
Never able to see the light.
The spirit of Papa was always on his side
Never to leave him when he cried.
The boy knew Papa was always going to be by his side.
For better or for worse, he knew today would be alright.

Understanding De0th

Aiden Sullivan

Laying in a field
In the dark winter night
Losing all my senses
Watching the starry sky

The world disappears
From my body and my sight
And the infinite expanse
Horrifies my mind

It's moments like these
That I realize
I'm not yet ready
To leave everything behind

Laying in a field
In the dark winter night
You've lost all your senses
Under the starry sky

The world disappeared
From your body and sight
The infinite expanse
Had already haunted your mind

It's the memory of you
That I realize
I'm never fully ready
To tell you goodbye

Performing

Opossum Kreuzscher

What is femininity?

Growing up, I was told that women in beautiful dresses are feminine. Women who wear makeup and style their long hair into beautiful curls or flowy locks are feminine.

Feminine, pretty girls like dresses and makeup and pink.

That is femininity.

When I was a little girl I read romance stories of boys who loved other boys and I asked myself,

“Why can’t I love boys like that?”

I had this connection that I couldn’t explain.

I thought, maybe I could be a boy like that, but that’s ridiculous. I am feminine, I am pretty, I am a girl who likes makeup and dresses and pink.

I am not a boy, I am a girl. I have the breasts to prove it. I have the long, flowy hair. I have a closet full of dresses and I even make sure to tell everyone at school that my favorite color is pink and I love Barbie and I want to be a fashion designer when I grow up because that’s what little girls are supposed to like.

That is femininity.

I performed it just right.

What is femininity?

Who chooses what that means? Is it me? Is it my mother or my father? Is it God? Is it the woman I see on TV, or the women I see in the street? Is it the absence of femininity that defines it?

What do people look for in the performance of femininity?

You spend your whole life being told that this is what makes you feminine, what makes you a beautiful woman. It didn’t make sense to me.

My parents told me they had no signs when I came out to them, but I don’t think they were looking very hard.

When I was 12 I brought a picture to my hairdresser and asked her to cut my hair like that. It was buzzed on the sides and cut short on top and she said no. Because I would look like a boy.

“I’ve never seen someone so miserable to get a haircut,” she joked.

She laughed. My mother laughed. I did not.

Is that femininity?

When I was 14 I tried using a new name at school. I was pulled aside by a teacher and told he’d have to tell my parents because it’s alarming behavior. In his defense, he thought the rule was stupid, he was just doing his job. Thank you Mr. Nickel, for being the only one who warned me.

I told my parents one night that I was a boy and they didn’t believe me.

There’s one thing my mom said that rings in my skull at night when I can’t sleep, “What are we going to tell your sisters?”

She said it like I killed someone, like I dragged their dead body through the house and splattered blood across the walls. In a way, I had. I killed their daughter and took her place. And every day I dragged her dead body through the house.

Is that femininity?

I am 19 years old and I use a name that I know no one will take seriously out in the real world.

Gender is a performance, and I am being booed off stage.

Fuck your stage. I don’t need you to like my performance. I don’t need your permission. I don’t need your approval. I don’t need anyone but myself and my mirror to tell me that I look amazing, that I feel amazing.

I am happy being a man, a something, a creature, a beast, a clown, a confusing mess. But I am not a woman. I am the master of my own identity.

That is femininity, and my performance is great.

Together We Are One

Aiden Sullivan

When we hold each other, do our blood vessels attach?
From our comforting warmth, our heartbeats can match

When our hearts beat from this sentimental contact
We touch all that we can to perpetuate this impact

Across many lands and seas, arteries can stretch
But this minuscule extent of touch cannot fully express
My entirety of love that I willingly direct
To you

The Buzz

Jocelyn Everett

There is something in the air today. It buzzes around my skin and gives me goosebumps. I walk to class, feeling the buzz. The buzz of last night was caused by a different source. A light pink liquid stood out next to its amber companions. LEDs shine down on the bottles and create new colors. The music is too loud but only too loud for me. I could tell by the laughs and smiles. Everyone else enjoys the noise. Noise is a constant unfaltering presence in my life. It enters my skull and bounces around like when you take a bite of food and you can't quite place the flavor, you move it around your mouth and chew on it a little extra until you pinpoint what you're looking for. But I know these sounds. Yet I can still feel my brain moving them around and listening a little extra. How do you tell your own brain to stop listening?

I stopped listening.

The crowd moved to another room. To engage in a vice I don't share. Funny how vices bring people together. We all try to quit the things that make us vulnerable. Vulnerable. I felt vulnerable when they laughed at me for not smoking. As a compromise, I sat in the room. I felt the haze. I felt how it swirled around the room like a menacing shadow looking for its next victim. I saw it gather around those I loved. I felt it around me like a cumbersome shawl- made out of wool too heavy. My shoulders scrunched together, and I curled into myself.

I stopped listening.

There is something in the air today. I walk to class feeling this something. Maybe what's in the air today is the leftovers from that night. The consequences of my flesh desires. Of my desire to be seen. To be felt. To lean on someone's consciousness like a heavy object they can't move. To stick to someone's interest like those seeds that stick to clothes. But there is something in the air today and I am walking to class.

FICTION

Cancury Trail

Cecilia Groth

A sudden yowl sounded from the depths of the cave, and Walter froze. The cave wasn't that large, and he couldn't see anything inside. Could it have just been his overtaxed mind? Another softer cry gave him his answer. With a distrustful glance back, Walter carded through his curled— if short— hair and turned his head to look into the cave. It loomed before him, unfamiliar chirps and drips sending chills down his spine. A vast expanse of unknown, and— Another howl spiraled through the chilly October air. Walter shifted his weight. Everything in him screamed to move on, walk away, and enjoy the rest of his recuperative hike. He'd been through enough stress these past thirty years to deserve a few days free from endless papers and emails. Walter didn't consider himself the hiking type; if he wasn't slumped over a bar counter on the weekends, his boss had given him a report due far too soon. Walter groaned, holding his head in his hands.

“I am *not* thinking about Christopher today,” he said. “That young, privileged prick is *not* going to ruin my PTO.”

With an unsatisfied huff, Walter marched into the cave. *Fucking Christopher, fucking screaming animals in a fucking deep, dark cave, fuck this.* “Thirty thankless years. Thirty! All spent turning into an overworked hunchback barely paid ten percent more than when I began. And then comes in this... this *greenhorn!* And oh, what a hard worker he is! Let's promote him and—”

Walter stopped in his tracks as a low growl permeated the darkness of the cave. A sharp scent scraped his nose, and Walter subconsciously scrunched his face. He'd smelled that scent before, years ago, when he'd tripped over his shoelaces in the parking lot.

Was that... blood?

Going against all of his instincts, Walter took a step forward as his eyes adjusted. A small, amorphous shape emerged from the murky darkness. It grew somehow, a circle slowly spreading toward Walter's dusty boots.

The sharp scent made his face twinge again as the form let out a rumbling growl. It slowly came into focus, and Walter let out an involuntary gasp as the pieces of the puzzle clicked.

It was a *cat*. It had mottled fur, and blood was seeping from one of its hind paws— the leg lifted and teeth bared. A thousand thoughts whirled through Walter's mind— not the least of which being that he had *stepped into a cave with a wild animal*— and as much as he knew this cat could have rabies, ringworm, or a host of other diseases, something pained him at the thought of leaving it. It was clearly scared and hurt, and he wasn't exactly hiking on a popular trail— he'd had to sidestep multiple small trees and thorn bushes grown from years of neglect. It was either Walter or no one for this cat. Walter or—

He waved his hands to dispel the thought. No. He would help— God, *Walter* would help— this injured cat.

But how? He didn't know what exactly was wrong with the cat— it could have been anything from a slight scrape to a broken bone— and he'd never had a pet before.

But his grandmother had. He recalled a moment years ago before her hair had fallen out in clumps when she still remembered and maintained her garden. One of the barn cats had a litter, and she brought Walter with her to check on them.

"You have to approach slowly," she'd told him. "Cats don't like sudden movement." So, moving as slowly as his limbs would allow, Walter approached the cat in the dark cave. Despite his best efforts, the cat still slunk back. Its spine shifted awkwardly to prevent the raised leg from hitting the ground. But eventually, it hit a wall. Dew glistened in the fading light, momentarily grabbing Walter's attention.

A quiet— perhaps hesitant, Walter thought— hiss broke the silence. “It’s okay, little guy,” he reassured the cat. “I won’t hurt ‘ya.”

With even more painfully slow movement, Walter circled around until he could touch the damp wall. The cat turned with him, glowing green eyes never leaving his. Now came the hard part.

Walter grated the inside of his cheek against his teeth. His knees cracked as he bent down, eventually kneeling on the ground. He could feel the earthy, moist stone press against his pants.

“Once you’re close enough, however,” his grandmother had said, “You grab ‘em quick as you can.”

And so, with a short breath to ready himself, he grasped the cat. He held it between his knees, keeping it in place so he could get a better look at the lame leg. After careful inspection, he could easily spot the large thorn sticking out of the paw.

“That’s no good,” Walter whispered. Another sharp breath and some quick whispered assurances, and the thorn was gone. Walter let go of the cat, standing up so quick he felt his head spin.

How on Earth did I not get bit? He questioned as he observed the cat. It had run a short distance away, leg still raised, and turned to stare at him. Surely it had just been the thorn bothering it?

Sure enough, after a few distrustful kicks, the cat let its leg hit the ground. Then, it bounded toward Walter. He stepped back hurriedly, foot almost losing traction. But the cat didn’t bite him. Instead, it nuzzled its head against Walter’s jeans— ones he hadn’t worn since college. There hadn’t been any reason to since. He let out a laugh at the thought of twenty-two-year-old Walter letting a cat cover his precious jeans in fur. “God knows I wouldn’t have stood for it,” he laughed. “Not my Sasson’s!”

Walter let the laugh trail off, glancing down at the cat. It was still rubbing against the denim, and Walter shook his head. “I can’t leave you here, can I?”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “My God, I’m bringing home a cat. Walter Calhoun is bringing home a *cat*.”

He brought a hand down, letting the cat give it a few tentative sniffs before picking it up. It wiggled a bit before ultimately settling down. Walter’s hand moved on its own, scratching the cat’s head. “You’re a soft guy despite being an outdoor kitty,” he mused. “I suppose you need a name, huh?”

A moment of silence.

“What about... Frances?”

A memory flooded his mind— a woman with gray, curly hair gingerly tracing her fingers along three small kittens, eyes full and content. He felt his fingers mimic hers as a soft vibration purred against his chest.

