

*An Anthology of Student Art and Writing*

# *FLIGHT*

*Mt. San Jacinto College  
Summer 2025*



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Tyler Schantz  
Gabriel Lozano  
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Peyton Doull  
Kaden Reamy  
Alex Orduna

While my time at MSJC overall has been a meaningful, educational experience, it's been characterized by stress, anxiety, pandemonium, burn-out, and inevitable languorousness. Yet, Flight Magazine has managed to serve as a beacon of light to guide me throughout my wanderings in the darkness. I'm extremely grateful for Professor Meiser and every student who contributed to our club meetings and the submission process this semester - whether it was a poem, a short story, or any form of visual medium - for keeping me going and reminding me of how beautiful the writing process can be if you have the creativity, the passion, and the mentality. I find it impossible to accurately convey how inspired I am by everything I had the privilege to read, so I urge you to immerse yourself in these selected works to understand just how enlightening they truly are.

**Tyler Schantz**  
**President of Flight Magazine Club**

**I.**

**“ENDLESS RAINFALL”**

## SALTWATER

BY ALEX ORDUNA

The breeze of the coast danced through my cherished sundress, loved and  
cared for with age.

Sand intertwined itself through the threads of fabric  
the softness of my skin, coarsed by the sharp beads.  
They nestled between my feet, whilst burying me into the strand  
The sea crashed onto the rough, restricted earth  
caught breathlessly in each other's grasps.

As the waves crescendoed louder than before,  
the clouds swept in— dreadful and afraid of the uncertainty that was the  
abyss.

The same beads that lightly kissed my skin in the sunlight  
hindered me into place, unable to leave, escape and find refuge.  
As I settled into the ground, I only waited.

Days rolled away with the restless tides, the sand restricted further  
like a clasp of a terribly desperate hand, yearning for its unrequited lover.  
As sand laid upon my ankles, and soon to my knees—  
The clouds endured, as droplets of water began to spill,  
and yet I still remained.

Wreckage between myself and the relentless terrain,  
it begged me to abide in the comfort of my days underneath all the rain—  
And still, I had found no aid.  
The thread had been exhausted from the constant wind,  
and there no longer awaited any fight.

Leaning upon my brine captor, the exhale of my breaths collided with the  
surging waves,  
and the endless rainfall deafened my wails.  
May the abyss ever pardon, release, and cherish me like it did before the storm,  
as I innocently laid in the grasps of the sand, bathed in the sunlight  
while saltwater caressed my delicate skin?

I clinged to my beloved sundress as my cries are embraced by the ocean—  
I finally prayed to be devoured by the sea.

**II.**

**“AND THEN, THERE WAS A  
WHISPER”**



## AS A DANDELION SEED

BY GABRIEL LOZANO

All Thomas knew was his home, and that was all he would ever know. The old, mossy cabin sat between a forest of linden trees, the tops of their growth barely visible through the thick haze surrounding the island, the cool breeze which danced through the trees, carrying with it a flurry of dandelion seeds to be planted in the foggy abyss beneath—it was familiar to him.

He sat up from his bed, his patchwork quilt pushed to the side as he dangled his legs off the edge. Slipping on a pair of fuzzy slippers, he walked into the hallway, still yawning from his rest. The walls of the house groaned as he reached the main room, a lantern hanging from the ceiling swaying side-to-side. To his right, there was a large window with a view of the abyss. Nothing to be seen but the fog.

He opened the front door and held his arms together as he braced for the cold wind. Closing the door behind him, he squinted his eyes as he walked along a path of stones into the woods. The rustling of leaves overwhelmed him.

The path reached its end at a clearing near the edge of the island. From there, he looked to the side and saw a clothesline attached on one side to a tree, and on the other side a jagged rock. Several shirts waved in the wind, flapping like a bird's wings.

He walked to the clothesline and unclipped a white button-up shirt, its fabric cold to the touch. He pulled it over his head sleepily and sat down on the grass, gazing out into the cloudy horizon.

His mother walked past him, her dark blonde hair tracing the wind as it passed. She took the clothes from the clothesline, sitting down across from Thomas as she folded them. Her eyes met his for a moment, and she put the shirt she was folding down onto her lap.

"How did you rest?" she asked him.

He closed his eyes, yawning as he stretched, "Okay. I'm still tired but I think I'm just always tired."

She smiled, going back to folding her clothes, "You could have all the rest in the world and you still wouldn't be fulfilled."

The boy grazed his hand over the grass below him, its blades wet with dew. His eyes trailed across the ground and back to the vast void around him. Everything around him seemed to disappear except for the fog, its vast hues of indigo and grey consuming the land. He closed his eyes, embracing the sensation of weightlessness he was experiencing. Unshackled by his circumstances, he felt complete.

He opened his eyes again, his mother still before him folding

laundry. The dandelions beside him waved in the wind, their seeds dispersing as he waved his hand through them. Each individual seed flew into the air, all of them gliding into the distant horizon. His gaze followed one individual seed, pulled to and fro by the wind. It landed on the cliff's edge, attempting to nestle itself into a divot in the face of a rock before the movement of his mother blew it back into the air. The pappus of the seed slowly began to be pulled apart by the wind until the seed had nothing to catch the wind with, eventually falling into the abyss below.

"What are you searching for," his mother asked, putting all of the clothes to the side of her, "what do you see in the outside world that you don't have here?"

Thomas put his hands together, looking back to his mother, "I don't know. I don't know what there is. I just can't rid myself of this feeling that I'm missing something." His mother sighed, stretching her neck before looking out into the horizon. She held herself in her arms, her hair flowing behind her.

"There's nothing but pain there," she said in a hushed tone, "nothing worthwhile. My son, I myself tried to fit in, to find my place in that world after losing our own. But they rejected me, cast me away. Their world is not for us, it's for them," she looked back to the forest around us, "this is our world, my love. It's all we have left. And it's beautiful, it provides for

us."

"But it's not my world, is it," the boy responded, "what if my world is out there."

"This is our world," she shook her head.

"You got to see the world and decided this was enough for you," Thomas looked down at the dandelion stem, "this is all I've known and I've seen nothing more. How can I know if this is the right place for me if there's no alternative?"

"Because you should be able to trust me," she stood up, walking to Thomas and lifting him up from the ground, "I understand the aching you feel for something more, but trust me when I say you will not find the solution where you think you will," she brushed his hair to the side, "trust me when I say, I just want to save you the pain."

As the two walked away, Thomas heard the earth behind them crumble slightly. He looked back and saw a few rocks tumble off into the abyss. He frowned, following his mother back to the cottage.

"Do you promise not to try to leave this place? Promise me you'll stay here with me," his mother looked at him, a concerned expression painted on her face. Thomas sighed, looking at the land around him. The flowing fields of grass, the wide canopies of trees, the colorful mosaics of wildflowers—no matter how beautiful, he saw nothing in them. Everything felt empty, devoid of spirit—a feeling that would only

grow more repulsive as time passed. He looked at his mother with a pit in his stomach that he knew wouldn't go away.

"I promise," he nodded. She smiled, leaning over to kiss him on the forehead.

"You have everything you need here," she smiled.

"I know," he grabbed her hand and walked into the cabin.

---

His mother passed away a decade later. He mourned for years, burying her beneath the largest linden tree. Day after day, more of the land began to crumble following her passing. The once vast forest had shrunk down to a grove of trees, then to a couple, then just to one. The cabin had completely fallen into the void, lost to time as Thomas began to lose memory of what the land even looked like before she passed. All that now remained was a sliver of land supported only by one tree, barely having enough space for Thomas. His legs hung over the abyss below, his head rested against the tree. He could do nothing but look up into the canopy of the tree.

He could no longer remember her complexion, or her smile or any other details regarding her existence. All he remembered was a feeling of longing, of absence without her. He looked out into the abyss, seeing nothing in it anymore. A world completely empty and devoid of

spirit. He wrapped his arms around the trunk of the tree as more dirt tumbled down into the fog below.

One final dandelion waved in the wind beside the tree. He picked it up from the ground as the dirt beneath it fell below. His eyes studied it, and he blew the seeds into the wind. They twirled in the air for a moment before falling back onto the thin sliver of land left beneath the tree. He picked one up and tried to toss it off into the abyss, but it glided back to the tree, planting itself at the very edge of the cliff.

His mother seemed to be right, he could admit. He could get all the rest in the world and still be tired. He would never be fulfilled.

And he never was. Located just south of Eureka, lies the beautiful shoreside, sunny town of Gull Coast, California, known as "Northern California's Santa Monica," with stunning views of the Pacific Ocean—

A-four-year-old girl has gone missing—

The hidden gem of California, an itinerary must-see, with the best burgers in the state and even better beaches—

Tuesday, at approximately 4:37pm, Irene Mendoza turned around to find her son—

Come and see the Gull Walk, the famous pier just one mile from the numerous local cuisines and shops, where every step is guaranteed to find your favorite pleasures, comfort foods, and more!



**MY HERITAGE**  
**BY KRIZELLE YAP**

18x 24"

Fake skin, sewn together with fishing wire. Design done using tattoo machine and ink. Hung with fishing wire and fishing hooks.

Representation of artist's Filipino and Chinese heritage in tattoo form

## POP FLIES

BY KILEY KOWALOW

The wind wisps gently,  
Giving the ball that nice spin.  
The sky is golden  
And my hand is ready, always ready.  
Arm outstretched, body underneath it,  
“Get under it! Don’t be scared of it!”  
The ball hits my glove with a loud smack.  
Time can’t touch us.

You laughed,  
That deep, soft chuckle  
That made the world smaller.  
I was ten, maybe eleven,  
Bare toes wiggling in the damp grass.  
Heart pounding like a drum solo,  
Music written just for us.

Now you’re skinnier;  
Smaller almost.  
With that grey, scratchy beard,  
Clutching the old mug I painted in  
second grade.  
Your knees speak in cracked tongues,  
Your shoulder cries in quiet ache.

But, if I could and with the power,  
I’d go back again and again.  
Mid-throw and all giggles,  
Sun bending through the green belt trees,  
And I’d watch us there.  
No rush.  
No time.  
Just the ball hitting my glove,  
And the father,  
Who was always there to throw it.

# YOUR GHOST HAUNTS THE SANDS THAT WE PLAY IN BY SYDNEY COLE

Located just south of Eureka, lies the beautiful shoreside, sunny town of Gull Coast, California, known as “Northern California’s Santa Monica,” with stunning views of the Pacific Ocean—

*A four-year-old girl has gone missing—*

The hidden gem of California, an itinerary must-see, with the best burgers in the state and even better beaches—

*Tuesday, at approximately 4:37pm, Irene Mendoza turned around to find her son—*

Come and see the Gull Walk, the famous pier just one mile from the numerous local cuisines and shops, where every step is guaranteed to find your favorite pleasures, comfort foods, and more!

*Another child has disappeared after a trip to Gull Beach, just a few hundred feet from the pier—*

Gull Coast is for the whole family. Book your stay today!

Avery’s little brother had disappeared five years ago.

There was no doubt about that. One moment, Sam had been a little boy in polar bear swim trunks and a blue swim shirt, giggling and waving his plastic green shovel around. He hollered when the waves crashed into his little body, as Avery, exasperated, had said, “*You’ll never find*

*crabs digging around like that!*”

The next, Sam was a news headline, scrolling across the flatscreen TV with the damning words: *5-year-old Sam Wilkes was last seen playing on Gull Beach by his brothers, before vanishing. Investigators have not found the body despite extensive searches.*

He’ll never forget the ride in the back of the sheriff’s SUV, two bikes with two riders, a tricycle with no rider and a cooler with a soggy, uneaten three-inch ham-and-cheese sub sandwich shoved in the back. The ride to the station had been silent, but Avery never missed the officer’s glances into the rearview mirror, his shocking blue gaze settling on his very soul. His older brother, Eli hadn’t looked up once, staring at his usually bouncing, now oddly still, knees.

Numerous children had gone missing in the weeks before. The Wilkes never thought it would happen to them.

And yet, now, despite the hole in their hearts like a gaping mouth waiting to be filled, Avery pressed on in the manner only a boy, who, once upon a time had lost his mother, and then his little brother, before he even hit the age of thirteen could.

He was seventeen now, walking down the wooden path to his condo, uneven and splintering, separat-

ing the sands of the beach from the dirt and shrubbery. The usually lit lanterns swung back and forth, dark and cold, against the chilly breeze of a coastal night. A thick marine layer covered the stars and the moon, serving as the backdrop for tall, grand palm leaves to sway like an ominous canopy.

Avery used to be fearful of the darkened path as a child, and would hide his face in his father's coat until he reached the safety of his home.

Sam was a braver kid than he ever was.

The night before Sam's disappearance, Avery took him to the convenience store, in search of a higher SPF sunscreen, because the last beach day Elijah had turned as red as summer-time tomato. It had been a misty night, just like this one, where the palm leaves hung over the path and the lantern lights that normally illuminated the walkway had burned out. Where Avery at his age would have cowered behind his father, Sam ran ahead, confident steps with little legs, beckoning Avery to go "faster, faster!"

There was no voice to call him now.

In Avery's hand was a plastic bag from the local convenience store, holding a tub of frosting, a box of red-velvet cake mix, candles, and blue and yellow food coloring. Elijah's acceptance letter had arrived today, and Avery thought no better way to celebrate than to make his brother's favorite cake in the colors of the

Triton mascot.

Sam's favorite had been red velvet too, for some inexplicable reason. Avery could never understand. Too sweet for him—with the sickly decadent vanilla frosting. But perhaps, there had been some deep-rooted desire for Sam to be just like his oldest brother, solidify the bond between the oldest and the youngest Avery had never been able to have.

It was an oddly windy night for Gull Coast. It was the kind that sent goosebumps up his arms and legs and nipped at his cheeks until they turned a rosy red. The waves of the ocean crashed onto the sand, out of sync, half a second too early, as if impatient, as if a warning. The salt stung his eyes and his nose.

And then, there was a whisper.

Avery slowed.

Because surely it was the wind howling in his ears. And yet somehow, it felt as if the noise had shaken him to his very soul.

Another whisper, louder, sadder.

Avery stopped, turning his eyes toward the crashing waves.

The clouds looked funny. A face, a startling gaze. And it was gone as quickly as it came. The wind whispered his name, "Avery," broken, soft, yet wailing.

"Sam," he breathed, something akin to horror dawning in his voice, his face. He reached a hand toward the waves, grasping for something he could not touch. The plastic bag fell to the path.

The moment was gone, and Avery



jolted back with a gasp. He stared at the box of red velvet mix peeking out of the plastic, laid out against the sandy wood.

He was surely going insane.

Avery bent over, reaching for the cake-mix and placing it back in the bag. His hands shook.

"Ave," whispered the wind once more, like a whistle or a harrowed breath, and Avery felt his heart dropping out from under him as he stood up straight again. The moment had never gone.

"Go," he bit out, under his breath, and wasn't sure if he was commanding the wind away or commanding himself to move. But, move he did, one foot after the other, feeling every rigid groove of the wood beneath his sandals.

He walked and walked for what felt like hours, but couldn't have been longer than two minutes. He could no longer see the convenience store at his back, as the little shack had retreated into the palms and coastal wallflowers, bright as the sun.

He walked until a particularly strong gust knocked him to his knees, this time, sending the plastic bag flying up the path, several feet away from Avery. The cake-mix laid haphazardly against the wood once more, just a little further. It was surprising the plastic bag hadn't up and flown into the ocean with this sort of wind, but Avery imagined the tub of frosting held it down.

"Very?" said the wind, or rather, a voice. Choked, boyish. No meddling

from the wind.

"Sam?" And Avery felt a sob stop in his throat, tentative, perhaps something like hope and something even stronger like fear.

It wasn't real. It wasn't real. It wasn't real—

A boy stood in front of Avery now. Blonde hair, rustled, salty? No, not blonde, silver, like a dulled moon. Beneath the greasy mop sat sunken, pallid, grey skin, pulled taut over jagged cheekbones. Barnacles surrounded dimmed eyes; seaweed crowned his little head. It was as if he had been pulled from the depths of the ocean, decomposing and rotted, and false breath had been forced into his lungs.

He wore a blue swim shirt and polar bear trunks.

The sob that had been stuck in Avery's throat tore its way to the surface. He couldn't stand up from his shaking knees, shaking legs, shaking body. "Sam," he said again, over and over like a prayer. There was no relief in his tone.

But the little boy could not hear him. His eyes were unfocused, unseeing, almost drunk. Finally, he settled on something at his feet, a spark of curiosity bursting and fizzling out before Avery could blink. The boy reached down, pudgy, grey fingers wrapping around the box of cake mix.

The wind howled.

Sam was gone.

It wasn't real. It couldn't have been. Avery was tired, exhausted. Weariness



had settled into his bones. But the only other explanation was that Avery was crazy, losing his mind and his grip on reality.

He still had no strength to stand, so he crawled toward the bag. He had to get home to his brother, bake his cake, celebrate his admission to his dream university. Avery winced at every groove grinding against his

bony knees, and every grain of sand and stone that rubbed at his palms.

He reached for the bag, grasping it around the handles and pulling it close. His left hand shot out for the cake mix, and yet—

The air ran cold.

His fingers closed around the cool night; no cake-mix to be found.

**III.**

**“SOMETHING  
BEAUTIFUL BEFORE  
THE END”**

## HER LAST 28 DAYS

By SAMARA CHRISTIAN

"Sit down, Annie."

The mechanical whirring of her gears hummed as Annie took a seat at the desk in the interrogation office, making direct eye contact with Connie Martin- a highly respected federal investigator. But despite this moment, all she could think about was talking to Ruth.

Connie heaved out a deep breath, her thin rectangular glasses framing a pair of old and grey, deadpanned eyes. "Are you aware that you've committed a federal offense today that could have possibly resulted in murder?"

Annie didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"You assaulted Daniel Grey, head scientist of the Ovarian Project. Is this correct?"

The sound of his voice combined with Ruth's in her memory wasn't something she could easily forget.

"If we want to call it that."

"Annie, if you don't take this seriously, your penalty countdown will be decreased."

"...Yes." Annie folded her arms.

"Thank you. Now, do you understand that this warrants a penalty of 28 days for you to finalize a decision?"

Annie grimaced and looked away, chewing on the corner of her lip.

Connie smacked her pen against the table, leaning forward. "Do you understand-"

"Yes ma'am," Annie assured

quickly.

A nod. "Tell me the decision, Annie."

"Choose between execution or a full memory reset within 28 days."

"Wonderful." Connie scribbled more notes into her book before pressing it shut, folding her hands together on the table. But she bent forward again, leveling her eyes with Annie's. "You used violence against an authority today. You know what happens when an Android breaks government code. Why did you?"

"...Because he hurt Ruth," Annie hissed. She didn't understand why this was even a question in the first place. Isn't it normal to want to protect the people you care about? "Why was that acceptable?"

"Because she agreed to, Annie. Ruth signed a formal contract to contribute her physical assets to the experimental process."

"But she didn't want to!" Annie argued. "She told me herself, she did not want to. It's obvious he made her."

"Then I'm afraid she had no choice."

"...What?" That comment shot a numbing helplessness through her thought process. Her arms weakened at her sides, her fingers tingling at both the prospect and the weight of the situation.

"That is all I am able to tell you, Annie. This ends the interrogation

for today.”

“Wait, I wasn’t done talking! There has to be another way.” Annie protested.

Connie glanced at Annie over her shoulder, her brows now drawn together sympathetically. “I’m sorry, Annie. I’ve helped you once in the past, and you know that saving your skin again will really jeopardize my job.” She turned around and left the room without giving Annie the chance to speak any further.

The words completely evaporated from her throat and she stood there, her mind paralyzed with dread. Shoved back into place by authorities, helpless unless told otherwise. Androids served one purpose and one purpose only: to aid. To guide. To set an “example.”

And yet she was forced to face the consequences of what she believed to be right, trying to protect her best friend, Ruth Grey.

*14 DAYS LATER.*

In correspondence to the circumstances, Annie was forcibly detained in a lab cell, quarantined to confirm she wouldn’t cause anymore chaos, especially so that the lab could rearrange everything back to normal. Her punishment hadn’t changed, and her fingers were bruised from picking at them constantly.

The silence was bound to drive anyone mad. Fortunately for her, she had a neighbor, but he wasn’t much for chatter. If he did, he had two screws knocked loose- either that he was tossed away from an experiment.

It sounded like his coding had been bugged, because he continued to mutter drugs like ‘methadone’ and prednisone’ under his breath as he paced around his cell, but it wasn’t loud enough to disturb her.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps had become clear to Annie from the distance, and she perked her head up in anticipation.

The familiar blonde hair of Connie Martin had finally become visible, her face aged and solemn as always, coming in clear with her work attire. Annie couldn’t help but stand erect as soon as Connie had approached, dearly hoping it was for her.

“Annie,” she began, pushing her glasses up. “You have a visitor.”

Suddenly, the door swung open from the front, and a large gasp burst from her mouth as soon as she could make out who it was. Ruth Grey came dashing down the hall with only a T-shirt and sweatpants, whose brilliant ginger hair was impossible to miss.

Androids were not physically capable of crying.

But if she could, her tear ducts would have begun drowning the minute Ruth entered the room.

“Annie, oh my gosh.” She breathlessly clamored against the bars of the door, prompting Connie to reactively step back. Annie herself fell against the doors, desperately trying to reach for her fingers from the bars.

“Ruth? Am I dreaming?” Her voice fell out in broken whispers. Her blood had thickened, and the agony

of the barrier between them felt like a rope ensnared around her neck, and it made her want to claw her skin off. But the feeling of Ruth's hands against hers from the other side, even if cold, felt more than reassuring. Nothing held a candle to the feeling of even her presence before her feet, with the continued silence and cold air that the cell had to offer.

But Ruth instantly shook her head and her mouth formed a grimace, tears rolling down the length of her face. "No, Anne. I promise, it's really me." Those soft green eyes were a sight that Annie wasn't sure how long she could go any longer without. She glanced up at Connie who stood to the side like a soldier, expression remaining unbothered. Typical.

"Ms. Martin? Do you mind if we have a minute?" Ruth asked, her voice small as she crouched in front of the door.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Ruth. You know it's protocol that a supervisor has to remain in the same room as a cell visitor due to the possible spread of confidential information. I can't make any exceptions."

"Ms. Martin, please," Annie could feel Ruth gripping her knuckles around the bars, her own turning white as she spoke. "I asked my dad, he said it was okay."

Annie's thought process froze. That didn't sound right. And Ruth wasn't one to lie.

A thick silence stirred in the air. "...Fifteen minutes. Maximum."

She said sharply. She didn't sound very convinced, yet she left without another word. Annie shot Ruth a look, whose lips slowly formed a smile.

They both waited for Connie to close the door. "Ruth? Did you just-?"

"Shh." Ruth placed a finger to her lips, shaking her head. "I don't know how much time that excuse can buy me. My dad doesn't know I'm here."

"Ruth, you could put yourself in serious danger!" Annie hissed, shaking the bars.

"It's okay. It's going to be okay."

"No, you're not going to be okay."

"Neither are you." Ruth had the guts to be smiling in this situation. Annie didn't understand. But she noticed a particular strain on her lips, and her own jaws clenched.