“Yeah. Frances.”

A Chance Encounter

Jocelyn Everett

I sat in the cold cement room the officer had led me into. It wasn't like the TV shows that I grew up watching. There was no two-way window, no moderately hot and charming detective that chatted me up as I was led here, and no sentimental music playing over the scene to help viewers understand I was innocent. Instead, there were cameras mounted in the corner of the room and a tape recorder in the middle of the table. I wondered if that two-way window room was somewhere else in the building. Maybe they'd put me in a room meant for victims, not murderers, and they thought I was innocent. No, that's wishful thinking. After all, what Will did to make me look guilty was almost foolproof.

"Okay, Dr. Lindsay, take me through what happened." The officer got right to the point. I began to tell him everything from the start.

#

My secretary, Sam, sends me a quick chat. I pull it up on my laptop. "*Your two p.m. appointment just showed up.*"

I check my watch and see it's just after three p.m. A typical secretary would've told the client to reschedule. The policy I published for my company states that we do not take walk-ins, and if you miss your appointment, we have to reschedule for another day. But this was Alice. Alice has been my client since the beginning of my practice, which opened four years ago. Sam knows I'd make an exception for her. I reply to Sam, "*Go ahead and send her in.*"

Alice rushes in and sets her things down quickly. "Hi, Dr. Lindsay," She says cheerfully. "I'm so sorry I missed our appointment. And I know you don't like to take walk-ins..."

I don't take them at all, I think to myself. I begin gathering her patient files to write down notes from this session.

“But I had another episode yesterday, and at first, I didn't want to leave to get here. But then I thought it might help a little, and, well, by the time I had decided to get going, you know how the traffic can get in Seattle, and so I thought maybe I could just walk, but then I got outside and decided...”

I cut Alice off. “That's alright, Alice. Let's just get started on the session. I have another appointment at four, so we've got a little under forty minutes for today.” Alice settles into her usual chair and takes a few deep breaths. We ended the session, and I started leading her out of the office.

###

“Wait, what did you guys discuss in this session? Was it anything that upset you or anything new?” The officer inquired. I took a beat to respond; his tone was accusatory in a way I didn't like. I took a peek at his nametag. It read, “Dobkins.”

“Officer Dobkins, you know as well as I that our session falls under patient confidentiality.”

Officer Dobkins leaned in towards me, “Dr. Lindsay, this is murder we're talking about. Don't you think that a serious issue like this could overrule that confidentiality?”

I shook my head. “Alice didn't say anything during her session that would allow me to report it to authorities.”

“I just think that's a very convenient rule for you,” he replied.

“Officer, this could be my license on the line and, therefore, my practice and livelihood. As much as I want to help Alice,” My voice cracked when I said her name. “there's just not much I can say about our session.”

Officer Dobkins leaned back in his chair, defeated. “Continue with the rest of your day, please.”

#

Sam sends another message. *“Your four p.m. is here early. Do you want me to ask him to wait in another office?”*

While Alice is packing up her things, I think of how to respond. Sam is only being generous and worried. My next client, Will, is a bit of an odd one. I haven't been seeing him for long, but I typically save space between clients coming in so that none of my clients would feel pressure by being seen. I message back, *“I will walk Alice out to the door and then walk Will to my office. Just have him sit in the normal waiting room.”*

“Alright, that's the end of our session. I've paused the recorder, so we are all done.” I say to Alice.

We begin walking out. “Thank you so much again, Doctor. I appreciate you meeting with me.”

“That's no problem, Alice. I'll walk you out to the door as well.” We both walk out, and I see Will and Sam having an intense conversation.

Will leans over the desk, with both forearms lying on the desk. “You don't understand. When you talk to me, you should be...” Sam looks bewildered. The poor guy hasn't dealt with the ugly side of mental health like this before.

I have to step in, “Head out the door,” I half-whisper to Alice and turn back to the desk. “Will. Stop that. Let’s go inside, talk, and leave Sam alone.”

Will turns towards me, but he isn't looking quite at me. He's almost looking behind my shoulder. His eyes widen and he yells, “SHIT.” Did he think I caught him acting out?

“Will? No, that's Danny. Danny, are you okay?” A worried voice comes from behind me. I mentally roll my eyes. *This is why I don't take walk-ins.*

I turn back to Alice. “Alice, this is Will, another client of mine. Please head out. I'll see you next time.” Alice's eyes are focused behind me on Will. I hear some motion behind me. Alice's mouth opens in surprise, and then Will hits me over the head.

#

“So what happened after that?” Office Dobkins interrupted.

“I woke up to you guys busting the door down,” I replied. I stared angrily at the officer. I am reliving the most traumatic experience of my life to him, and he doesn't care. “Everything else is all the stuff I've gathered since.”

“What stuff have you gathered?”

“When the officers helped me to my feet, I saw Sam's paperweight next to me. I figure that's what Will, or Danny, maybe, hit me with. Your officers aren't that good at whispering, either. I heard them say Sam is dead. That he sent some message about me on his computer before he died.” I grit my jaw. Sam was a good person. A bit dumb, but he wanted to do good. I started compartmentalizing. Alice was who I was worried about now.

“Those are interesting conclusions.” The officer said. “What do you know about this Will, or rather Danny?”

I shook my head. “Patient confidentiality... there’s not much to say.” I felt pressure in my chest as I thought about Alice. “He had just started up as a client. Sam said he was hostile every time he had to talk to him. He’d only had one prior session. His background check hadn’t even fully gone through yet.”

“Dr. Lindsay, I need you to work with me here. Making up a client in order to throw us off isn’t going to do you any good.

“Making up a client!” I laughed. “His files are in my system. I can show you all the paperwork.”

He shook his head, “We looked through it already. Your office files were thrown around. We took them as evidence but we didn’t find one for any Will.”

“My files? Well, they were thrown around. Clearly tampered with. I’m not lying about my clients.” I yelled at the officer.

“Miss, I tried to explain earlier. It would just be much better if you worked with us to figure all this out. Help us find Alice.”

“It’s Doctor, not Miss. You haven’t found her already? Who called the police? I thought it would’ve been her.”

“Listen, we looked at Sam’s messages. We know what you did. We just need you to tell us everything, including where Alice is. We know you’ve been seeing her for a long time. You must care about her wellbeing.”

“Of course I care!” I searched for any bit of knowledge I could drum up to prove my innocence. “Look at the street cameras! There’s a gas station right across from us. Their cameras get a bit of our parking lot in them. We had a break-in last month and figured out their cameras could help us. We didn’t find the culprit, but I know Will parked in its view.” I said excitedly. Something that would prove another person was there; it was just perfect.

Knock, knock, knock. Another officer opened the door, “Sir, we need you out here for a minute. It’s urgent.”

“Have you found Alice?” I pleaded with the officer to give me some good news. “Please...”

Officer Dobkins stood from his chair and stood between me and the door, “I’ll look into getting that camera footage. In the meantime, if there’s anything you want to tell me about, just ring the doorbell.” Officer Dobkins exited the room and closed the door behind him.

It was about thirty minutes before I heard any movement outside. Not much, just some ambient bangs and footsteps. Something I’m sure happens in police buildings often. The fluorescent lights above me glared down on my head. Until suddenly, they flickered. They flickered again. Then, the lights went out.

“No way they forgot about me,” I said out loud. “HEY. HEY. HELLO, I’M STILL IN HERE.” I shouted towards the door. I heard nothing in return. The clock only said six o’clock. Do officers really clock out at six? No way. I heard the doorknob rattling. Weird, why hadn’t the lights come on?

The door opened, and the last face I expected to see came around the corner. “Come on, we don’t have much time before the alarms come back on. Follow me out now before he gets here.”

A Noise I Named Sam

Beatrice Fry

When I was nine years old, my family moved cross country to a small town in Montana. It wasn't for any reason in particular besides that my parents wanted a change of scenery. They tried to play it off as exciting, like we were going on a new adventure, but I was a kid with high anxiety that seemed to be triggered by anything under the sun. I wasn't made to handle a big change like that. I was hoping that my tendency to stress easily would deter them from going through with the move, but knowing my parents, I knew that hope was a more optimistic term for wishful thinking.

When we eventually arrived at our new home, it wasn't anything special. It wasn't much bigger than our old one and was even painted the same boring shade of off-white. The biggest difference that I noticed was that this house was older. The white paint on the siding was beginning to yellow in certain spots, and moss was starting to grow in some of the cracks. This made Dad very excited because it gave him an excuse to power-wash the new house, something Mom never let him do because she hated the noise it made. The inside wasn't much better. The walls were covered in tacky wallpaper from what had to be no more recent than the seventies, and the beige shag carpeting retained a musty smell that made me want to cough as soon as I entered the room.

My anxiety started to kick in the way it typically did when I thought about old houses. It was why I was always unnerved when I stayed at my grandmother's, even if it was just for a few hours. Of course, I was worried about how structurally sound the house was- if the wooden cabinets in the kitchen that looked as if they had begun to shed their pale blue exterior like a snake sometime in the last decade were covered using lead-based paint or if the wiring was so shotty that the place would be up in flames within the week. Was there black mold in the

basement? Then there was the fear that the place was haunted, seeing as my parents would have volunteered to remove the bodies themselves if it meant cutting a few dollars off the price tag.

Seeing that I was beginning to freak out, Mom decided to take me up the old wooden stairs that seemed to scream in pain with every one that we ascended, and down the dark hallway that looked like a screenshot straight out of a horror movie, until we finally got to what she had officially deemed to be my new bedroom. The walls were a disgusting shade of greenish-yellow that looked like the vomit I was currently tasting after the putrid smell of something hit my nose. It was so strong that it made my eyes water, yet so unique that I had no idea what it was or where it was coming from. While Mom ran downstairs to grab a can of Lysol and her Magical Frosted Forest Yankee Candle to help with the unpleasant aroma, I went over to my window and opened it up as wide as it would go. It made a high-pitched squeaking sound the entire way and even got stuck halfway through its journey, requiring some slightly more aggressive assistance from me.

Once the window was open, I rested my elbows against the wooden frame and leaned my head out. The window was on the back wall of the house, overlooking the large wooded area. While my mind immediately went to the horror movie trope about serial killers coming out of the woods at night, I also felt the soft breeze blowing in my face, carrying the perfume of some strong-scented flower I was unable to identify. I suddenly felt calm. Standing there in my window on that mildly warm spring afternoon, the breeze gently kissing my cheeks and the leaves in the trees, causing them to make their iconic rustling sound, I thought about all the good things there were about this new house. For one, the backyard was bigger. Not only would I have more room to run around in the fresh air and sunshine, but maybe my parents would finally let me get a dog, too. While my room smelled bad now, it was definitely a size upgrade. The color was sinful, but that's why they made paint.

In contrast, I liked the smell of paint, even though I knew that I wasn't supposed to due to the paint fumes. Finally, Mom and Dad seemed to really like it here, and that meant something to me. I knew that most of my current anxiety was due to first-day jitters, and that someday I would view this place as my safe haven, the place that could relieve my fears.

We got everything moved into the house by dinner, and by bedtime, we had set up the most essential things, such as the beds and other furniture. As I was trying to fall asleep, I lay there under the sheet, shivering slightly. It was clear that the house was draftier, and that was making things colder. I wanted to go downstairs and look through the boxes, trying to find my heavier fleece turquoise comforter, but between the screeching steps and the noise I would make trying to find it, I assumed that I would wake my parents. Then I would feel bad, seeing as they had just gone through a stressful day of moving, and I didn't want to be the one to deprive them of their much-needed rest. As I wrapped the sheet around me tighter and curled my body more into a ball, I suddenly heard a noise that made my stomach drop. It sounded almost like a moan, almost. Moaning wasn't the best way to describe it, but it was the closest human-made sound I could relate it to. I then thought that maybe it was an animal in pain or a really strange mating call. I wasn't exactly an expert on Montana wildlife.

Nonetheless, even though my brain had already created a perfectly believable answer to the situation, my anxiety tried to poke holes in my logic by wondering what exactly lived in the woods behind my house. Sure, it could be a moose. I knew that there were moose in Montana, and I had no idea what one sounded like, but what if it was something a little more unnatural? Now I was shaking, both from the cold and fear, which wasn't a pleasant feeling. I wanted to go over to my window and look out to prove to myself that there was nothing there, but I was too scared that there would be.

That's when my brain pulled out an old memory that I had forgotten till just now. A few years ago, when I was seven, my friend Katie had her birthday party at her Uncle Sam's

house. Uncle Sam had a small area of land with trees catty-corner to his house, so after dark, Katie wanted to go on a flashlight hike in the woods. Her birthday was five days before Halloween, and she was the kid who loved to watch horror movies that the MPAA never intended for her to see at that age. She was only about a year older than me, but her ability to handle that stuff was beyond most adults. I wasn't the biggest fan of the night hike idea, but I didn't want the other kids to think that I was a coward or miss out on a potentially cool experience. I put on my gray puffy coat that made that high-pitched brushing sound every time I moved my arms, took one of the flashlights from the kitchen drawer that contained every type you could imagine, including ones that no longer worked, and stepped out into the cold October air with other sugar-hyper kids around me. The woods were cool, and I was feeling glad that I came along until Uncle Sam began making scary noises in the shadows of the trees to put us on edge. Katie revealed to us afterward that she had asked Uncle Sam to do that in order to make the hike a little more interesting, but I felt like I was going to be the youngest person ever to die of a heart attack while in the situation.

As the memory slipped back away into a long-forgotten dusty corner of my mind, I felt some of my fear slip away with it. I'm not sure why my brain used this as a coping mechanism, but I decided to name the noise in the woods Sam. For some reason, the fact that it now had a name made it less scary to me. Almost like it was a friend waiting to be made. I heard the noise two other nights before the end of the month, and both times, I told Sam to go to bed by whispering gently to the window. Soon, it became a little bit of a joke. Over the next six or so years that I lived in that house, every time I would hear it, I would acknowledge it. I would say hello to it, wish it a good morning or good night, and tell it to go to bed or to be quiet. The noise didn't scare me anymore; in fact, most of the time, I chuckled when I called out my witty response. Even my parents had caught on and started calling it that in a joking manner. Despite the good humor associated with it, I was always curious about what in those woods was

making that noise, even if it meant ruining the element of surprise. Whenever the opportunity presented itself for me to learn anything about the noise, I always came up with dead ends. It's not like it consumed my life or anything. It was nothing but a question that I kept in the back of my mind just in case it would get answered someday.

I finally got that answer when I was fifteen. I was in my maroon-colored room, sitting in bed with a family-sized bag of white cheddar popcorn and watching reruns of Spongebob to get a nostalgia high, when I heard a familiar noise coming from the woods. I rolled my eyes and said no louder than my normal talking voice.

"Sam, could you keep it down? I'm watching something." As soon as the words left my lips, the noise stopped. The irony of the situation made me chuckle under my breath as I said back a little louder, "Thank you!" Viewing it as nothing more than ironic timing, I went back to my snack and my show. I ended up turning everything off and setting down for bed around ten past midnight. I fell asleep within a few minutes and got a few hours of decent sleep.

Around two thirty in the morning, I woke up to the noise. Annoyed that my body decided to wake up at this time to something I had been accustomed to at this point, I went to whisper groggily to my empty bedroom for Sam to shut up. I stopped and listened. The noise sounded a little louder than usual but also closer as if someone was purposefully trying to keep their voice down when in close proximity to someone else. Very close. My eyes involuntarily shot open and went immediately to my window. Suddenly, my body turned cold, and was paralyzed with fear. Backlit by the moon, a large dark figure stood there, staring at me. My bedroom was on the second floor, and yet this thing still seemed like it had to hunch over in order to get to the window, meaning that it had to be around eight feet tall. Its skin was completely black. It had long, bony fingers that rested on the outside of the window's wooden frame and large black voids for eyes. Despite this, I just knew that somehow it could see me. One of the scariest things about whatever this was was that it had no mouth, yet I could hear it

making that God-awful sound I had played off as a joke for years. Hearing the sound clearer than ever before and having an image to put it with instantly made my stomach drop. It wasn't moaning, it was screaming. It was the sound of a creature screaming with no mouth.

Both of us just stared at each other for what felt like minutes but was actually probably only about twenty seconds or less because that's all I felt I could do. Then, the figure raised one of its fingers from the window frame and tapped it against the glass a few times as if it was telling me that it knew I was awake, that I knew it was there, and that it wanted me to let it in. That was what finally broke me out of my trance. I couldn't scream – my body physically wouldn't let me – but my flight response finally kicked in and allowed me to scramble out of bed, fling my door open, and run into the hallway. I know that my first instinct should have been to go to my parents' room, to wake them up and tell them what happened, but I instead shut myself in the upstairs bathroom where there were no windows. I turned on the lights and sat in the bathtub, finally feeling safe enough to process what just happened. I tried to calm my breathing, but it only seemed to make me hyperventilate even harder. I was shaking, crying, and definitely having a panic attack. I know I was because it feels like you are dying.

I didn't think that I would be able to sleep anymore that night, but I emotionally exhausted myself while running on adrenaline and conked out in the bathtub with the lights on. When I finally came to and mysteriously found myself in the bathtub, I was forced to confront the happenings of the night before. My anxiety flared up once again. Since there were no windows in the bathroom, I had to wait for my eyes to finish their de-blurring phase so that I could read the analog clock above the sink. It was about four past eight in the morning, meaning that my parents wouldn't be up yet, but the sun would be. I went back to my room, making sure to peek around the corner slowly first. Whatever I had seen last night was gone now, but I still felt uneasy. I opened my window and looked around, trying to find any sort of proof that what happened was real– scratches in the wood, large footprints in the grass below,

smudges on the glass. I even looked over at the trees to see if there was any sort of evidence that a large creature had gone in there – broken branches, higher than the average amount of leaves on the ground. Maybe I was even trying to find the figure itself as if it were hiding in the shadows at the edge of the tree line. I never found any of the proof I was looking for.

I lived in that house for about three or so more years till I eventually moved out for college. I continued to hear the noise during that time, but I never joked about it again. Instead, it made my stomach twist, and my chest tighten every time. If I heard it while outside, I would immediately go back in the house. If I were asleep, I would instantly wake up and stare at my now curtain-covered window, wondering if I would see the shadowy silhouette of that thing behind the dark red fabric. I never did. I am in my thirties now and don't even live in Montana anymore. Yet, to this day, I still have no idea what I saw that night over fifteen years ago or if it was even real. I've had friends and family tell me that it was a dream or a bout of anxiety-driven paranoia. I've had friends and coworkers who believe my story and have even given their own theories as to what it might have been. I'm personally not sure what I believe. All I know is that the image will forever be burnt into my brain, and I will never sleep without curtains again. I just hope that it wasn't real because the idea of that thing lurking in the woods of Montana, screaming into the night and looking for someone less fortunate than me, is utterly terrifying.

First Love Ophelia

Arcane Bigler

When she first came in, she displaced me with a swift and hefty weight. She stayed until I once again stilled, and I began to lap at her dress and wrists that splay wide in the thin bed. Her voice slowly rose, her lips parted, as she began to sing. A lullaby or possibly a sorrowed song. As I washed around her body, soaking into the garments and corset, I listened and knew that sirens would be jealous of a voice such as hers. Down from the tree, she had brought the wildflowers that grow around my banks. These flowers she had picked, I swirled around her, creating a halo around her blushed face.

With greed, I drank in her voice and body. Each layer of her dress, all of the blue and gold threads, was smothered with the coolness of my reach. I wiped the tears from her face, filled her palms with weight, and frothed her hair from her shoulders. Her voice carried an even rhythm as I thirsted for her. I pulled her down into the shallow depths of the river. I placed a flower behind her ear, a purple lilac that smelled as sweet as her voice sounded. I caressed her temples as her forehead began to dip backward.

I did not notice how far my insatiability ran until her voice was seized by bubbles. Her hands did not push herself up from the soil below, and her feet did not kick. I rippled over her lips, pursed in a blank expression. Her eyes closed as I began to enter her mouth, following her throat down into her lungs. I moved slowly, her last breath being mixed with the cool feeling of relief. I brought her further down, a mere few inches, until she lay on the floor of my bed. Beneath her dress is a stirring, a failed movement to swim against the saturation. More roughly, now, am I brought into her lungs as I fill them completely in search of her final song. A current breezes her face. A cradle of encouragement for one final note.

Fresh:Denial::

After a few hours, her body is again completely still. Her hands are still outstretched and open, as she was before she sank beneath me. Her body is that of a statue. Pale and stiff. I flow past her cheek, searching for the pink that was once there. Her lips take on a purple hue.

The sun begins to peak again. Throughout the night, I had begun to push at her sides and press down onto her chest. Her dress matches my current as I move around her, leather heels digging into the stones and soil from her fight. Her heart is still beating, and I insist on it as I try to raise her back to the surface. If I could get her head back above the water, then she would go back to singing. She moves her lips into a smile, and her hands tenderly sweep through me to comfort me. A mean trick, surely, that she has stayed beneath the water.