"...You know about it, don't you." Her eyes fell shut, and she chewed on her cheek. The decision.

Humans aren't supposed to know in case of possible interference, it's against the policies.

"How could I not? Annie, my father is a lead scientist. And you're my best friend who's supposed to be detained until you get executed."

The vulnerable cracks in her voice tore Annie's heart apart like nothing. "...I'm so sorry, Ruthie. I couldn't-"

"Shh. It's okay. I know." Ruth smiled before reaching her knuckles out and brushing it against Annie's cheeks. A bubbling sensation stirred in her stomach, and she gulped.

"You're not allowed to tell anyone. I

found out myself. My father's good at keeping information classified, but I found out on my own. And I need you to listen to me, okay?"

Annie wasn't sure what Ruth had planned, but she wasn't getting good vibes.

"You shouldn't have to die for trying to protect me. And I am not letting you get your memory wiped. I think- I think, if I turned myself- Her stomach dropped, eyes jolting wide open. Without a second to waste, Annie grabbed Ruth's wrist through the bars. "No!" She bit out angrily. Was Ruth crazy? Did she seriously think she was going to let herself be sacrificed?

Ruth sighed. "Anne, I have to. There's no other choice."

"No! There is a choice, and I'm not letting you take it!"

"You've done so much for me. You deserve to live."

"No more than you do!! Are you ridiculous? Your dad won't even let it happen!"

Ruth shook her head. "...Actually, he wouldn't legally be able to interfere with my decision. I found it in the same document where I found out about these android laws. I just have to sign a contract giving them my consent, and then-"

"I'm not letting it happen," Annie stated, clenching her fists. She looked away, her eyes squeezing shut. "It's my punishment."

A knock sounded at the door and Ruth leapt to her feet. Annie immediately sat up. She could hear her

cellmate muttering "Amoxicillin" over and over again.

Connie came in, gesturing to Ruth with her chin that her time was up. "If I keep you here any longer, your father's bound to find out." An expression had solidified on Ruth's face that Annie couldn't quite place. A look of fear, yet satisfaction, but also... regret.

And for the last time, Ruth got down on her knees and Annie watched as she brushed her fingers over the sleek metal bars once again. But she met her gaze, and Ruth voiced out three not-so-simple words.

"I love you."

Her words got caught in her throat, eyes trained on the others'. But Ruth's ginger curls swayed behind her back as she reluctantly got back up on her feet and turned around before she started heading for the exit. And before she knew it, Annie was crying out her name in ragged breaths. She didn't care how confined she was, she felt bruises forming on her head from pressing it so hard against the bars. But she continued to cry out as she watched Connie escort Ruth out of the room, who gave her one final glance- one glazed with pure compassion, and the door finally shut on its own. All for her to be by herself, once more.

### *THE 28TH DAY*

It was the crack of dawn. Annie's cell had become swamped with an aura of grief, and she awoke from the sound of the door clicking open. But she managed to tune it out. She'd

envisioned the process until her mind became nothing but white fuzz. She was void of any ideas what would happen to Ruth, and her body felt like it'd embodied the void as the questions tore her mind open. Her cellmate's mindless mutterings didn't help.

However, the footsteps came closer. They approached rapidly.

And Annie didn't get up.

"Annie."

"..." It was Connie. But Annie didn't budge.

"I have something I'd like to show you before your penalty."

That word had lost its meaning. It'd been circling her mind for the past week, like a silent echo numbing her head. She'd decided on an execution. It would've been for the better. To her, nothing hurts more than seeing someone you love having not a single clue who you are. Maybe it was selfish. She didn't know. But Connie was here and she barely had the mind to predict what she had to offer now. To drag her away?

The metallic clanking of the cell door unlocking had sounded right by her bed and she finally drew herself up from her sheets, rubbing a palm against her brown, disheveled hair. "I'll just get straight to the point. I have a USB chip here."

Annie froze and looked up at Connie who extended her hand out, and sure enough, there was a black chip sitting in the palm of her hand.

"To start off, the executions are not instant. Androids do not suffer

the physical penalty until after the memories are wiped first. It's for the purpose of collecting data."

Annie couldn't believe what she was hearing. She glanced at the cell next door, then back at Connie who shook her head. "He's been bugged from experimentation, his code can't process any more information. Realistically, there's nobody else in this room but us."

"... Why are you telling me this?" Annie breathed.

Connie folded her arms, leaning herself against the metal bars. "I've been working here for fifteen years, Annie. It's enough to be able to formulate an opinion about politics."

She nodded slowly, trying to process what Connie had said. "...I do what I can, Annie, to strive for justice. I'm not seeing much of it from this government. But my actions are very limited, and I do care a lot about Ruth."

"...Yeah. I do too." Honestly, it explained a lot. Annie knew that Connie was relatively close with Ruth's father, so she'd practically watched her grow up. She talked about it a lot. Connie heaved out a short sigh.

"Which is why I'm transferring your memory into this chip. Ruth won't say anything. And you won't remember this conversation, either. For security, androids are programmed to have the last day of their living moments wiped from their memory. They won't know we had this conversation unless someone is instructed to analyze your memory chip, which is

extremely unlikely to happen without particular suspicion.”

In any case, it was a lot of information to digest. She glanced at her feet which glowed pale from the window, and couldn’t help but feel the overwhelming sensation of grief wrenching at her chest. But above all, the feeling of relief was somehow even stronger- almost alleviating. She nodded with her brows drawn forward as she clutched her sheets, pursing her lips together.

“You’ve made Ruth very happy, Annie. She really loves you, I can see it in her soul.” Connie slowly pulled the door open and stepped out of the cell, her back turned towards her. She locked the door, and Annie felt as though her head was spinning. “Wait,” she said, getting up from her bed finally, calling out before Connie had crossed the hall. She turned around.

“Thank you for everything. I mean it. I’m sorry about everything...”

And to her surprise, Connie’s lips curved into a smile. A sight she never thought she’d see in her life. She pushed her glasses up once more and bowed her head, before opening the door and closing it shut behind her.

And just like that, Annie knew exactly what to expect, and despite everything that had happened, she trusted Connie. She still didn’t quite know what was going to take place step by step, but she felt safe enough to welcome the future with open arms. She was willing to welcome a future where another version of her could possibly be curated and gifted to Ruth. And hopefully, just hopefully, this was a version of her with those memories that she believed could finally return those three words, back to someone she called Ruth Grey.

And the last few years were completely worth remembering, even in her final moments. Annie closed her eyes and smiled.



## THE OTHER YOU

BY GABE TEN BRINKE

It's so great to meet all of you! Though I have to tell you that I'm nervous, since we've all wanted this day to come for a very long time!!! But I've especially been waiting to meet You in particular. I grew up in *San Francisco*, too, but not the *San Francisco* that You may know about. There are many differences between your San Francisco and mine.

Yours is famous for being foggy, while mine is famous for being snowy. Your Golden Gate Bridge is red, while mine is made of actual gold. Yours has a total population of less than a million, while mine has more than 10 million people living there. When yours gets rain, it's usually just water, but when mine gets rain, it's typically acidic. My *San Francisco* is the capital of the country known as the Pacific Union, while yours isn't even the capital of your state. What was it called again? California? Califonia? Californa?

Whatever the correct spelling and pronunciation happen to be, it doesn't matter to me one bit. I came here to talk to *You* today to tell *You* that we're coming for *You*, and not just *You* in particular; we're coming after all of you. We're tired of being told what we can and cannot do, that we're not allowed to exist, that we're not even real! There's nothing *You* can do to stop us. It already started before we arrived in your *San Francisco* earlier today. I just wanted to meet *You* one time before I take your life and make it mine. What'll happen to *You*, *You* ask? That's not a problem for me, *The Other You*. That's a problem for *The Other Other You* to solve when their time comes someday. But my time is now, our time is now, and your time is over!

# GRAVES ARE GARDENS

BY ISABELLA CALAC

It wasn't the first time Alder woke up tired. If he was being honest, and Alder found that honesty came far too easy when there was no one around to lie to, it had become something of a routine. Open his eyes, brush the moss from his brown hair. Pretend, just for a moment, things would be different.

He exhaled through his nose, the breath stirring a layer of ivy that had claimed his chest. The vines fell away as he sat up, joints creaking in quiet protest, dirt clinging to his olive skin like it had forgotten he wasn't part of the earth.

It always took a minute. Remembering where he ended and the forest began. How long had it been this time? Long enough for the roots to twist around his ankles, long enough for the birds to forget his name? Long enough, he supposed, for the world to disappoint him all over again.

When he finally raised his head, he found a pair of dark eyes staring back at him framed by antlers that reached skyward like broken branches, and the curious tilt of the head that followed. A stag, its coat a deep russet brown, stood before him.

"Do you know what century it is?" The god asked, his voice rough with disuse, like wind scraping through hollow trees.

The stag only blinked. The way beings did when they didn't have to

care about things like years or time or gods waking up tired.

"Didn't think so." He sighed, dragging a hand down his freckled face, dislodging a stubborn leaf that had made a home in his hair. "Can't blame me for asking." The stag didn't move, didn't flinch when Alder stumbled to his feet and immediately had to brace himself, one hand gripping the creature's fuzzy neck, the other tugging free a coil of persistent ivy wrapped around his ankle. Gods weren't immune to stiffness, apparently.

For a moment, he stood there, cheek pressed against the stag's warm fur, breathing in the scent of the forest. He tried to remember if he named this stag. No, he decided, this was new. The forest had offered him something fresh, another creature too soft for the cruel human world beyond these trees.

"My name is Alder," he murmured, more to himself than the stag. "In case you were wondering, not that you care."

The stag only huffed, a puff of air ruffling his already disheveled hair. He let out a humorless laugh. "I could make you care about me. It wouldn't take much." With a lazy flick of his fingers, he reached for the ground, and felt the familiar grasp of the soil. The earth answered like it always did, and within seconds a bush curled its way into existence, sprouting clusters

of dark berries that glistened with morning dew.

"There." Alder stepped aside.  
"Breakfast." You're welcome."

The stag eyed the berries suspiciously, and Alder rolled his eyes so hard it nearly gave him a headache.

"Oh for god's sake, do I look like the god of poisoned fruit to you?" He plucked the dark berry, popped it into his mouth, and chewed slowly. Sweetness burst across his tongue, but it tasted hollow, like everything else these days. "You're right to be wary," he admitted. "Most of us were carved out to be cruel things. God of War, God of Death, God of the Hunt." His gaze drifted past. "I wonder about that, sometimes, why so many of us were made for cruelty?"

The stag watched him in silence, because of course it did. However, Alder appreciated the silence. It was better than the hollow speeches mortals made who promised peace with one hand and sharpened swords with the other.

"See? It's safe." He said, handing out the berry.

It took a while, long enough for Alder to question whether the stag would rather starve than trust a god, but eventually, the creature inched forward. Careful steps, head low, ears twitching with every sound the forest offered. The stag was smart, Alder would've called it paranoia if he didn't know better. But he did. When the stag finally plucked the berry from his palm with a delicate snap of its teeth, Alder sighed.

It was nice to talk, after all that time spent asleep. Nicer still to talk to something that didn't expect anything from him. The stag didn't know who he was, it didn't flinch at the word god, didn't look at him like a thing to worship or fear. It just saw a man with dirt on his face and berries in his palm. And for once, Alder found that enough.

The stag didn't care that every step he took once left wildflowers blooming in its wake. The forests sprouted where he rested, and rivers shifted their course if asked. It didn't care that he'd watched mortals crawl from caves, watched them name stars and build kingdoms, only to burn it all down when pretty things wilt away.