The life I fail to keep away from her begins to feed from the supple skin. Fish and other creatures gather 'round; perhaps they had heard her voice, but they do not stay to listen. Her body bobs in the water and attempts to turn over in the thin bed. She wishes to stand, push herself up out of the water. I would allow myself to let her go if she would come back again to sing.

It is now that I realize my mistake. While her voice had been made similar to that of a siren's, her body did not uphold that truth. I brush her hair away from her face and swirl over her eyelids, looking for life.

A week of trying to bring her song back has resulted in gouges in her cheeks and wrists, and parts of me slipped into her flesh and left ugly marks. The only color left on her body is not man-made but rather the course of nature. The course of my stream. The shallowness of my actions brought her down to the shallows of the riverbed.

Bloat:Anger::

Her being has begun to move again, rising from her grave. I notice the way her body begins to distort, and my currents move around her body in an unnatural curve. The corset, rotting out from the two weeks submerged, allows her torso to swell. The boning cuts into her,

but I cannot soothe these new aches. A waxy overlay has covered her body and prevents me from washing over her again. It takes less time for this process to churn, and her body soon reaches the surface again. I mourn the loss of her face for the first hour. The skin now exposed attracts life that I cannot stop. Flies and birds land for their own taste. They pick at her, scavenge her, and I am left useless. The waxen layer boils my flow, and I shove at her back.

Another day allows the flies to leave their spawn, and soon, they crawl over the surface of her body. She disrupts the course of the water, and my actions are barren of reason as I search for something to accuse. The life around me that I supplied picks at the one thing I tried to keep sacred. Even the flower herself denies my support to console her. The adipocere (add-eh-poe-sear), as I have come to know it, does not dissipate even as her flesh does.

Her skin is left with open wounds, some blistering and white, while others are pulsing and gruesome. The maggots feed freely, and I do nothing. I allow them to take parts of her away. I watch as crows now pick at them. A sense of revenge seeps into my veins. They are to blame for her destruction, her downfall.

Active Decay: Bargaining::

What is left of her insides has begun to spill out, a milky white liquid that I allow to become part of me. The fish that come along to taste it are pushed downstream, accompanied by fallen fruit and unlucky insects. Offerings. Her jawbone now peaks through. I was supposed to supply life to this area, and yet I took one and crushed it. I greedily drank her whole and left her bare.

For one more song, for the color to return to her lips, I would revitalize a forest and bleed myself dry. For one more week, where her skin is soft, and her hair is lush, I would allow myself to be drained out and emptied.

Advanced Decay: Depression::

Her body, once in full bloom, is weathered to the bone and bare tendons. Those who fed on her in prior weeks move past as if she is nothing. I gather her auburn hair on a stone that matched her eyes, pressing each strand up onto the shore to preserve it. The skin that is left, most hidden beneath her skirts, becomes infested with beetles. They shriek and squirm as I brush them away.

The roots around me beg for a drop, but I don't bother to reach them. I begin to run myself thinner. I could steel myself and become destruction, but it is less work to flow out and become dry. Barren, just as I have left her bones. Despite a flood of emotions, I have no water to give.

Skeletonization: Acceptance.

All that is left now, besides the bones, is a whisper of her song. The trees sing it as the wind blows through them, and the connected creeks harmonize. I let the roots reach deep into me until they are full, and understand the fish are who I feed.

Her life was not wasted but cherished. I watched over every stage of her decay and kept it. I continue moving until every part of me has known every part of her. A life has flowed into mine and will flow into more. Recycled into the tree that she fell from and the flowers she picked.

- After John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*

Returning Home

Jeb Crow

I vividly recall the bright oak floorboards that I spent my early youth skating on with socks, and Mom would scold me about how I could fall and hit my head. The soft green floral wallpaper would always brighten the room, especially during the hour of the day when everything was golden. The sun shimmering through the window above the sink, glistening through the stained glass window ornaments and reflecting against the walls and furniture. The curio cabinet full of Mom's fancy glassware—those which were purely for decor and never used, despite Mom saying it was for a special occasion that had not yet come—would reflect in the sunlight, causing speckles to dance across the room.

The solid wood dining table—the place where we would always have our family dinners, our late nights doing math homework, and our hours-long Monopoly sessions—was always kept in fine condition with a tablecloth, place settings, and a centerpiece matching the holiday or occasion. Mom would always make sure the matching chairs had soft, clean seat cushions to accommodate soreness from our lengthy, continued use of the room. The dish towels, the ceramic decor, the used dishware, the pantry shelves—they were always perfectly matching and harmonious with each other.

Finally, the chandelier. It was simple—bronze metal arches hanging a short distance from the popcorn ceiling, each arch leading to an artificial candle with an incandescent light bulb, and crystal-esque glass beads leading from the top base to each candle. It was a gorgeous chandelier that Dad had installed when I was too little to remember fully, but he would continuously boast about how it was cheap to our family friends. I miss these memories with Mom and Dad so, so much.

On the floor between the curio cabinet and the solid wood table, underneath the beautiful chandelier and always in a large spot of sun, laid the cat's fuzzy bed. It was a moderate-sized bed for a moderate-sized cat. The inside was plush faux fur that lined the short walls, and the outside was a soft green with a white argyle pattern; it truly matched everything else in the room, as one might expect. That was Mom's doing—I truly know the cat loved Mom the most because she used that bed religiously. Perhaps the sunshine also helped. Dad, however, loved the cat more than Mom did. He would always make sure the curtains stayed open at the ideal times for the cat to lay in her bed in the sunspot.

The cat was beautiful and, like everything else, matched the room. She was a longhair with pristine brown striped tabby fur, a white underbelly and paws, and delicate green eyes. She would always lounge in her bed or, occasionally, on the windowsill. She was friendly and vocal, always chirping as a greeting. Whenever I was upset or crying, she would always come find me and rub her little fuzzy noggin against my hand. Juniper was her name. I miss her most of all, even if I was not her favorite.

It's been a long time since I've been home. I wonder what happened to her.

#

“Quinn.”

Suddenly, I was jolted from my dream—could it have been a hallucination? I've been getting so little sleep lately that it was entirely possible.

“*Dude*, Quinn,” the voice repeated.

Rubbing the crusty exhaustion from my eyes, I looked at him—Beck, my new friend. Beck was a younger man—maybe in his mid-20s; he was tall and moderately muscular with dark hair and scruffy stubble. He was towering over me, standing whilst I was lying on the cold

floorboards of the treehouse. The treehouse provided a nice, secluded area safe from the creatures.

“Quinn, we’ve got trouble.” Beck’s voice was more urgent now.

As my grogginess lurched out of me, I realized the groaning coming from below the treehouse. Beck rushed to the window, and I hoisted myself to my feet to join him. From the window, we could see three rotting creatures; their skin peeled from their humanoid figures, exposing their rotting flesh and withered bones. There were likely a few more that we couldn’t see.

“*Shit!*” I hissed. “What do we do?”

Beck reached out of the window and broke off a branch; he then pulled his knife from its pouch at his belt. He took rope from his pack and tied the knife securely to the end of the branch—it looked sturdy enough.

“Follow me!” He growled, pushing open the treehouse door and falling through to the ground.

Whipping out my own knife from its sheath, I followed Beck out the door, using the rope to break the fall a bit more.

I hit the ground hard, impacting my knees, and I stumbled. I had no time to recover before a creature was upon me—

SHHCK!

Beck’s spear pierced through the creature nearest to me. I quickly regained my footing and began stabbing the thing in its head.

SHHCK! SHHCK! SHHCK!

Dead.

More creatures quickly approached. *So* many more. I watched Beck spear a few more as I tried my best to stab heads, but our efforts were not entirely effective.

“We’ve gotta bail!”

Beck bolted away from the creature he just stabbed, and I followed him as quickly as I could. We pushed through the brush lining the house whose backyard the treehouse was in, shoving our way through the rotting wooden gate. We made it out onto the street, the cracked pavement proving difficult to find footing. I tripped, crashing down on the sharp cement with a loud crunch.

Pain speared up my arm. I think I may have broken my wrist. *Shit.*

Beck pulled me by my opposite arm to my feet, and we ran. We ran for so long that our legs burned and ached, and my legs were numb. It distracted me from the pain in my wrist. It felt like forever before I came to my senses and suddenly recognized the neighborhood we were in.

“*Beck,*” I wheezed, pulling us both to a stop. We were no longer being followed.

Taking a moment to breathe, hands on my knees and bent over, I huffed out, “I used to live in this neighborhood.”

Beck looked around wearily, analyzing the empty street and abandoned houses in the culdesac. “You lived here? Got any recommendations on where to set up camp?”

“Yeah, about a ten-minute walk that way,” I gestured ahead, down the street. “Help me splint my wrist first.”

#

It was more dull than I remembered. In fact, it was nearly the opposite of what I remembered. The beautiful oak floor was filthy—it was an odd hue of grey, rotting and muddy, with a grey dust coating its entirety. The soft green wallpaper was faded and peeled from the walls, revealing stains, remnants of glue, and black mold. The curio cabinet was completely

empty, save for the few formerly gorgeous pieces smashed on the rotting floor. The beautiful wooden table was rotting—like everything else—with mildew growing upward on the legs, fuzzy and black, and obvious water damage. The accompanying chairs were caving in the centers, bending oddly and likely suffering the same wet fate as the table.

All of the statement pieces in the room were either rotting or gone, including the sweet little cat bed. No sunshine peeked through the windows, especially with the tattered curtains drawn. The beautiful, bragging-worthy chandelier hung by a wire from the ceiling, some of its incandescent lightbulbs broken and exposed, and the crystal-esque beads hanging loosely.

Mom had passed at least ten years ago, leaving the house to Dad. He must have struggled with the upkeep, which explained the leak in the roof that probably only got worse since the apocalypse began. There was a new addition to the wall, however—a gold-rimmed mirror. The mirror was broken, but I could see my reflection.

I was no longer the little kid who skated the floors in socks, who played Monopoly into the wee hours of the morning, who cried to the cat that would comfort me. I was grown—old, even—with grey flecks in my unkempt hair and deep bags under my eyes. Dull hazel eyes stared at me from the reflection. There was no doubt that it was me staring back from the reflection, but I didn't want to believe it.

“Some shelter,” Beck chuckled lightly, trying to lift the mood but instead rudely bringing me back to the fullness of reality.

I grunted, “It's my parents' house.” That seemed to eliminate any lightness that Beck tried to bring.