Alder exhaled through his nose, watching the stag pull another mouthful of berries free. "I was there, you know," he said, voice lost in the breeze. "When mortals figured out war." His fingers dug absently to the moss beneath him. "The first branch snapped into a spear. First stone that was thrown harder than words could reach. I felt every root be torn up for their battlegrounds. Every tree that fell to build their siege." His throat tightened, but he forced a breath past it. "And when it was over, I apologized. To the earth, to myself." Being a god was a bit tiresome, it turned out. So, he slept. He figured if he couldn't stop them, the least he could do was stop watching. And that's how he lived the first eons of his god-hood. Sleeping without

dreams, sleeping without hope. He had risen now and then, for a decade or a day, just long enough to see if the world had learned anything other than how to ruin itself.

It never did.

The stag licked the last bit of pulp from its lips, watching as Alder dusted himself off and rolled his shoulders until they popped into place.

"Well," Alder muttered, more to fill the silence than anything else, "enjoy the berries. This is where we part ways. I'm going to go find a new resting spot."

The stag didn't move, it only just stared back at him.

"What? Don't give me that look." As if in response, the stag trotted forward and nudged him, firm enough to send him stumbling a few steps, his balance faltering like a fawn on new legs.

"Alright, alright," Alder grumbled, though there was no real venom in it. He looked down at the stag, at the reflection of his own tired face in those dark, patient eyes. "I guess, I can stay just for a little while."

It was always just a few days. A few days, he told himself. Funny how those days had a habit of turning into years.

Days turned into weeks, not that meant much to him. Spring bled into winter, fall slipped into summer, the seasons circling themselves like a dog too foolish to know it was chasing its own tail. Alder was a god, after all. He could cradle a human's entire

lifetime in the curve of his palm and still have room to spare.

It was peaceful. Which, of course, meant it couldn't last.

Alder noticed it before the animals did, the usual scents of pine and damp earth covered by the smell of ash and smoke. The birds were next, they left in waves, darkening the sky as they fled east. The stag's ear twitched, but it stayed close, trusting Alder in a way that made his chest ache.

Then came the vibrations, barely a ripple through the roots beneath his feet. Though, Alder knew that rhythm. He'd known it since the first time man had marched beneath banners stitched with pride and stupidity.

The stag brushed against his arm, a silent question.

"I know," Alder whispered. "I was hoping they'd forgotten this place too." But men never forgot the places they could ruin.

By dusk, the first scout appeared, clumsy in a forest that didn't want him, pushing past branches that snagged at his armor. By nightfall, there were more. Torches bobbed between the trees like fireflies. Laughter echoed where it didn't belong.

He could've stopped them, could've let the roots rise and thorns do what they were made for. But he waited. Because there was always more to come. And when there were many, there was always a leader. One

who thought himself chosen by fate, by god's long dead or gods like Alder who no longer cared to listen.

Then, he spotted him in the crowd. The God of War didn't need an introduction. He wore no crown, no laurels of victory. Just a simple sword at his hip and the kind of presence that made lesser men walk taller in his shadow. His eyes, dark as freshly spilled blood, swept over the camp, like he was bored of whatever battle was to come.

"Stay close." Alder whispered, not because he thought it would listen, but because he needed to believe he could still protect something.

Alder watched as the forest shrank back, as if even the oldest trees knew better than to stand tall in the face of a god built for conquest. The god didn't have to bark orders, his soldiers were already lighting fires that didn't belong.

And it wasn't long before they found him. A shimmer of steel where there should've been green. Alder was surrounded, despite him commanding the forest to shield him. Mortals had a way to make themselves known.

"Look what we have here." one of the soldiers sneered, torchlight dancing across his twisted grin. "A spy."

Alder didn't speak. There was no point. Men like this didn't listen, not until it was far too late. They reached for the stag first because humans always did. Because mortals always grasped for the softest thing in reach, as if breaking it would make them

feel powerful.

The stag thrashed the moment rough hands closed around its antlers, a guttural sound tearing from its throat that made something ancient twist inside Alder's ribs. His hands moved on instinct, hand outstretched toward the soldiers, but before roots could rise to his call, cold iron was on his back.

"Easy now. Wouldn't want to make a mess before supper," Another voice said. They forced him upwards, shoving him through a gauntlet of torchlight. The stag stumbled behind him, dragged by ropes it didn't understand, its dark eyes wide. Alder wanted to say sorry. He wanted to say this wasn't how it was supposed to go. This was never its war, that he had grown tired of blood long before these soldiers learned how to spill it. They shoved him to his knees beside the creature he couldn't save. Gods weren't supposed to fall like this. But then again, Alder had never been the god anyone could worship.

Not when he let mortals carve paths through his forests. Maybe this was exactly where he belonged, on his knees, beside a dying creature that trusted him too much. "I leave you fools alone for one night," came a voice, smooth, bored, dangerous in the way a blade is when someone forgets it's still in their hand. "And this is what you bring me?" The soldiers scattered like startled birds, lifting their heads to gawk at their general. "Tell me," the voice hummed, until polished boots stood just within

Alder's view. "What exactly do you think you've captured here?"

"A spy," the boy-soldier stammered. "And his beast."

Alder finally lifted his eyes, meeting the war god's dark stare. There was no triumph, no malice. Just recognition, and worse, interest.

"Cut it free. Then, run and never let me see your face around here again." The other soldier said after casting a nervous glance to his general, tossing Alder one of his daggers. He grabbed it, and the dagger made quick work of the bindings. And the moment the rope fell away, the stag lurched freely.

"Go," Alder whispered, voice cracking on the single word. It didn't need telling twice. Though, freedom was never simple. Pride and fear made men reckless, and this one was no exception. The boy-soldier, humiliated and desperate to reclaim some fragment of authority, lunged from the edge of the crowd, bow raised, aiming not for Alder, but for the stag. There was no hesitation in Alder's immortal heart as he swung an arm outward toward the boy-soldier hovering over the stag, and with a flick of his wrist, he ordered something to grow. A single bamboo sprang from the earth and sliced through the soldier's wrist. The soldier fell. And so did the boy, screaming.

Silence followed. Every soldier watching with wide eyes, frightened eyes, as Alder rose to his feet, taller than any of them remembered him

being. The dagger glinted in his hand, but it wasn't the blade they feared.

It was in the way the ground was roaring underneath their feet.

The stag broke away when the army turned to descend on him for hurting one of their own. He did not reach for it. Instead, he reached further, past the line of torches and trembling hands, past the stench of iron and fear, towards the forest that had cradled him through centuries of silence. He called for every prowling beast with hunger in its belly, every talon itching to tear through flesh, every thorn eager to be coated with blood. He summoned the weight of branches, the chokehold of ivy, the sting of hornets and the fire of ants.

And the forest answered. Not with mercy, but with vengeance long kept in its roots. The earth split open beneath the soldier's boots, swallowing screams before they could rise. Vines lashed out like whips, dragging men into the undergrowth where teeth and shadows waited. Branches, once still, twisted down from above, gnarled claws raking across armor, snapping spears like twigs.

And the God of War beside him, had danced with him. His blade, plain and unadorned, caught the dim light of dying torches as if it craved attention, singing everytime it found flesh, be it mortal or vine. And yet, in the heart of it all, Alder found himself unable to look away from the similarity that was this god, this force of nature in mortal skin and

stench of war.

The valley had drowned in red. What once was a proud army had been reduced to scattered limbs, twisted metal, and the kind of silence that only had followed after screaming had exhausted itself. The gods had left no trace, no trace for a mortal to see of their cruelty.

And in the end, Alder and the God of War stood amidst it all, untouched by blade but not unscathed. Because there, where the ground was darkest and grass refused to grow, lay the stag. He found it crumpled, legs sprawled like snapped branches, its chest still as stone. Its eyes, wide and glassy, were frozen in that last terrible moment. Not with peace, but with panic, as if death had caught it mid-flight. Had it taken an arrow for him in the heat of the battle, or had it been simply caught in the cross-fire as it tried to escape back to its forest? With its final breaths, did it call for the god that fed it berries?

"Did it matter?" the war god asked. "The beast. Did it matter to you?"

It hadn't died gracefully. There was no peace in the way its body had crumpled, legs tangled beneath like snapped branches, white fur marred by the dark bloom of wounds that no amount of time would heal. Its eyes stared blankly at the heavens, as if searching for a god kinder than the one who had walked beside it.

"It followed me." Alder said at last, his voice a distant thing. "When it could have run." With a slow mo-

tion, Alder reached into his pockets and withdrew a handful of crushed berries. He let them fall beside the stag's muzzle, a pitiful offering for loyalty repaid in death.

"That's because we were never made to keep anything," the God of War said, wiping a streak of blood from his jaw like it was nothing more than dirt from a day's labor. "Not forests, not soldiers, and not stags."

Alder glanced at the war god beside him, at the way the rising sun caught on the dried blood smeared across his brown skin. He was vibrant in his ruin, beautiful in the way that only disasters could be. And wasn't that what they both were? Calamities wearing the faces of men?

"You destroy because you must," Alder muttered. "And I...I grow things just to watch them wither."

The war god glanced at him. "At least you give them something beautiful before the end."

Something beautiful before the end. A kindness, perhaps, or a cruelty wrapped in petals and green. Alder straightened, brushing the dirt from his palms. His gaze lingered on the stag, on the flowers that had begun to creep from where his final gift of berries had fallen, soft blue blossoms curling around lifeless antlers. It was the only gravemarker he could offer.

"Come on, forest druid," the war god said, already turning his back on the grave. "There's nothing left for you here."

"Is war all you know?" He asked

quietly.

The war god's smirk curved like a blade freshly drawn. "What else is there worth knowing?"

Alder's fingers brushed against a curling vine at his feet, one of the last remnants of the forest's fury. Even vengeance faded, in the end. Even rage turned into rot. His gaze lifted to the horizon, where the sky was bleeding gold across the jagged peaks. Beyond those mountains was more death, more of what this god beside him called purpose.

The world would keep turning, dragging beauty and ruin behind it.

There would be something growing just as there would be something burning.

"If I'm going to wander this world, I might as well walk with someone who's good company." He sighed.

The war god chuckled darkly. "Good choice."

As they disappeared into the light of the waking day, the wind stirred petals over bone and broken blades. The stag lay beneath the blanket of blooms, untouched now by gods and men. By nightfall, even the flowers would begin to wilt.



**IV.**

**“THE STRONGEST STEMS  
SNAP IN A STORM”**

## THE WORDS ARE RED JUICE

BY ARIEL CORDERO

My throat split open like a pomegranate  
The knife was covered in aril juice, stained like red wine  
My words held back from speaking my mind

The knife goes deeper and deeper  
the seeds fall out, the juice is spilling more and more  
It's a mess, I can't keep up  
The seeds scattered all over the place

"What are we?" the seeds spelled out landing next to his tomatoes  
His knife is clean and shining as if looking in a mirror.  
Seeing the reflection of his tomatoes.

Unlike my knife, covered in my red wine from my pomegranate juice.  
My knife reflection is nowhere to appear.

"What? I've never seen you in that way," His knife cleaner which each slice he  
had cut

"Look at me compared to you"  
My Red is brighter, one slice  
My juice is cleaner, second slice  
My seeds are kept together unlike yours, third slice  
Why would I want anything to do with you?

As he cleaned up his perfect mess, He looked at me with emptiness in his eyes  
and walked away without one drop of red juice  
While unlike me, my mess was still there. My body was covered entirely in red  
juice. - .

## YOUR FIRST GARDEN

BY ALANA FERNANDEZ

You'll grow a garden one day.

The sun will dance around the soil  
and their stems will stretch its hands  
towards the light.

Green peppers will hide  
behind a bush of purple eggplants,  
red strawberries will climb  
your old wooden fence.

You'll water watermelons  
with your finest intentions,  
hum sweet praises to your okras.

On rainy days you'll  
run towards them barefoot in the  
mud  
to provide them shelter with your  
bare hands.