I wandered into the living room and was greeted with a horrible stench. Before me, I saw a person-shaped stain on the floorboards. Dad's watch was lying nearby, rusty and covered in the black ooze from human decay. I choked back a sob, covering my mouth and squeezing my eyes shut. At least he hadn't fallen victim to the creatures. *I should have visited...*

I felt Beck's hand lightly brush my shoulder in an attempt to comfort me. I heard him whisper, "I'm sorry."

I so badly wanted to be the little kid again, to be comforted by Mom and Dad—hell, even by Juniper. Suddenly, Beck and I heard a creak from an adjacent room. My neck snapped to the source of the noise.

A loud, gurgly screech sounded from the other room, and I could see it there in the doorway. The large figure was on all fours and hairy, with massive yellow claws protruding from its feet—*paws?* Its flesh peeled from its body, leaving gaping holes in its side and exposing its withering bones. Its jaw remained permanently open, in which its maw full of sharp teeth could be seen. The worst part of it was its eyes—the actual eyeballs, sickeningly green, hung from the sockets, leaving oozing gaping holes behind.

The creature hissed, and I realized.

"Juniper?"

It lunged forward at Beck and me, and we both scrambled in different directions to avoid those claws. Beck made it back into the kitchen—my beloved kitchen—and I shoved myself to my feet in the living room. I was coated in whatever dust and mud was on the floor—it smelled weird... *gunpowder?*

Juniper—*God, I don't want to call it that*—was focused on Beck. It entered the kitchen, stalking toward him. I know Beck didn't want to leave me behind. In an effort to divert its attention, I rushed forward and shouted, "*HEY!*"

Juniper turned to face me, its muscles squelching and its black eyes looking deep into my soul. I brandished my knife, and I saw its claws flex. *Oh God*, I thought, as time seemingly slowed down.

Lunging forward, I stuck my knife in Juniper's skull, its hanging eyeballs bouncing and *thwacking* me; the diseased ooze immediately soaked into my skin.

SHHCK! SHHCK! SHHCK! SHHCK!

I stabbed and stabbed and stabbed, trying to kill the mutated version of my poor old cat. Juniper didn't deserve this.

I felt my wrist splint snap, and pain seared through my arm. In between one of my rear-backs to stab, Juniper lurched forward, and its loose jaw clamped around my shoulder.

I let out a blood-curdling shriek. *I'm going to die!*

Beck lurched forward with his spear from before, stabbing Juniper over and over, but it was only focused on me. I fell back in its grasp, looking up toward the ceiling. That beautiful chandelier hung loosely above us, and all I could smell was gunpowder and decay.

The chandelier!

"Beck!" I shouted through clenched teeth. "The chandelier! Cut it down!"

He obeyed my words immediately. He swung his spear and cut the wire, causing the chandelier to come crashing down. The broken incandescent bulbs immediately ignited the wood flooring with the help of the gunpowder dust. I felt the flames engulf Juniper and me, the singe becoming increasingly hotter. Both of us let out a shriek, trapped under the chandelier and burning.

"*Quinn!*" I heard Beck's shriek.

"Get out of here! Save yourself!" I yowled, struggling underneath the weight of Juniper and the chandelier.

Lying on the burning floorboards of my beloved childhood kitchen, I saw Beck's boots as he ran outside. *Get out of this neighborhood*, I thought. *There'll be more coming*. Watching my childhood home fall apart around me, I had never been happier. I was finally that little kid again.

Ruby

Emma Wright

2023

The trees whizzed past us as I sped down the county highway. I was pushing sixty-five in a fifty, anxious as all hell. My wife sat in the passenger seat and stared straight ahead at the asphalt illuminated by the high beams. She chewed at her fingernails. I reached over and grabbed one of her hands, partially to keep her from biting her fingers raw, partially to comfort her, and partially to comfort myself.

“Diane,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “Everything is going to be okay.” She nodded slowly but said nothing. A few moments later, we arrived at the gas station.

“Is this the right one?” I asked Diane.

“I think so,” she said, her voice shaky. “She said it was the Shell just outside Inesburgh. Where is she?”

I didn’t have an answer for her. We couldn’t know what our daughter would look like as a twenty-three-year-old girl. If it weren’t for the family photos around the house, we would barely remember what she looked like when she was eight, the last time we had seen her. I said a silent prayer.

“David.” Diane grabbed my arm, her nails digging into my skin. She pointed as a young woman came around the corner of the building. She was tall and lean, her long dark hair draped across her shoulders. It was Ruby. It had to be. Diane hopped out of the car and ran to her, throwing her arms around the girl. I froze a moment in utter disbelief, then followed suit. Ruby did not put her arms around us.

I didn’t remember much of the reunion or the drive home. I did remember that Diane had inspected Ruby to make sure our baby girl wasn’t hurt. I did remember Diane’s sobs and

how she could barely speak. And I remembered how Ruby's eyes were fixed on me, cold and unblinking, every time I looked back at her in the rearview mirror.

"David, honey," Diane said once we arrived at the house. "I'm going to get Ruby situated and make her some food. Do you want anything?"

"No," I said. "I'm okay. I'm going to call the police and let them know she's back."

"Oh, please don't make us go through this tonight. Can't it wait until the morning?"

"I'll ask them to come tomorrow, but I'm calling them. Her case went cold. They need to know." Diane sighed and nodded. Ruby appeared in the living room doorway, and Diane quickly ushered her toward the bathroom.

"I'm sure you'd love a hot shower, right, dear?" Diane said as the two trailed down the hallway. I went into my office, opened the top desk drawer, pulled out a worn business card, and called the number.

"Detective Stirling."

"Hey, Bob, it's David."

"Dave!" Stirling said cheerfully. "You doing alright?"

I took a deep breath. "Ruby is home."

"What? When?"

"Diane got a call earlier tonight," I explained. "From a young woman claiming to be Ruby. I didn't think it was even possible, y'know? Her case went cold years ago. But she told Diane where to come get her, so we went, and... I'm pretty sure it's her. I don't understand how, but it's her."

"Jesus, David. That's great news. Are you back at home?" Stirling said.

"Yeah, we've been back for about ten minutes. Diane is getting Ruby situated and fed and all that."

"Dave, you have to bring her to the hospital. She needs to be checked out."

“I think she’s showering right now.”

Stirling cursed. “Get her out of there. Forensics will want tests. It’s probably too late now, but do it anyway.”

“Diane isn’t going to like that,” I said, dreading my next conversation.

“I know, but get her down here.”

I hung up and found Diane in the kitchen.

“We need to take Ruby down to the hospital,” I said.

“David, please. We just got back,” Diane pleaded.

“I know, but they need to check her out. Stirling said forensics wants tests. They’re not going to be happy that she showered.”

“Screw them!” Diane threw her hands in the air, exasperated. “I’ll go get Ruby, but once we’re done there, I’m not doing anything else for them. I just got my daughter back.”

“I know,” I said softly, stepping towards her. I pulled her into my arms and kissed her. When I pulled away, tears had begun lining her eyes again.

“I’m ready to go.” Diane and I jumped, turning to see Ruby standing behind us. Her wet hair dripped onto her shirt, one of Diane’s old ones.

“Oh, did you hear all that?” Diane asked, laughing uncomfortably. Ruby nodded.

“Well,” I said. “Let’s go, honey.” Ruby’s eyes followed me, staring the same way she did in the car. A chill ran down my spine.

She knows, I thought.

I avoided looking in the rearview mirror as much as possible on the drive to the hospital. Ruby remembered what happened fifteen years ago – I was sure of it. The look in her eyes was enough, but something else felt wrong. More specifically, I wasn’t sure how she was still alive.

The doctors told us that she was in perfect health. No signs of malnutrition, assault, or injury. It didn’t make any sense. There should have been *something*. But she was fine and

released within two hours after the tests. When Stirling came to get her statement, she refused to talk. Instead, her eyes stayed fixated on me.

2009

“Daddy?” A knock sounded at my office door.

“Yes, Ruby?” The door opened, and I swiveled in my chair to look at my eight-year-old.

“Mommy is hurt,” she said blankly.

“What do you mean? Where is she?” I sprung out of my chair and out of the office.

“The bathroom,” Ruby called after me. I ran down the hallway and into the bathroom.

Diane was passed out in the full bathtub, blood matting the back of her blonde head and staining the tile wall. I screamed and pulled her out. She was still breathing. I turned and saw Ruby standing in the doorway.

“Bring me the phone, Ruby!” She didn’t move. She stared down at Diane’s body with curiosity, the side of her mouth curling into the slightest of smiles.

2023

“Dave,” Stirling called from down the hospital hallway. “We need to talk.”

My heart leaped into my throat. Had Ruby said something after all? Stirling had become a close friend through the investigation, but we didn’t tell him about the accident. He only knew that Ruby was a missing persons case. I clenched my teeth and nodded, following Stirling into an empty room.

“Between you and me, something’s not right with Ruby,” he said. “I don’t want to worry Diane too much. She’s been through enough as it is, y’know? Ruby won’t talk, but she’s

showing signs of a trauma response, which makes plenty of sense, but, gee, I don't know. Something's weird about it."

"I had that same feeling. She's—" I paused and looked around before turning back to him. "I don't like the way she's looking at me. It's like she's staring right through me."

Stirling sighed and ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "Go home, Dave. You all need some rest."

So we did. The weeks passed by, and I was scared in my own home. Ruby barely spoke, and her eyes followed me everywhere. I wasn't sleeping much anymore. As the days turned into weeks, the tension in our household grew thicker. Ruby's silent stares were suffocating, and I found myself constantly on edge, waiting for something terrible to happen. Diane seemed oblivious to the unease that settled over us like a dark cloud, choosing instead to dote on Ruby and shower her with affection.

One night, as I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, I heard a soft creak outside our bedroom door. My heart raced as the door slowly swung open, revealing Ruby standing in the doorway.

"Daddy," she whispered, sending shivers down my spine. "I know what you did."

I felt a cold sweat break out on my forehead as I struggled to sit up, my mouth dry. "Ruby, what are you talking about?"

Her lips curled into a sinister smile as she took a step closer. "You thought you could get away with it, didn't you? But I remember everything."

I felt a chill run down my spine as Ruby's words hung like a heavy fog. Panic clawed at my chest as I searched for a way to diffuse the situation.

"Ruby, sweetheart, whatever you think you know, it's not true," I stammered, trying to keep my voice steady despite the fear creeping through me. She tilted her head, her gaze unwavering.

"You can't hide from me, Daddy. I see the guilt in your eyes every time you look at me." Before I could respond, she raised a finger to her lips and whispered, "Shh, don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

With a haunting, toothy smile, Ruby turned and disappeared into the darkness of the hallway, leaving me paralyzed. The echoes of her footsteps faded into silence.