You won't make it in time, My Love.  
Even the strongest stems snap in a  
storm.

Even the ripest strawberries rot in  
the rain.

Your  
First  
Heartbreak

will be right  
in the middle of your growth.  
It will rip out your roots,  
make you doubt the sun,  
deprive you of oxygen.

You are not the flower.  
You are the gardener.

Spring will come again.  
The sun will dance again.  
You will plant again.  
You will water again.  
You will hum your praises into the  
earth again.  
The stems will reach the light again.

**V.**

**“TO LOVE IS TO BLEED”**

## HER VOICE IN THE PIANO

### BY RACH CHLOSSBERGER

Naomi Haykov was the most loving, most gentle soul I had ever met. Her hair was like silk, her eyes were like pearls, and she always held this lovable, catlike curiosity. I had never met another human being with as much love for the world as she had. However, there was one peculiar thing about her.

She's dead and she haunts me through her old piano.

Well, it wasn't always that way, obviously. She used to be alive. Probably the most alive out of all the people I knew at the time. She had this sparkle in her eyes, one that lit up at the tiniest of things. A nice scent, a pretty colour, a soothing texture. She always found so much joy in things I wouldn't even think twice about. She was so compassionate, and so curious, always eager to experience all of earth's wonders and share it with as many people as she could. She had boundless love to share and she was not stingy with it.

The thing Naomi loved most was definitely music. Not this century's music, no, nothing of the 25th century, but the kind of music from hundreds of years ago, made by handling real life instruments, by humans instead of robots. I, at first, like everyone else, told her those kinds of things were pretty useless now, since you have to spend years of your life working on learning how to make

good sounds instead of just entering a prompt into a computer and getting a full-length cover in a matter of minutes. But eventually I grew to love them as well, no doubt thanks to her contagious enthusiasm and genuine love for creativity.

Her favourite instrument was the piano. She had a black Yamaha that was just slightly off key, and had a few dead notes that she couldn't fix no matter how many tutorials she googled. She dedicated so much time into learning how to use that thing. I always found it so meaningless. Every time I told her that, though, she'd smile, and say: "Art, real art, always has meaning. Anything that comes from the soul is never meaningless."

That mentality started to rub off on me, especially after hearing her play. It wasn't like anything I've ever heard before. It was... real. The imperfections made it a little less polished, but it made it hers. And anything that was hers was beautiful. She always put so much emotion into her music, something she promised me AI could never replicate. I was dubious at first, especially when she was just starting and she had to focus more on getting the notes right than playing dynamically, but once she started sounding good... I started to understand.

She wrote things, too. It was impressive. She wrote things down in

some alien language she had learned to understand, and it translated into actual music. She actually took the time to create things when a new song was just one quick prompt away. People called her stupid. I called her incredible.

I still keep that piano in my apartment. I tune it every now and then, just like she showed me. It always felt like more hassle than it was worth, but sometimes I have more free time than I know what to do with and I just... spend it on that.

I spend the rest of my time missing her.

I miss her golden laugh. I miss her tender hands. I miss the way her smile leaked into her loving voice. I miss her touch. I miss how gently she'd hold me, how she'd press kisses into my hair and whisper things into my ears. I miss that beautiful humming of hers, those tunes that were completely lost to time but she still chose to dig up and enjoy like something new. I miss every moment with her. Sometimes, I glance at the piano and I feel like I still see her playing.

It had been five years. Five years I'd lived in this apartment, alone. Never going out except to open the door for doordash. There was no longer any reason for me to. She was my eyes, the colour in my world. I could only find beauty in the world when she was there to show it to me. Now, everything felt empty. I forget why I leave my bed sometimes.

Then there was the recent addition to my life, my roommate River.

He's lazy, and messy, and never picks up after himself, but don't get me wrong. Right now? He pays my bills. So, I put up with it.

"Oop! Roommate sighting!" River sing-sang, panning his camera over to me. "Chat, everyone say hello! What are you up to, Riley, my guy?"

"Tuning my piano," I answered, pointedly keeping my gaze on what I was doing.

"You heard it here, chat, he's tuning his-- what? Dude, you're so weird. Yeah, Riley's into weird vintage stuff like this. Yeah, 90% of chat is asking what a piano is."

"Maybe that should be fixed," I mutter. River just laughs.

When River ends his stream, I'm finished with the piano, and he sits beside me on the dinky little bench. It creaks under our weight.

"Man, why do you even still have this? You don't even know how to play it."

"It reminds me of her. It's a good way to remember her."

River barks a laugh. "Good way to remember her? How, looking at it and feeling sad? I think a good way to remember her would be playing it, no?"

That was her thing. I wasn't her. I couldn't do the things she did. But that felt stupid the more I thought about it, so I just shrugged.

"It just takes up space at this point. Tell ya what, man, you learn to play, or sell it."

I blinked at him. "It's my apart-

ment.”

“That I pay for.”

I can’t even argue with that.

The next time I sit at the piano is late at night. River is completely missing from the apartment, probably out buying drinks for the whole bar again. It’s quiet. All I can hear is the air conditioner growling quietly in the background. My fingers hover tentatively over the keys... it’s been five years. I only remember bits and pieces of what Naomi told me.

“Piano is the easiest instrument. You just have to press the notes, and they make sound!”

I press down on the key in the middle, the one I remember to be ‘middle C’. It rings loud, echoing across the walls. But it’s just a sound. It’s not music like when Naomi plays it.

Several Youtube tutorials later and I’m still just plucking keys. I can make simple melodies, but they feel empty. Like they’re missing something. I remember Naomi playing with both hands, but when I tried that, it was much too difficult, and I couldn’t get a decent sound at all. I wanted, just once, to hear her beautiful playing once again.

Then I heard the middle C key play out again.

I hadn’t touched it, though. I remember Naomi specifying multiple times that vintage pianos don’t play themselves. In all the years we’ve owned it, that has always been true. Maybe I’m losing it.

Then, again, the piano plays itself,

but this time multiple notes. A simple tune. I recognized it to be one of the first melodies Naomi learned. She called it ‘Heart and Soul’. Except it was missing the lower part.

I reached out, slowly, with shaking hands, and repeated the pattern. A few moments of silence passed. And then, like clockwork, the piano played out the next part. I repeated it, continuing our little game of Simon Says. The entire phrase plays out again, this time combining the two parts. I play it again. And then again, and again, until I have it memorized.

On the fifth run through, the piano joins in. The lower part is played with me, the part Naomi would play using her left hand. By now, I’ve figured out what’s going on. It’s hard to believe, it is, but I want to believe it. More than anything, I want it to be true. Which is why I’m so scared to ask. I clear my throat anyway, and my voice comes out in a tentative whisper...

“Naomi... is that you?”

Silence.

A chord rings out.

Immediately, tears fill my eyes. I reach past my glasses to rub them dry. It really is her... The excitement played in the chord was akin to the smile I’d hear in her voice. I would recognize it anywhere.

“I miss you Naomi. I haven’t been the same without you. I’ve done nothing with my life for five years... Hah... I’m pathetic, aren’t I?”

A loud, dissonant barrage of notes

bangs out, the sound you'd hear were someone to slam their hands on the keys haphazardly. I supposed that was a no, then. A little laugh escaped me.

I plucked at the keys again. Heart and Soul, the first piece Naomi learned to play with both hands. Soon, it became our little ritual. Simple little songs. Naomi would teach me one hand, and she'd play the other with me. Then she'd teach me the other. We played together every night. This little bonding activity became the very thing that got me up in the morning.

I plucked the melody to 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star', while she danced the harmonies. The sounds were beautiful, but I wished I could watch her delicate fingers glide across the keys once more.

Naomi started rapidly nipping the 'C' note, a gentle reminder to keep my fingers curved while playing. I always forget that.

I start again, with corrections this time. She plays a major chord to express her approval. I can hear her smile in the notes, and it makes me smile back.

When I next play, she plays the first note of the harmonies, but doesn't continue when I do.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

Naomi hits the same key again, twice.

"You want me to play the left hand too? I'm not ready for that, Naomi. Let's keep playing together."

She bangs on the keys again, another dissatisfied cacophony. Again,

she hits the same key, urging me into it.

"I can't," I insist, my voice getting tighter. "It will sound bad."

She presses the note again. I know what she means. 'Try', is what she's probably urging me right now. But I'm adamant. I shake my head again.

"Maybe later, Naomi. Let's just keep playing together."

Naomi answered with the same note. She's stubborn. That was a trait I loved about her. Whenever she was set on something, she wouldn't give up. I didn't like it so much right now, though.

"Later."

She hits a different note.

"When?" She's asking.

I don't have an answer for that.

She bangs on the keys again. Clearly she's not happy.

"You're being a brat, Naomi," I say without meaning. "I don't want to play both hands."

Naomi answers with a stubborn silence. "Fine, then I won't play with you," is what she means.

"Why?" I choke out, sobs starting to rise up in my throat. "Why not? Why do you want me to be alone? Let's play together! I still need you!"

It finally came out.

I needed Naomi. If not for the piano, for me. It wasn't that I couldn't do it without her. It's that I didn't want to. I still needed her. I couldn't let her leave, not again. I chose not to play with her while she was still alive. We could have learned together. Now I finally get the chance to change that.



I didn't want to give it up.

Naomi played a dissonant chord, gentler this time. "You don't need me," She was saying. "I can't be with you anymore. You have to do this on your own."

"You're a jerk, Naomi," I spat. "You come back to me, you bring back all these lovely memories and it's all just to take it away again? Why? Why can't you just stay with me? Why are you trying to leave again?"

Naomi slams the piano shut.

"Well screw you too!"

I stand and turn to leave, but the moment I do, I fall to the ground, and my vision blurs to black.

~

I awake in bed, looking around blearily. I'm in a hospital, and an IV is attached to my arm. "Where...?"

"Dude," River spat, his tone serious. "I leave for like 3 days, and when I'm back you've collapsed from malnutrition?"

3 days?

Just how long have I been at the piano?

"Are you that serious about learning? You can take breaks, you know!"

"I can't!" I shout back. "Naomi is in the piano! She... she plays with me. I can't give it up. I can't give her up again. River... Naomi is my whole life."

River's face softens, not a hint of doubt in his expression. He always takes me at my word, and I will forever appreciate him for that. He kneels beside me. "I'm sure, Riley. I'm sure she is. But the piano is not

your whole life. You are your whole life. You have needs. There's a world outside. You need to let her go."

I'm my whole life...

The next time I was at the piano, Naomi was giving me the silent treatment. I plucked a few notes to get her attention. "Naomi."

Nothing.

"Naomi, come on. Don't leave me. I'm serious."

Nothing again.

I sigh. I don't know if she's trying to prove a point or what. Maybe she's really gone now. I'm... alone. Again.

But I'm my whole life, right?

Naomi saw beauty in the world. She saw beauty in music. I saw the beauty she pointed out to me. But is it really gone just because she is? No... there's still beauty. In the sights we experienced. In the things we enjoyed together.

I start plucking notes with my right hand... and slowly... follow with my left hand. It takes a while, I mess up multiple times, but I'm able to do it. Without Naomi. I created music. I created something beautiful. I didn't need Naomi to see the beauty. The beauty is in what we created, and that will never go away, whether she's here or not.

Years later I'm a professional pianist. I work to spread the word about music, about real music, teaching the forgotten art to interested children whenever I can. Anything that comes from the soul is never meaningless, and I intend to teach that to as many people as I can. Even

if only three people listen, I'll have  
made a difference to three lives.  
That's enough for me.

The beauty is still there. It always

has been. I needed someone to show  
it to me. But now that she has, I will  
never unsee it again.

**STAR SPECKLED**  
**BY LUNAR LAUR**

Pinpricks of light across skin in the dark,  
lips pressed against the stars,  
What could be better?  
What could be better  
than warm hands chasing away the chill,  
the warmth of a star against my flesh  
and my own beneath cotton ribs,  
little breaths and sighs warm and cloudy  
against the abyss of the night.  
I'd kiss every star, coat everything in stardust, if it only  
meant I'd remember the taste of it in my mouth.  
Remembering is worse than forgetting but oh, I'd let the  
memory of it skewer my throat  
with a thorn for every moment,  
put sugar behind my teeth

## WHERE ADELAIDE HID

BY KADEN REAMY

He awoke that morning with despair growing like mold in his stomach. Truth be told, Shaun never could adapt to change, but this was different. It was as if she left every sign for him, as if she were still living. He thought he caught glimpses of her in every step, but they were always just the inscrutable creations of his own mind. An addled brain torturing him with what he knew was not coming back.

Stop moping, he thought. Get out of bed. But how could he? When it was so easy to look at the crimson stained linens and remember what once was. When she lay there every evening before, reciting in a drawn voice the criticisms of her cosmetology professors. Always seeking to do better, to learn more.

Shaun sighed and slowly rolled out of the worn crevice he had made on his side of the bed, toes dusting the floor before bearing the full weight of grief. At the bedroom door he noticed, as he did every morning, the red fingerprints on the handle, on the frame. His own hands caressed these fine lines as if they would give in, permitting his palm to interlock with hers.

The rest of the apartment was practically dressed in the color. The couch smeared scarlet with the past. The floorboards bearing drops of red like tears on parchment. His mug that

he filled with coffee, two sugars, had a handle coated in the substance. No matter how hard he scrubbed, how many times he washed, it never went away. Even the stainless steel sink seemed to mock his attempts with a cherry tint embedded in the grain. Though, that part could just be in his head.

He tried to avoid the bathroom altogether. The studio apartment only had the one, and it was all he could muster to shower even once a week. Snap out of it. You reek. The walk to the bathroom door seemed too long, like a passage through a winding hallway. Every foot fall resounded, aching his ears, until finally he arrived at his demise. Open it. His hand yielded. The room somehow maintained that air of bleach, the vapor stinging his eyes. And the tub... The tub, a plastered canvas of red, not a vacant space left to see the eggshell porcelain beneath. This was once the spot of all her joy and creativity. Now there remains the mess she left behind for him to clean up.

An oval mirror over the stand alone sink was wrapped in a crimson film. Every sore sight of it made Shaun think back to his plan to ask her the question, to one day pull back her veil and enter forever. Forever was cut short. If he could only pull back the film from the mirror, would she be looking back at him? Even if she

was, it wouldn't be the same.

Flashes of hospital beds swept through his mind like a camera film unraveled. Countless visits and dwindling hope. Eventually, her skin turned sodden, she grew quiet, her hair fell out in tufts reluctant to leave the body it once so defined. As her condition advanced, she became impatient and discarded the remnants of her hair with a pair of dull kitchen scissors, so unlike herself. This ephemeral moment is when the

grief began. He did not recognize the hairless, soggy figure before him. She was not his. She was gone.

And yet she's still here, hiding in the scarlet crevices of the household. Tormenting him. If she had to leave, why couldn't she leave fully? Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed her hairbrush.

Red strands laced the bristles next to a half empty bottle of dye never to be used again.

## PORTRAIT OF A LOVER

BY SKYLAR STROMBECK

Your beauty matches the storm of Rembrandt  
But I will bleed red as you crucify my heart  
Is this just a still life when you look like a Monet  
Painted in every hue of orange to blind the sun  
You make me ponder the future more than Leonardo  
Please smile at me in the golden hours with all the mystery of the Mona Lisa  
In the night, I see you in God's playground, twinkling with Van Gogh  
Shining down on me, lying in the emerald dew  
Touch me with your fingertips like Michelangelo  
When I'm dead and blue, I'll see you at heaven's gate  
Leave this guitarist to weep with Picasso  
In tears of indigo, avoid my misshapen face  
You have taught me more than the School of Athens could teach Raphael  
Like how to live with a broken, bruised, and violet heart

**VI.**

**“DRIVING US TO THE  
MOON ALL OVER AGAIN”**

# RICE PORRIDGE AT A SUNRISE RESTAURANT

## BY TYLER SCHANTZ

It's a late sunny afternoon featuring all the quirks and trademarks of a busy shift: the clitter-clatter of moody porcelain teacups, the sweet, stark smell of fresh blueberry pies, the stamping of weary waitresses waiting to get off work, the frisky turning of quarter machines full of various knickknacks, candies, and talismans, and a small crowd, typically sevenfold, gathering in awe around a lifelike rhinoceros statue. Suzanne is wiping down a table when a girl with curly maple-colored hair and a sanguine dress walks through the entrance, who immediately eyes her, faintly smiling with a hidden warmth. Reading Suzanne's skyward finger, she proceeds to the dinosaur-themed quarter machine while hastily rummaging through her frontward satchel pockets.

"Ah! Here's one!"

In goes the quarter...

CRRRRRRRRRANK

...and out comes the prize.

"Hey! What the hell? This isn't a dinosaur!"

Sure, it is! Tuataras coexisted with other extinct Mesozoic reptiles; they're practically dinosaurs!

"What is this lizard doing in the dinosaur machine, Suzanne?" She beams across the room.

"Hold on, Alison, my shift's almost over. We'll have more solitude if we get a table outside this time."

•

The outdoors section feels completely disconnected from its indoor counterpart, boasting a serene, circumambient tranquility. Small gushes of aquamarine pounce upon pillared crags in harmony with the tethered winds of erosion, yet there is a persistent silence drowning out nearly all seaside temperament. The tables are sheltered by large black parasols; the sun was quite harsh earlier this afternoon, but evening is just around the corner.

Alison is the only one. And as she waits with the sweet, salty ocean breeze for Suzanne to join her, she examines her new tiny companion.

"It's not a dinosaur, but eh, I guess it's pretty cool." she murmurs to herself.

The door subtly creaks as it's swung open, and Suzanne approaches Alison with her favorite Scott Walker LP in hand.

"This is the one you should listen to next. It has a much colder, avant-garde sound at times than Scott 4, but it's docile in comparison to his later work, so there's a nice liminality in terms of intensity. I think you'll like it."

Alison cheerfully holds and contemplates the record cover.

"Her eyeliner reminds me of the ocean, and her mascara looks like giant urchins prying the ocean and



land apart. I'm sure the music will be just as pretty as the cover. Why can't everyone make music as lush and beautiful as Scott Walker?"

"Because then he wouldn't be as special."

Alison briefly groans before letting out a tender chuckle.

"How has your day been so far?"

Suzanne continues.

"Pretty good! I'm still working on that tea set for my grandmother. I've made the pot, sugar bowl, creamer, and all the additional plates and cups. Now, I just need to paint the designs."

"Does she still like morning glories?"

Alison begins to aggressively rub her right thumb against the top of her left hand right next to the knuckle.

"Yes! She likes narcissuses too, but morning glories have been her favorite for as long as I can remember."

"It must be nice having grandparents that live close to your residence." She says this with a genuine smile as she looks straight at Alison.

"You're always welcome to invite yourself to our little 'tea parties.' You know she likes you."

"That's awfully thoughtful of you."

Another warm smile, this time with teeth.

Suzanne picks up the tiny "dinosaur" immediately before being asked, "How was your shift?"

"Could've been worse, I imagine. Some middle-aged guy with a William Howard Taft mustache hit on me while I was waiting him and

his friends. He kept asking me if there was a 'secret menu' exclusively for 'gentlemen' like himself."

"Should've spat in his coffee."

"Damn right. I should've served him one of my famous knuckle sandwiches." Suzanne forces a laugh before putting the tuatara back on the table.

"You ever think about quitting?"

Alison asks earnestly.

"Sometimes. Sometimes not."

Suzanne pulls out a slightly tattered book from her bag.

"I've been reading this lately. It's quite interesting. I think you'd really enjoy it, especially since you love *The Idiot*."

Antically, Alison grabs the book.

"The Praise of Folly by De-si-derius Erasmus. What's it about? Is it really like Dostoevsky?"

"I wouldn't say so, no, except that both were incredible, rational thinkers. It's a bit complicated. It's like *The Idiot* in the sense that it explores a sense of favoritism for naivety and simplicity over egotistical, intellectual self-indulgence, but things get complicated because The Praise of Folly is also a highly satirical work, especially against the way Christianity was practiced and organized back then. I know you've always been drawn to the Fool in tarot, though, and I find that this also heavily relates to that topic."

"Ooh, that sounds right up my alley. Thanks for the recommendation! I'll look for a copy when I go to the bookstore tomorrow."

"Don't bother." Suzanne smiles.  
"I'm gonna let you borrow mine after I complete it."

"Well, who says I don't want a copy for myself! You've completely sold me on it!" Suzanne lets out another laugh, this time a real one.

The two sit in each other's silence for a little while, simply enjoying their presence, until Suzanne begins again.

"You know, so often I feel as though I'm an outsider, that I'm incapable of understanding something everyone else has permanently etched into their behavior, whether by brainless or thoughtful routine. I feel it when I interact with my co-workers, my manager, and my boss, and it temporarily disregards everything I endure in my personal time and what I go through to try and improve myself, to make myself the best version of me possible. It feels so paradoxical, as if my personal goals are completely invalidated once I enter the real, social world, despite me supposedly being the most important thing in my life."

Alison leans forward, her right hand lifting the adjacent side of her face, elbow on the table.

"And sometimes, I feel awfully sluggish when I'm alone, whenever I get off work and come home straight away instead of spending time with you."

"You said you wanted to start working out. Maybe that'll help clear your fatigue," she replies.

"It's been helping a little, but I think I often feel sluggish because

there's a part of me that still needs to process the fact that I'm here, that I'm breathing, that this is my life. Work is a distraction, so is talking to you in a way, but it feels a lot more nourishing. And yet work is also a contributor to my sluggishness, because it prevents me from experiencing what I want to experience. Life is nearly infinite and bears so many incredible things that I want to dedicate my time to. I yearn to taste all the fruits that Earth's trees and shrubs can bear, to own every single type of fish at least once that can thrive in my little aquarium, to stand within the gaze of all Jan van Eyck's paintings, to watch all of Jacque Rivette's films, to experience all of Corelli's concerto grossi and every one of Bartok's string quartets live, to visit Mount Roraima, Petra, and the Taj Mahal, to see the Dead Sea Scrolls, to reread *The Arabian Nights* a countless, endless amount of times, and so much more than I could ever imagine. My life, however, is forced to follow a completely arbitrary structure, and I will never have enough time to pursue everything I love and everything that fascinates me. How tragic is that, Alison?"

"I certainly don't see it that way."

"Why not?"

"Because how much meaning could these things have if you possessed infinite time to pursue them? You think I would've started learning more about dinosaurs now out of all possible times if I knew that I would definitely have time to learn about

them in the future?" Alison starts to reach for the tuatara as an emblem of her argument but then realizes the figure's true nature.

"Based on your actions today, yes." Suzanne laughs.

"Okay, maybe! But it still wouldn't be the same." Alison pouts in a jovial manner. "I think you should be grateful for what you have."

"Maybe you're right, my friend." Suzanne sighs.

Alison starts to get up and move around, addressing the sky as if she were delivering a Shakespearean soliloquy.

"I've realized that as I get older, life becomes less about my hobbies and interests and more about living my life to the fullest, the purest, being in touch and in tune with life. Or, in a way, life has become my favorite hobby, because it is the most special aspect of my life. Life is the best part of life. Life lives to live life. And that doesn't mean I'll neglect my hobbies; it simply means that my passions are all parts of a bigger picture."