2009

Diane was discharged from the hospital after a few days, with a concussion and some stitches as the only physical reminders of the incident. The emotional toll was much heavier. She couldn't shake the feeling of dread that seemed to emanate from Ruby, though she couldn't remember what exactly had happened in the bathroom that night. All Ruby had told me was that her mother had fallen and hit her head, but the image of Ruby's smile as she watched her bleeding mother was burned into my brain.

A few days later, I came home from dinner with some colleagues. The front door creaked open, and I dropped my keys in shock. Diane was asleep on the couch, and Ruby slowly approached her, a kitchen knife in her small hand.

"Ruby!" I screamed. It might as well have been a whisper for all the notice my daughter took. But this wasn't my daughter anymore. I didn't recognize this strange child who was about to kill her mother.

I lunged across the room and snatched her off the floor, prying her fingers from the knife handle. Diane gasped as she woke to the commotion and screamed as the severity of the situation dawned on her. I wrestled the knife out of Ruby's hand, but she fought back with a strength that contradicted her age.

"Ruby, stop this! You don't want to do this!" I pleaded. Her gaze, once so full of warmth, was now ice cold. There was no reaching her. Tears blurred my vision as I restrained her thrashing limbs. She freed an arm from my grasp and scratched at my face and throat. I backed up instinctually and tripped over the coffee table. My body hit the ground, knocking the wind out of me, as Ruby went sailing out of my arms and into the corner of the coffee table.

"No!" Diane and I both shrieked.

Ruby lay unmoving, her neck hanging in a position it shouldn't, and blood gushing from the impact. I flipped her onto her back and shook her, begging her to move or make a sound. I checked her pulse. Nothing. I started chest compressions. Nothing. Ruby's cold eyes stared upwards.

Diane and I went to bed. Whether it was out of shock or stupidity, we left it alone for the night. Part of me hoped that when we woke up, Ruby would be sitting on the couch watching cartoons like nothing happened. Instead, when we went into the living room in the morning, her body was gone.

2023

I crept into the hallway, unsure of where Ruby had gone. I prayed she wasn't in her room, which was right next to where I wanted to go: my office. I needed a weapon, and the lockbox under my desk had exactly what I was looking for.

I tiptoed down the hallway and opened the door as quietly as possible. I shut it behind me in the darkness, and when I turned around, I was looking down at the barrel of my gun.

"Looking for this?" Ruby asked.

"How did you know the combination?" My voice shook.

“Your guilt is so incredible,” she said with a chuckle. “I knew it would be my birthday.”

“Ruby, sweetheart, please—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Ruby screamed. “You tried to kill me. You *did* kill me. But I’m back now, and you’re going to pay.”

“How is that possible?” Tears streamed down my face, and she laughed again.

“I’ve seen hundreds of doctors over the past fifteen years. They typically sent me to priests after.” She lowered the gun. “But I’ve learned some tricks because of it. Remember this?” She tipped her head to the right, and her neck hung, broken. Blood began to drip down her face, and the stench of rotting corpses flooded the room. I stepped backward, gagging and coughing. She straightened her neck, and the blood and smell stopped.

“Kill me,” I begged. “I swear on my life that I never meant to hurt you. I love you so much, Ruby. I’m not going to stop you.”

“It’s not as fun when you aren’t begging for your life,” Ruby said.

“Just please don’t kill your mother.”

“Now there’s the begging.”

She tossed the gun aside, and I lunged for it. She slammed her hand into my throat, cackling at my effort. I flew back into the wall, Ruby’s superhuman grip lifting me off the ground. I clawed at her hands, though it did nothing. I tried to scream Diane’s name – tried to warn her – but I couldn’t scream at all. My vision blurred, spots lining the edges of my peripheral.

Ruby’s evil gaze stayed on me in my final moment, just as it always had.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Regrets

Arcane Bigler

Life is short.

Live it fast-paced. Parties, money, sex, intoxication. Lying and distrust. Breaking the law, cursing religion, abandoning your parents. Manipulation. Fist fights and murder.

Lie to all of your friends, tell them you're staying in for the night. Lie to your partner, cheat on them. Sleep with all the women you can. Sleep with several men. Do it all in one night, do it for months. Disappear. Go to L.A., go to Ibiza. Get high, reach for the clouds. Get low, fall to the ground. Scrape your knee, blame it on your friend. Blame it on a stranger. Blame it on God. He's the one who put you here, you didn't ask for that. You didn't ask to be alive.

Who cares about the law? No one is in charge of you. They can't tell you what to do. Bribes, deals, corruption, war. Don't pay your taxes, don't work a job. Live off the system. Fuck the system! Buy a gun, use it to protect yourself. Use it to harm others. Don't get caught, don't stop. Find a spouse, have children. Neglect them, leave them, teach them to use a gun, teach them to lie. Find a new partner, a new lover. Have more children. Leave them, too.

You can't slow down, life is too short. Life is too long.

Live it slow-paced. Get-togethers, wealth, love, sobriety. Truth and trust. Respect the law, go to church, take care of your family. Integrity. Compassion and safety.

Hang out with your friends, have a night on the town. Stay in and watch television, have a game night. Tell your partner how much you love them, buy them flowers and chocolates. Devote yourself to one person, make them feel special. Let it last forever, until death will you part. You'll fall down, but you'll apologize. Pick yourself back up. Keep going. Keep your head low, eyes low. Use your manners. Yes, sir, no, ma'am, thank you, please. Please save my soul, Lord. God, can you hear me?

The law holds us together, they protect us. They wouldn't lie, they wouldn't steal. Charities, cooperation, salvation, support. Pay your taxes, work as hard as you can. Get promoted, become a manager. Become a business owner. Do what you can, do what you must. Watch over yourself, watch over others. Protect them, don't hurt them. Save them from trouble. Have children, grow your family. Love them, show them the way, take them to church. Teach them about life, about morality. See them grow up. Send them off to college.

Life is too long, life is too short.

You're getting old, fading out. Kids have long moved out, you've retired. Life is good, life is sick. Your bones ache, your counter is cluttered with prescriptions. You never made it to Florida, never made it to a beach to retire.

When you pass, you'll be surrounded by family and friends. They'll hold your hand, tell you it'll be okay. You'll smile, you'll leave them your things.

Did you live life to the fullest? Did you do everything you could've? You never got to travel the world, never got to go skydiving. You were comfortable, sure, but did you make enough money? Did you get to do the things you wanted? You'll never forget that you missed your daughter's third-grade recital, your son's fifth-grade soccer game. You never got to see the Eiffel Tower, maybe you worked too much? Were you gracious enough to the people around you, were you kind enough? Did you love your kids enough, your partner enough? Were you going to Heaven, would God save your soul? Did it matter once you were gone?

Life was too short, life was too long.

You're barely forty, but your body is wasting away. You have no one, left them all behind for the world. Life is good, life is sick. Your head aches, your house is barely livable if you even stayed there. You couch surf, move from one stranger to another.

When you pass, will you be alone? You have nothing left to leave behind, nothing material matters in the long run. It would all degrade eventually, just like your body. Just like your soul.

Did you live life to the fullest? Did you do everything you could've? You never told that person you really did love them, you never saw any of your kids graduate. Did you ever have enough money? It was always slipping from your fingers, from your grasp. Did you get to do the things you wanted? You'll never forget the places you didn't go, the friends you lost. You didn't get to meet your grandkids yet, maybe you partied too much? Were you too cruel to the people around you, were you too selfish? Did you love the fast life too much, the enhancements too much? Were you going to Heaven, would God save your soul? Did it matter once you were gone?

The Walk Back

Jackson Helmholtz

I said my goodbyes and stumbled out of the cubicle dorm building. Time to turn on some music and get back to my apartment. I always dreaded this walk back, not because of the distance – in all honesty, the walk is only five minutes – but because I had to do it alone.

Tonight, I was especially dreading the walk because it was cold and snowy, which also meant all the walkways were extremely slippery. I knew I had to be careful, but I also wanted to enjoy what was left of the night before the sun started to rise.

As I take my first few steps out from underneath the enclosed entranceway, I begin to take in my surroundings. To my left, at the entrance of another dorm building, I catch myself staring in that direction as memories come flooding back. Being locked out of that dorm building last year in the pouring rain. It was three a.m., my roommates were asleep, my phone was dead, and I had just had a shitty day. When I realized I didn't have my ID on me, I just sat in the rain, trying to figure out what the fuck I was supposed to do. Then, my savior walked by. Thank goodness I was not the only night owl on campus. One of my neighbors happened to be walking home at that time and thankfully let me in to get to my dorm and finally go to bed.

My mind jumps back to the present, this time with a large smile on my face. Getting lost in memories and trains of thought was the one nice thing about this walk. Don't get me wrong, campus is beautiful, but it becomes boring after living on it for so long. The only way for me to keep my mind straight is to continue to live in distant memories as I slowly make my way back to my apartment.

I start taking the first steps down the slippery stairs, almost falling in the process. This slip threw me back into another memory from last year, a daytime memory. It was downpouring, and it felt like all of campus was going to flood. I was doing homework with my

friends in their dorm, just trying to get assignments in before their due date, all of us bored out of our minds. With me having completed my assignment I suggested we all go to the gym. This was met with unanimous agreement (mind you, we had all forgotten that it was raining outside). We all got ready and were about to head out when we finally realized our mistake of wanting to go to the gym: none of us owned umbrellas. We all start to sprint out of the dorm building, trying to get to the gym as fast as possible, not caring about those around us or mud but simply wanting to remain as dry as possible. This was until we hit the stairs, and I forgot to grab the railing, causing me to fall straight onto my ass. Then, memories of laughter dissipate as I continue down the stairs during this cold night.

I continue my journey to my apartment, only slightly shivering. The memories are nice because they mean I don't have to think about how goddamn cold it is and how badly I'd rather be anywhere else than on this walk back. Only a few more minutes are left, and I'm just about to pass the football field when another memory comes to fruition. This time, it was from last semester instead of last year. I was with my friends shouting different *Pitch Perfect* songs across the football field in the middle of the night. It was brisk but not enough for any of us to want to wear a jacket. We were dancing and goofing off with one another as we recited every song perfectly. We couldn't get enough of this soundtrack; we had just finished watching the movie as well. While we wandered the campus, we had no one destination in mind. We just wanted to continue to have fun and roam. At that time, the night seemed endless and full of possibilities. Coming back to reality, I remember how much I miss nights like that. Nights where I could be outside without being pissed off at the world for it feeling like zero degrees with windchill.