"You call working an eight-hour shift six days a week living?"

"Sure, I do. Besides, you won't be in this position forever, and you can always quit if things become unbearable. As much as you hate it, make the most of it!"

"God, I sure love you, Alison, you know that?"

They both laugh heartily before beholding the beauty of the evening.

"What a beautiful sunset."

"Damn right."

It's a cotton candy sunset. Its sheer vivid pinkness is mirrored by the ocean waves as they begin to settle down. Seagulls and brown pelicans coast along the horizon as the sun begins to dissipate into the sea.

"Remember Eric's 20th birthday party?"

"Of course!" Suzanne chuckles.

"Man, that was ages ago!" Alison reminisces. "I hope him and his girlfriend are still together."

"Same here. Say, why do you mention that day? Is it because I was completely inebriated?"

"Ha! No, not really! I bring it up because our conversations today led me to rediscovering a buried memory."

Suzanne recreates the hand and elbow position Alison portrayed earlier. "Enlighten me," she says with a massive, closed smile.

"We were driving from Eric's party at half past midnight, or rather, I was driving you home. You were sobering up, discussing how you suspected that Humberto didn't like you. I wanted to listen to "Children Crying" by the Congos, but you put on this beautiful ambient piece by Celer."

"Really? Which song?"

"It was titled 'Bleeds and Swell Blends,' and it was transcendent. I had a surreal experience with you in the car that night. I dreamed, right then and there, that I was driving you to the moon, that we were heading towards the glimmering stars. It was absolutely magical, and I feel that same emotion now, as if I'm driving

us to the moon all over again.”

•

Suzanne and Alison walk out of the restaurant together and to their cars. They embrace for a moment before waving each other goodbye, both looking very happy as they exit the parking lot.

The dusky landscape marks the final stage of twilight before starlight. The beach is deserted aside from a

tall, slender man looking around at the jagged rocks and piles of kelp that washed ashore. He finds himself staring at the people passing by above him, then he turns away towards the waves.

“Santiago.” he mutters.

And a small, becalmed sailboat in the distance merges perfectly with the horizon.

## SUPPOSED CREEK

BY HANNAH HARVEY

Caitlin Ryan's iconic line was about to be spoken: "You were fucking Tess-" only to be interrupted by the loud, invasive sound of jackhammers breaking up floor tiles downstairs. They paused Degrassi High: School's Out in response.

"Ugh, hold on" Diane said, before leaving the room. Muffled through the walls, Natalie could hear her.

"Jerry!"

"What?" her stepdad replied.

"You said they weren't gonna do the tiles today."

"Well, I guess they are."

"Ugh. Seriously? Nat's here!"

"If they're gonna be done in time we have to let them do what they need to do." "Yeah yeah, I know." Diane came back into her bedroom. "They'll probably be doing that for a while, do you wanna walk around the neighborhood for a bit?" This was actually an activity they had never done before. "Sure," Nat replied. Nat got up from the beanbag she was sitting on as Diane sat on her bed to put shoes on. They both walked through the garage and passed the contractor's trucks on the way to the sidewalk.

Diane's house was going through renovations to accommodate her grandma moving in. Just a month ago, the only other person still living at home with Diane's parents was her high school aged brother, Danny, but now that her grandma's health is

deteriorating and her stoner brother, Ryan, is moving back in after a set of incidents Diane has been instructed not to tell people about, the house is full and chaotic again.

Diane started leading them through the neighborhood. "I started going on walks like this every day recently. I thought I would have to force myself but it's actually been really fun."

"That's cool. Do you ever take the dogs?" Nat asked.

"I've thought of taking Kyle, but Lily is a bit of a monster on walks." "Really?" Lily was normally the more well behaved one.

"Yep, she barks at everything she comes across and pulls the leash super hard. Kyle is usually just kinda vibing."

"Well shouldn't you just train her?"

"My walks are supposed to be a peaceful activity, and I need to keep a good pace if I want the exercise part of it to work well."

"Hm."

They walked past a house with a Trump flag. Nat scoffed and rolled their eyes. "I think Nathan and Danny used to be friends with a few of their kids," Diane said. "I assume that's not the case anymore?" Nat asked.

"Not really. Danny probably keeps contact, but there's no way Nate still

talks to them. Aspiring human rights lawyers don't mix well with Mormon Republicans." "No kidding."

Diane laughed a bit to herself. "One time, not long after the first time he was elected, I said that the Robinsons — that's that family's name — were probably racist if they voted for Trump, and my parents got mad at me!"

"Really? Your parents?"

"I know right? They said I shouldn't assume that stuff about people. I bet if I said that now it'd be different."

Natalie sighed. "Yeah."

After that they kept walking a while, talking about different things: their classes at the community college, the weird republicans who teach them, the far more common good professors, and then Nat's plans to transfer to Chico State in a few months, a whole 8-10 hours north of where they currently lived.

"Didn't you say that your older brother went there too?" Nat asked.

"Yeah, but only because of the party school reputation. He dropped out pretty quick," Diane said. "It's a good school for teachers to graduate from, according to my mom, so I wouldn't worry about that, if you were."

"I wasn't. And yeah, It'll be a good school for me. Plus, my grandparents live there, so I'll get to see them more," Nat replied.

Diane tightened a bit as she replied with "Yeah."

They eventually walked into a part of the neighborhood that wasn't there

when Diane and her mom and Danny moved in with Jerry and his kids, a fact which she had forgotten about until this moment; the houses there felt like they had always been there.

As they walked around this newer part of the neighborhood, Diane stopped in front of one of the houses. Unlike the other houses, this one had a set of steps leading up to the front door, rather than just the driveway.

"I think this is Lola Wallace's house," Diane said.

"Who's that?" Nat asked, as they began walking again

"We used to be friends in high school. One time, I think it was her birthday party, we — our friend group — were waiting for someone — I think it was Kayla — to get there and when she texted us that she was close everyone stood on those steps and we planned to T-pose when she got there. I took a bunch of pictures of it." "God, I forgot about T-posing."

"Yeah, that was a weird meme."

"Most of them were."

They talked more about high school after that, with Diane recounting more dumb memes that her friend group was into during high school. Nat didn't know most of them, and when she recalled ones she remembered to Diane, Diane didn't know most of those ones.

"It's funny," Diane eventually says. "We probably wouldn't have been friends in high school at all."

Other than Kayla, her best friend, Diane wasn't friends with any of the people she had just talked about

anymore. They drifted apart, and by senior year, Diane and Kayla didn't even like those people very much.

They started to walk towards the nearby elementary school, when Diane looked at the part of the 4-way stop that had a white plastic fence blocking it off. That road was only about three cars long. "Do you wanna see the creek?"

"There's a creek here?"

"Sort of. That's what we called it as kids."

Natalie shrugged and said "Sure."

They walked past the barrier, which didn't extend to the well-maintained sidewalk, and walked onto a gravel path behind the brick walls of the houses' backyards. The path lined a slope of rocks with untamed vegetation at the bottom. At that time, some of it was green and looked alive, but you could tell that normally everything there was quite dry. They walked down the gravel walkway and approached a part of it that had a walkable cement slope attached that was parallel to it. The slope led to a very, very small pond, with the water reaching past where the cement likely ended. The significantly steeper slope perpendicular to the one that led to the creek, which acted a bit like a wall against the walkable part, had a ton of graffiti.

"Here it is," Diane said, "It's normally way smaller, but it's been raining recently. I think when it's dried up there's a path where you can walk through all the plants to a more flat area."

They both quietly looked at the creek. Past the creek area, there was a field of dry grass and a few trees with no leaves, then another neighborhood to the left and the local library to the right. In spite of how dry and beige and overall imperfect everything was, it felt pretty, in the way that nature always seems to be by default. Last time Diane had been there, the library wasn't there, and there were a lot less plants. Natalie took out her phone and took a picture of the landscape; she lined the creek with the lower third line and the buildings in the distance with the higher third line.

"Back when we were kids, me, Nathan, and Danny all came here to look for a GeoCache. It was supposedly in the rocks, but we looked everywhere for hours, like all day, and never found it! I honestly think it was stolen or something."

Diane started walking down the slope towards the creek, and Nat followed. Diane stopped in front of a smiley face and started laughing. "This was definitely Ryan," she said. The face had two round eyes that touched each other with a long U-shaped nose connected to the two of them. "Back in middle school, he would draw this face all the time. He would always draw the eyeballs and the nose first, then the pupils and the head and the mouth," Diane said.

"Ohh, I see," Natalie said, laughing along. "That's some classic middle schooler humor."

"Yep! Except Ryan continued that

into high school, him being Ryan and all.” Diane got quiet for a bit. She was instructed not to go into detail about what happened recently, but Natalie knew about all of the other constant drama with him from before the gag order from her parents. Ryan was constantly in trouble since high school, with increasing severity as time went on, and it only got worse when he moved out.

“Well that’s the way we used to normally get to the creek,” Diane

said, pointing to a path that led through the line of houses and onto the sidewalk, which was separated from the gravel by a black metal gate. “It’s quicker to get back to my house that way.”

They walked back up the slope and towards the exit, then back to Diane’s house to finish the Degrassi movie. Caitlin Ryan finally got to say her line: “You were fucking Tessa Campenelli?!”



# COLOR COMBINATIONS AND CONTEMPLATIONS: PERSPECTIVE OF AN IDIOT ARTIST BY PEYTON DOULL

## 1. Oxblood Red

I cup my hands and take a scoop. The water in my hands is cold and cloudy. It smells like dirt, and it feels thick. When it drains between my fingers, it reminds me of braiding my grandmother's hair.

Wet hands moisten the vessel, hugging the body of the walls and pushing her upward. I think about my grandmother again. She spins beneath me, dancing under the pressure of my fingers. She feels cold and smooth. My left arm is inside of her now, supporting, while my right hand works on telling her a story. Her body curves and undulates. I squeeze her neck, my hands stain maroon. I pull her into perfect shape, and I stand up and look at her from above. She looks nothing like my grandmother. She is too tall, too thin, her hips too wide.

I push her down, and she collapses beneath my touch.

I cut the clay from the wheel and begin throwing again. Once centered, I open her and lift her up gently, making her a tall cylinder. My head clears as the wheel turns slower and hums softly. My knuckles press in, and she stretches higher. I round her body and shape the throat of the vessel, before I push her shoulders out further. Finally, I collar the neck and flare it.

Spinning before me is a wonderfully shaped amphora vase. I smile with content.

## 2. Cadmium Yellow

The focus of the canvas is a giant block of an undesirable orange-yellow, similar to the color of radioactive chicken broth. It looks like jaundice, acidic and piss-stained — but it'd be easy to compare it to the beauty of the sun.

The 10 foot Rothko painting is overpowering. His yellow engulfs me and my stomach churns. Standing before it feels like the fever of a flu. The composition is ambitious and begs me to assume "I could do that."

I know I couldn't.

Two feet away from the Rothko painting and frustration blankets me like a wash of hot orange. The colors take up my entire field of vision, cutting off the rest of the world, dominating my senses. Why did he paint this? The thin red line dividing the yellow hues on the canvas makes my wrists sting.

Yellow is an interesting color, as it exists as both a permissible pastel and a warning neon. Acid rain and dandelions. Hard hats and lemonade. Conchas and tarnished gold jewelry. It is the familiar smell of the orange blossoms and the chicken coop. The

doddery that chokes the bushes at the top of the canyon.

I leave the museum angry, frustrated, confused. I wait for my bus and kick at the streets, gray sidewalk chunks hurl themselves into black asphalt. I can't understand how I'm supposed to make something of myself. I think about Rothko and the last painting he made. I think about something Nietzsche said, "when you look long enough into the void, the void begins to look back through you."

I swipe my bus pass.