My apartment finally came into view. All that was left of the walk was going up the road, and there was my final destination. This always feels like the longest part of the walk, and I think it's because I have that anticipation of knowing how close I am to finally getting out of

the cold that time seems to slow down. I have to avoid tripping into the cracks on the decimated sidewalks, and it's clear that no one has done any maintenance on them in years. As I am careful walking on the sidewalk, one last memory comes into my mind. This is the same sidewalk I would sprint down on my nights coming back from the bars. During this particular night, I had not a single care in the world, and I just wanted to run. When I ran, I felt free, as if nothing could happen to me; I was existing in a state of pure bliss. The shouts of my friends were deafened by the wind passing my ears. I didn't care that I was so far in front of them. I just wanted to live in this feeling of freedom, and nothing could stop me in this state. That was until I ran out of breath. I almost buckled to my knees; the pain and exhaustion from not being in shape hit me fast and hard. I sat there catching my breath long enough for my friends to catch up to me, seemingly mocking me for running for such a great amount of time. It was a refreshing sense of fun. As the memory faded from my mind, I realized I was back at my apartment.

These walks back always seemed long, but they reminded me of how much fun I had while at school. Each memory is a reminder of a time when I was truly enjoying life, and these walks meant that I'd relive those moments of joy no matter how cold or windy it was, no matter how tired or stressed I was. This quick five-minute journey brought more joy to me than I had ever thought possible, especially while being at school. Now that I am finally back at my apartment, I can go to bed and create new memories the next day.

Grief, I Hate You... Chim, I Love You

Melody Ashworth

From childhood, my mother has always told me I am hyper-emotional. She has never meant it badly, but it is true. When I'm happy, I'm ecstatic, and when I'm sad, I'm devastated. I can't even witness others cry without crying myself. I wear my heart on my sleeve and it is often proudly, but not today. She always told me my feelings would be my downfall or my rise. Today, it is my downfall. Today, I sit at my measly Jimmy John's job in a distasteful visor, and I am devastated. The kind of devastation that feels like it could start wars. The kind of emptiness and sadness that could swallow you whole if you let it. With each inhale and exhale, breathing gets heavier. I wish I could lock myself in the bathroom and sob until my shift is over, but work must go on even at a sub shop.

So, what is grief, one may ask? I wish I could sum it up in one tiny sentence. If grief felt like a five-word sentence, it would be so much easier to process and disperse. We all know that is not the case. I once heard a grieving actor describe grief as "love persevering." I believe that the same notion may be mentioned in a song. It is all the love left that one is unable to give in the time their loved one is alive. When asking Google to define grief, it refers to deep sorrow, followed by misery, sadness, anguish, agony, distress, and the list goes on. We have professional ways to soften the blow of grief with words such as bereavement. We bake casseroles and comfort food to console one another through losses. The moment we feel loss, our body goes into fight-or-flight. It triggers defense mechanisms, all because the body feels like it is in danger. This emotion is so large your body has to produce life-saving hormones to protect you from it. Those don't go away. This fight-or-flight response can last as long as one is grieving. That being said, how do I get past the grief? I've prayed, I've screamed, I've cried for a better outcome, and yet, here I am, saying goodbye to my loyal as-can-be family cat tonight.

It all started underneath a dreary Applebee's dumpster when I was in the second grade. We had just lost our previous family cat not too long before. A tiny white fuzz ball with a specific black stripe on his nose, shivering in the cold by itself. He was petrified, but not of my father. Now, my father isn't the type of person to rescue animals left and right. He is the one who is always exclaiming we don't need pets in the house; however, Oreo is different. The instant bond he made with my dad was strange. People were trying to get him to come out from under that dumpster for hours with no luck. The second my dad tried, the kitten practically sprinted into his arms. That day, we all knew we didn't choose the cat, but the cat chose us to be his family.

I remember my sister pulling me aside after school. I was in first grade, and my sister was in third. She jumped up and down as she screeched about a new kitten we supposedly had at home. I didn't believe her at first. We had just lost our cat not too long before this, and we all knew we weren't getting another animal any time soon. She promised me it wasn't a lie, and we dashed home. The school was right across the street from us, so we wasted no time getting back into the house. We swung the porch door open as giddy as ever. I looked at her and whispered, "Kayla, I really hope you're right about the kitty." We opened the inside door, threw our backpacks down, and began frantically looking around, like the hide-and-seek game we would always play. As I peered around the corner to our couch, I instantly fell in love. My mom was holding that white fuzz ball as tight as she could. My brother, sister, and I hovered in awe, begging to take turns holding him. He was timid and shaking, poor guy. What he didn't know at the time was how full of love and adoration his life would be.

After throwing around some of the craziest names, we came across Oreo. It was simplistic; he was a black-and-white kitty. Not the most creative, but we were kids. The funny thing is, we barely called him that as he grew. We came up with the goofiest nicknames, from Chicken to Chunk to Chim. From that day forward, this stubborn little fuzzball helped me

and my siblings grow closer than ever. We played for hours with toy mice on a stick, cat bell balls, and a laser pointer (my favorite). Oreó's journey began with a soft patter of tiny paws, a fleeting glimpse of fur darting through the upstairs hallway, and the gentle purr that vibrated so ferociously. A cat, not merely a pet, but a family member, a silent companion who witnessed many milestones with our family. His presence constantly filled the room with warmth and smiles, especially when he begged for ham or chicken on your plate and tried to take it anyway when you said no.

Each day with Oreó unfolded like a tapestry of shared moments, from lazy afternoons spent basking in the sun to our playful exchanges that echoed with the laughter of innocence and pure joy. He has always been more than just a pet; he was a steady presence in a world that often felt uncertain and fleeting. His silent companionship spoke volumes, offering comfort in moments of solitude and joy in the mundane rhythms of everyday life. Snuggling with him made life more bearable, his soft purring humming you to sleep as you play "The Aristocrats" for him. He loved that movie more than anything, so much so that he would sit on my mom's tablet until she turned it on for him. I can still hear her picking on him as she shoos him off the tablet, only to turn on the movie and cuddle with him minutes later.

Time snuck up on us quicker than one would ever hope. The seasons changed, and he aged, and with each passing day, whispers of mortality lingered in the air. The once vibrant spirit that pounced with enthusiasm faltered, burdened by the weight of age and frailty. We had no idea. Our beloved Oreó hid his illness for as long as he could, a stubborn little feline. By the time the vets noticed he was in his last days already.

Now, the shadows are claiming their prize, enveloping our beloved companion in their somber embrace, and I lay witness. How awful it is to lay witness. I watch as his breaths grow more shallow, comforted by the pain medicine the vet gave. His eyes lay still, wide open. I can almost sense his sadness, his nervousness. Tomorrow, my mother and the rest of my

family will drive up to say our reluctant goodbyes. I don't just cry, I weep in his honor. Grief is a tempest that sweeps through the landscape of my soul, an uninvited guest that arrives, crushing everything in sight. Time becomes disjointed, and the present moment is an intricate dance of pain and sorrow. The impending farewell looms large, each ache a reminder of the bond shared with little Chim. There is a sense of finality in the air, an acceptance of the life loved and the suffering he will no longer feel once it is over. We give as many kisses as humanly possible and embrace one another as we share our favorite memories. Each memory is a bittersweet melody, evoking laughter, tenderness, and the quiet comfort of shared solitude. Amidst the echoes of memory, there lingers the painful awareness that these moments are just that... memories, ones we can no longer make more of. There is, however, a tender intimacy in the act of saying goodbye. Each caress, each whispered word, carries with it a lifetime of love, a testament to the bond shared between humans and felines.

As I endure this, I think about how no one could ever prepare me for how much loss you experience as you grow and what grieving truthfully looks like. I think your parents try their best, but it is moments like these that shape your resilience and strength. I've come to realize that joy cannot exist without sorrow and vice versa. They are permanently intertwined, like two lovers' hands that refuse to let go. It's painful, it's messy, it's heartbreaking. I physically feel sick to my stomach, but it is called a loss for a reason. It is a loss (and a great one) because there was something there to lose to begin with. A fun-spirited, warm-hearted furball who watched you grow up as you watched him. A belly to cry on, a companion to cuddle, our best friend. Even though it feels like I am falling apart, I would accept grief a hundred lifetimes over if it meant I got the privilege to experience the happiness invited in by a furry friend. It hurts more than I could ever imagine, but it is so worth it.

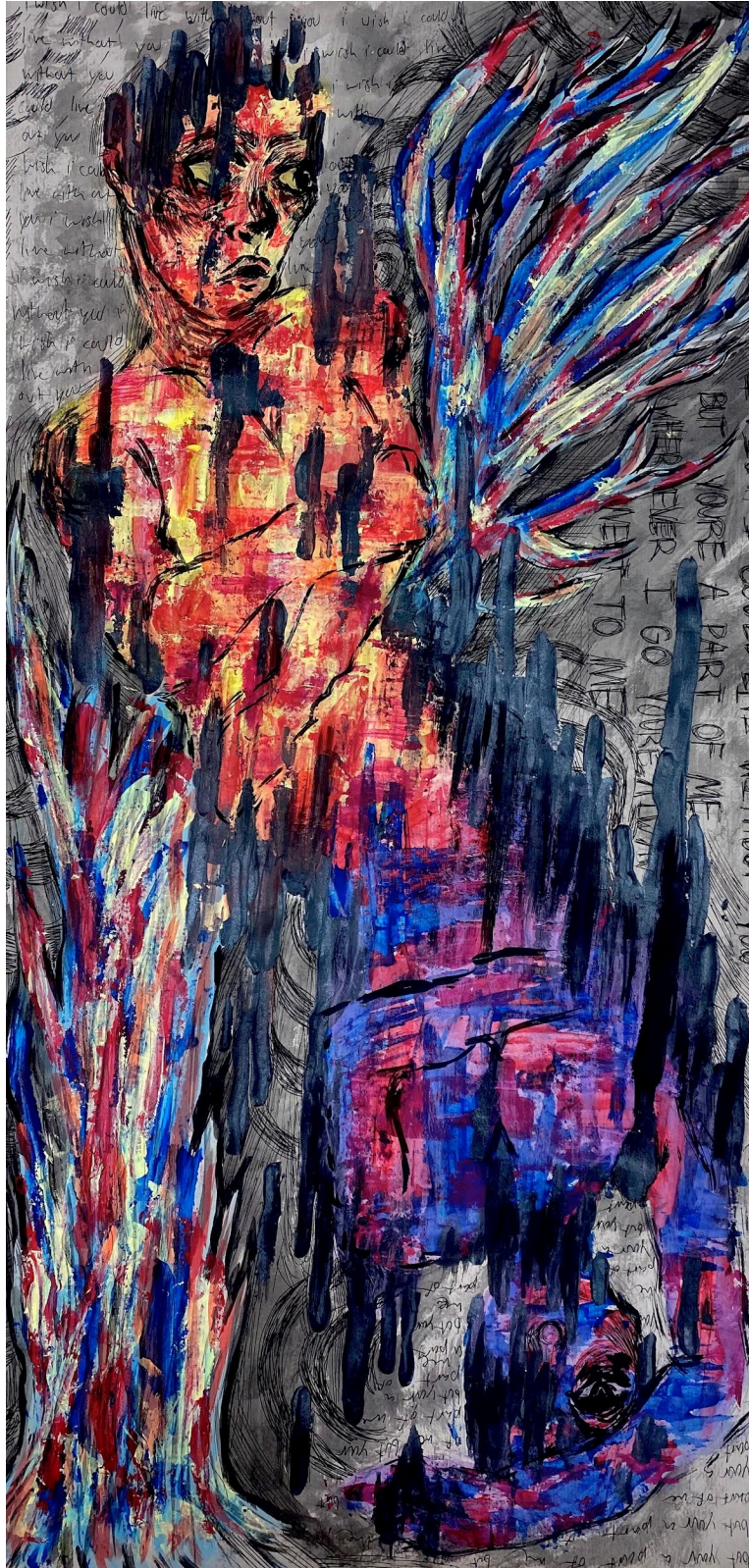
"What is grief?" I ask myself. One word is insufficient. All of the descriptive words to explain grief are insufficient. I don't know if there is a spoken way to describe it. It is not linear.