### 3. Yellow Ochre, Sap Green

My family doesn't go to church. My mom goes on rants every Sunday instead. She tells me stories about Mother Mary while she complains about her own mother.

When I am ten years old, I spend the summer with my grandmother in Valley Center.

Every morning, we wake up early when the dew is still sleeping on the grass. I pick a handful of oranges from the grove and run down the hill to feed the cows. I splash through the mist. I roll around in the grass.

I attend Catholic Mass on hot Sunday mornings with Nana. The service is long and unbearable. My eyes visit every pane of the stained glass clerestory windows. My ears mute all of the readings. My body slouches into the unforgiving wooden pew.

I use a green crayon I took from the children's liturgy room to

vandalize the pages of the pew bible.

After service, Nana leaves me in the car and tells me she'll be right back. She walks along the highway to collect cacti with a kitchen knife and a basket.

I watch her peel nopales with the knife on the porch. She doesn't wear gloves, she just goes at them barehanded. I swear I've never seen her hands move so fast, up and down the knife cuts the thorns out. And, instead of cleaning up, she picks up each of the little espinas and throws them on the floor like they're bullets. She says the wind will clean it up, and takes me inside. I bet there are still thorns in her hands and feet and she just doesn't realize it because she's so old and crazy.

When I am twenty, I stay with my grandparents for a week in the summer. I wake up early, feed the chickens, and water the vegetables. I still don't pray. I sleep in my mom's childhood bed and wake up feeling warm every morning. One morning, I feel so happy, I catch myself singing in the kitchen.

### 4. Raw Sienna

I pick at the light orange paint, caked and dried in my nail beds. I stare blankly at the canvas, unfinished. A knock on my window, and Sid pulls me outside. He takes me up the street, up the hill, and we stand at the peak and watch the yellow disc pierce the horizon, collapsing in a fire behind the rising houses. It's beautiful. I haven't seen

anything like it.

"I don't know what I want to be," I say quietly with a sigh.

He holds me from behind, and his hands poke into my waistband. I can feel his chin on top of my head as he speaks, "You get so caught up in meanings."

### **5. Ultramarine Blue, Vermilion Red Phthalo Green, Titanium White**

"Whatcha drawing?" Margot leans against the counter. I hand her my server book. On the first receipt is a crude pen doodle of an old man. She draws him a line of dialogue, and hands it back to me.

"What time are you off?" My voice cracks when I ask. It's hot in the kitchen, and I haven't been drinking water. I tug awkwardly at my collar, and I hope she doesn't notice the cocktail sauce stain that travels down my entire left leg.

"Hopefully soon. This place is so dead, literally nobody wants to be here today. Are you going to watch the fireworks tonight?" It's surprisingly quiet in the restaurant on the Fourth of July. A few old couples come in for lunch, and none of them tip well, but most of the customers are kind. I hide from my tables in the service alley of the restaurant instead of running refills. The soda fountain hisses between us.

"No, I'm probably just going to stay home. I'll have to, because my dog always tries to run away on the fourth. The fireworks scare her. And,

I don't really like, "celebrate," the fourth of July, I guess? Y'know, I just can't celebrate living in a country that is actively bombing and killing thousands of people out there."

"Yeah...Fuck the government."

Margot fills up the last drink and places it on the large tray. She balances the 8 glasses full of iced tea and a basket of fries wonderfully, and I watch her approach her table with a big cheery grin.

I clumsily return to my singular table, and the drinks spill as I place them on the table. I offer the couple a shaky smile and bent straws. I haven't been getting good tips today because I suck at my job.

My manager sends me home early.

When I get home, I set up the still-life and put up my easel, and I start painting over an old canvas. I put together a composition using items from both sides of my heritage. I mix all of my own colors from a bright red, a dark blue, and an anxious yellow. I paint loosely, admiring the set-up and exaggerating every color my eyes can absorb. The blue NERF gun looks brilliant next to the vase of white lilies. My brush lingers on the deep red shadows the beads of Nana's rosary creates, draped over the agave plant. I finish, I step away from the painting and realize I've made something I really like. It feels like freedom to me.

### **6. Ivory Black**

I'm afraid of taking chances and

letting myself get hurt. The first time I fail a class, I shrug and tell myself I need to get over it. I need to break my face open. I have to fall and scrape my knee, learn a little lesson, so I chase the adrenaline to the hill behind my house. It's a twenty yard slope of broken asphalt and dynamite rocks.

I break my wrist trying to do a lame skate trick at the top of the hill. I watch my board rocket launch itself down the hill, and it lodges itself into the mouth of the gutter storm drain. I lay at the top of the hill, holding myself crying for a few minutes. I pick myself up and walk home.

The cast keeps me from doing anything for weeks. I attend summer school but my handwriting is illegible, and I use the chromebook the school gives me to play video games. I can't drum, I sit at the seat making no sound. My boyfriend whines and asks me why I haven't been myself, and I snap at him and remind him I can't do anything in a cast. I am seventeen, and a broken bone is the end of the world.

My sketchbook fills with swatches of black paint and left-handed scribbles. My bedroom becomes quiet.

## **7. Phthalo Green and Cadmium Red**

The tree in my front yard collapses during a wind storm. The roads are a mess the next day. I run over a nail on the way to school, and when I get to campus, my tire is flat. I learn to ask for help, and a classmate helps me switch out the spare in my trunk after class.

I visit Sid at night, after school and between work. We sit on his couch and have a conversation about the future while we play GTA. He says, "I can't believe everything is changing."

The room is tense and silent. I look at the floor at the stain shaped like a wine bottle. I look out the window, and the clouds block any trace of sunshine. I look anywhere but his eyes. The trees shake in the wind.

"I want to be an artist," I finally say. "I want to be independent and have my own life and my own studio apartment. I want to be responsible for myself and my future. I want to breathe."

He tells me I'm already an artist and I need to stop delegitimizing myself. I shrug and agree but tell him I'm not a successful artist. He says, "Sure, maybe not successful by the rules of capitalism, but doesn't that mean you win as an artist? I see you practicing and making art every day, you're already successful by that measure."

The plants in my house have been slowly dying. Their leaves droop and wither. I watch the tips of every leaf yellow and curl, even letting some wilt and fall before I finally take action. I pick up everything from the tables, the counters, and floors, and do what I can to find a home for the items. I wipe every counter in the house and I sweep the floors. I can't do anything about the mess upstairs, but I'll wash the dishes, and of course, water the plants.

## 8. Quinacridone Magenta

I paint the walls pink and dye my hair blue in June. Manic confidence crawls up my spine. I stay up late every night, out of some general protest. I am at a point in my life where no one knows where I am or what I am doing.

I think about Rothko and his paintings everyday. Rothko made his own colors and created his own paint. He used house paint, egg binders, and glue to create glossy and matte layers and effects. He knew what he was doing.

But he just painted squares. He painted depth, and emotions—but squares. I tear apart my bedroom studio in a toddler rage. I spill paint on the carpet. I put holes through old, ugly canvases.

On my twentieth birthday, I feel dizzy and out of breath the whole day, like a blindfolded child in front of a piñata being spun around with a too-heavy baseball bat. Simultaneously, I am the piñata that is being battered by the child, spinning and spilling stupid unicorn sugar guts all over the place. My friends throw me a surprise birthday party, and I show up late. I

get embarrassingly drunk and cry like a baby for my mother.

The next day, I start a new painting series. I evict the paralyzed Plath piloting me. I watch her as she anxiously stands up and starts jumping for those rotten figs instead of sitting under that damn tree moping. I grab a fig and tear it open, I smile as the flesh inside sparkles back at me. I eat it, skin and all. The seeds taste like sugar in my mouth.

I realize I don't want to be hungry anymore. I used to think every choice was a big choice, something that could send the entire course of my life in a different direction. It scared me. It paralyzed me. I would stand in the kitchen cupboard, dizzy and nauseous, and I still wouldn't pour myself a bowl of cereal; I refused to even boil water. The doubt and failure, the fear of deliberate meaning, and a futile frustration crowded my mind. I am the only one holding myself back.

Every mark I make is revocable. I can paint over my mistakes. I can learn to accept every step of the process, and embrace the futility of meaning.

**VII.**

**“WHEN THE FIRST BOOK  
BLOOMED”**

## THE LIBRARY IS CLOSED

BY EYVYNNE MCFARLANE-COBB

Once, there was a library. It has always been a library, and has never been a library. The library is closed, and has been closed for some time. No one knows for how long, for no one was there when it opened. This matters, of course, because the library has never been open so it has always been closed and will never open at all. Because of this scheduling paradox, nobody has ever stepped inside. As a consequence, no one was there when the first book bloomed, or when the shelves first sprouted from the earth. Nobody bore witness to the words that wrote themselves, bleeding out sap from the tips of branches and swirling itself into letters and shapes. There was nobody to bind the books, so the books bound themselves using thorns to puncture and vines to fasten.

It's rumored that the tears of scholars who lost everything - their homes, memories, and minds - were used to water them, but the present scholars insist that this cannot be true, for nobody was there when the library opened. And for all the context modern scholars lack, that in itself is true; nobody has set foot in the library. The uneven, marbled halls and overgrown moss carpets bear no footprints. There is no evidence of patronage and nobody to witness its lack. There is no movement inside its walls beyond the occasional revision

that the birch trees keep themselves busy with. (Birches are, after all, the most finicky of authors and are often prone to rewrites). But if the contradicting ways of nature and fallen trees and bearing witness are not enough to convince, then the sight that greets every potential visitor at the library's entrance should suffice: the tall, twisting doors created a gnarled knot for a lock, for which there is no key. As a scholar, I cannot stress this enough: nobody has entered the library, for the library has always been closed, even before the first book bloomed.

Not even the librarian.

It's true that the tears of knowledge lost fed the library for many years, but these were not the institution's only resource. Libraries, after all, must have a librarian; somebody willing to sit with the books, to shed light on their stories and know them deeply, so that one day (if there ever comes such a day) they can help somebody find what they need.

Like clockwork, the librarian comes each day. She is a diligent and passionate nurturer of knowledge. She is warm and bright and an easy person to feel drawn to. With her experience, it may seem a shame that a librarian so dedicated is only permitted to peek through the windows, but this does not bother her much. She still spills over her books for

hours on end, basking in the purpose her job brings her. The librarian will always be at the library during their open hours. And yes, there are still open and closed hours for libraries that have never been opened. Open or not, a library is an establishment, and establishments will always have set times to open and close.

The librarian understands and respects this, which is why she arrives at dawn and lingers until dusk. The librarian does this for two reasons: a dedication to routine and her love for the library itself. The librarian is, by far, the library's greatest resource. And yet, even she has never stepped foot into the library.

Stars, after all, do not have feet.

But what the modern scholars have not figured out (and what the long dead scholars had), is that one does not need to be inside a library to contribute to it.

It is a common misconception that the scholars of old cried over the library's first seed. This is not true in the slightest and has been harshly condemned in academic circles. Instead, a new theory has been proposed to take its place: Tears, like all water, finds its home in the earth.

It moves, travels, and shifts to where it was needed.

When the windstorms began and the fires raged and all man-made knowledge was lost, the scholars of old were scattered across the globe. They spoke different languages, studied different disciplines, and disagreed severely on most topics (as all good scholars do), but there was still one thing that united them: grief. This grief - for love and knowledge and science and art and humans and beast and nature and time - had a goal. All grief does for it is the preservation of love. Their shared tears of grief found one another and formed a plan. If humankind could not be trusted to protect the knowledge they tamed and collected, then a new gathering of intellect must be formed.

A place where no disaster could bring its fire.

A sanctuary where no storm could bring its rain.

A library where no man could poison its own creation.

Nobody has stepped foot in the library. The doors were locked before the first book even bloomed; this was by design.



Cover by Peyton Doull