There are stages, but you don't go through each at a time. I am feeling them all at once like an avalanche, one that buries you ten feet under with no hope of escaping. Grief at the moment is an immersive experience, a journey into an abyss of sorrow where emotions are raw, sensations are heightened, and the very fabric of my existence is called into question. The clock ticks as a reminder of the irreversible nature of loss, yet a faint promise that the passing of time will alleviate the pain. All I know is two things: One, my emotions are insurmountable to the point I feel I may never recover, and two, I love my Chim. I always have, and I always will. I hope kitty heaven is filled with lots of forehead kisses and ham. Thank you for always being there for my family. You would win the gold medal in the "best pet" category if there were one (for 16 years running now). Rest easy, sweet boy.

ART

(a)part of me

Alyssa Kordish



Diameter

Makenna Finnegan



Falling Stars

Lennon Amor



Screaming Color

Kelsey Stanfield



Temporary

Hazel Stone



Her Universe

Serria Allen



The "I" In Humanity

Isaiah Shiley



Author Biographies

Serria Allen

Serria Allen is a junior English and integrated media double major with a business minor. They are involved in theatre, Zeta Theta Psi, Nu Sigma Alpha corollary, and a writer and editor for *The Kil* newspaper.

Lennon Amor

Lennon Amor is a senior English major with a concentration in writing. They are an editor and social media manager for Morpheus, an active member of the Euglossian Society, and a Zeta Ember. Their end goal is to be a professor and published author.

Melody Ashworth

Melody Ashworth is a senior health science major at Heidelberg University.

Arcane Bigler

Arcane Bigler is a psychology and criminology major at Heidelberg, passionate about forensic psychology and the brain. They have honed their writing skills through personal writing, coursework, and extracurricular activities. This is their first submission to Morpheus, with a creative nonfiction piece on “Regrets” and how to live life.

Jeb Crow

Jeb is a senior Video Game Production and Media double major with a minor in Art. They are a part of the Euglossian Society, Zeta Embers, Rhos Buds, Heidelberg Symphonic Band, and the Heidelberg Historians. Jeb enjoys spending their free time playing video games, listening to music, and spending time with their cat Gin.

Jocelyn Everett

Jocelyn Everett is a senior at Heidelberg University majoring in Business Administration. She has been writing fiction for over seven years and poetry for over five. She has enjoyed joining the Morpheus editorial team and is extremely thankful for the opportunity to work with authors.

Makenna Finnegan

Makenna Finnegan is a junior majoring in AYA English Education. She is the managing editor of the Kilikilik, the managing editor of *Rock Creek Review*, and a tutor for PACE.

Beatrice Fry

Beatrice Fry is a senior accounting major at Heidelberg University with a passion for creative writing. Beatrice has been writing for fourteen years and has experimented with many different styles and genres, but holds a special place for fiction writing, especially for creating novels and pieces in the horror genre. While she has written many different stories over the years, this is the first one to be formally published. She plans to never stop writing and, if she is lucky, to publish more work in the future.

Ryleigh Gorman

Ryleigh is a Heidelberg University sophomore majoring in media and English with a minor in psychology. They are involved in Greek life, specifically Zeta Theta Psi, and are part of campus organizations, including Berg Allies and the Berg Body Positive Association. Ryleigh enjoys long walks on the beach and has caught at least one fish in their lifetime, and in their words, making them an “okay-ish choice for this to be published by Morpheus.”

Cecilia Groth

Cecilia Groth is a first-year student at Heidelberg University majoring in environmental science with minors in literature and writing. She drinks copious amounts of raspberry tea and takes far too many naps for her own good.

Jackson Helmholtz

Jackson Helmholtz is a senior theatre major with a concentration in acting at Heidelberg University. They are a member of Make-a-Scene Improv, Rho Eta Delta, Alpha Psi Omega, Zeta Embers, and Euglos, and works in the student engagement center.

L Helms

L Helms is a psychology and criminology student graduating in May this year and loves reading. *The Stories We Keep* was created with the knowledge that Morpheus is a literary magazine, and with her love of books, she placed quotes from some of her favorite books or books that someone she knew had read after tea-staining the canvas. Then, she hand-sewed the books onto the canvas to represent the stories we both keep within ourselves and the ones we keep on our shelves. And finally, the quote to best explain her mindset while making this piece (that is also on the piece itself): “Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.” – Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein*.

Austin James

Austin is a senior computer science major with a minor in video game production. He is involved in the Computer and Technology Club, Alpha Phi Tau, and the Euglossian Society and serves as a Super Smash Bros. shoutcaster for the Heidelberg eSports team.

Alyssa Kordish

Alyssa Kordish is a sophomore AYA education major with minors in art and gender and identity studies. They are involved in Morpheus, Berg Allies, Zeta Theta Psi, the Euglossian

Society, Dance Team, GAP Tutoring, and an Admissions Student Worker. They have been doing art and writing all of their life, and it is one of their favorite hobbies.

Opossum Kreuzscher

Opossum Kreuzscher is a first-year theatre student. They write poetry as a hobby and are happy to share their work for the first time. He writes about gender, sexuality, and society's interaction with queerness.

Madeline Moore

Madeline Moore is a senior Psychology major at Heidelberg University. She loves all things arts and crafts and cats, which is how she ended up with her piece, *The Great Cats*.

Benjamin Neiberlein

Benjamin Neiberlein is a senior at Heidelberg University majoring in theatre with a concentration in musical theatre and a minor in art. Ben has been doing theatre for almost fourteen years and is interested in not only acting and singing but also composing music and writing musicals and stories. He has worked at the Weathervane Playhouse Theatre in Akron, Ohio, as an assistant teacher and onsite coordinator for the Akron After School Program. Ben wants to do as many occupations as possible, including actor, singer, composer, artist, and writer.

Kelly Peterson

Kelly Peterson is a junior from Copley, Ohio, majoring in Environmental Science & Sustainability, with a concentration in Watershed Science and minoring in Business Administration.

Isaiah Shiley

Isaiah Shiley is an English major hailing from Seneca County, Ohio. Born with an insatiable curiosity, he spends his time learning about anything and everything, with a few of his favorite topics being the natural world, philosophy, music, and engineering. When he isn't up to something, Isaiah enjoys spending time with the people (and cats) close to him.

Kelsey Stanfield

Kelsey Stanfield is a graduating senior studying English and Communication.

Hazel Stone

Hazel Stone is a first-year Primary Education major who is very active on and off campus. She mainly creates multi-media art using fabric and paint to create her portraits. Her favorite art type is paper mache, as it has so many possibilities.

Aiden Sullivan

Aiden was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but they consider Heidelberg a second home. After moving to Westlake, they worked hard on their career success, majoring in criminology, and, most importantly, the craft of poetry. In the quiet awnings of the eve', they grow sentimental and cast their heart into verse.

Brooklynn Wharton

Brooklynn is a sophomore political science major. She is an active member of the Philatathean Society and an executive officer for Student Senate.

Emma Wright

Emma Wright is a senior English writing major with minors in business and art. She is the Editor-in-Chief of Morpheus, the co-president of the Berg Allies, an active member of Zeta

Theta Psi, a Heid Babe, and a barista at The Heidelbean! In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing, and spending time with her roommates.

Editor Biographies

Lennon Amor

Lennon Amor is a senior English major with a concentration in writing. They are an editor and social media manager for Morpheus, an active member of the Euglossian Society, and a Zeta Ember. Their end goal is to be a professor and published author.

Morgan Boyer

Morgan Boyer is a senior History major with a minor in writing. She is a member of the Heidelberg University Concert Choir and the Heidelberg Historians. A lover of all things literature and an avid writer of historical fiction and fantasy, she is thankful for the opportunity to work with the talented authors and editors at Morpheus and get a glimpse of the world of publishing.

Jocelyn Everett

Jocelyn Everett is a senior at Heidelberg University majoring in Business Administration. She has been writing fiction for over seven years and poetry for over five. She has enjoyed joining the Morpheus editorial team and is extremely thankful for the opportunity to work with the authors and editors.

Rowan Gill

Rowan Gill is a sophomore English and Media double major with a concentration in Writing. They are a part of Berg Allies, Morpheus, Rock Creek Review, and Zeta Theta Psi. They also work at Beeghly Library.

Alyssa Kordish

Alyssa Kordish is a sophomore AYA education major with minors in art and gender and identity studies. They are involved in Morpheus, Berg Allies, Zeta Theta Psi, the Euglossian Society, Dance Team, GAP Tutoring, and an Admissions Student Worker. They have been doing art and writing all of their life, and it is one of their favorite hobbies.

Desirae Matherly

Desirae Matherly is in her second year at Heidelberg, where she teaches writing. Her essays and fiction appear in several literary magazines and she is the author of *Echo's Fugue*, a collection of personal essays published in 2019.

Emma Wright

Emma Wright is a senior English writing major with minors in business and art. She is the Editor-in-Chief of Morpheus, the co-president of the Berg Allies, an active member of Zeta Theta Psi, a Heid Babe, and a barista at The Heidelbean! In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing, and spending time with her roommates.