

VOYAGER



Spring 2022

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A Rocky Dream

Antonio Michel

“What would it be like to be God?”

This was the thought swirling through my head as I laid in my bed. It was the night of October 19th. I was wrapped up in my dark blue comforter along with a much thinner striped sleep sheet. It was starting to get cold, so I had to prepare myself for a time like tonight. I laid out on my back with my head rest on my comfy pillow, staring at my white painted ceiling.

With Halloween around the corner, I started to wonder about reality for good reason. Cause you know, people wear costumes on Halloween, and some of those costumes are inspired by mythical creatures. Some of those mythical creatures having crazy powers, and some of these powers being able to hypothetically match up with an icon such as Mr./Mrs./ Creator.

With all this being said, I understand that I may be branching down a path that is a little far from my reach, but one can wonder. And why not have the ability to wonder? So here I am wondering, lost in complete curiosity, about what it would be like to be this being of infinite potential. Here I am wondering about what it would be like to feel as if I can transform myself into anything or anyone as I please. What would it feel like to have a world of my own? These thoughts continued to swirl through my head. It must have been too much for my brain to handle at 3 am, because at some point, I ended up dozing off into my own world.

When I opened my eyes, I was surprised to find myself sitting in a wooden rocking share, which was rocking on not anything

in particular, as I observed an infinite white space that I was engulfed in, so much so that it was almost as if my body was submerged within this abyss. I was unable to move any of my limbs, feeling as if I was glued to this rocking chair. My arms were rested on the chair's elbow handles, with my palms curved out at the edge. My feet were hanging as if there was no sign for ground beneath me.

At this moment, I realized that I most likely was caught up in my dream, so I knew not to panic. On the contrary, I realized that this was the moment that I have been waiting for. I was wondering what it was like to be God for at least a good 25 minutes before I decided to enter this realm, so it was time to put my thought to good use. The first idea that came to my mind was to try and start creating an environment, but I did not know where to start. Two minutes passed, and then I decided I would try to create some a tree or something just to get the hand of things. I felt as if I was some type of Jedi in this moment, like I was like the present-world Yoda or some shit, putting all of my cosmic energy into the creation of this Almighty Tree, which would then be the branch and compass that would connect itself to the rest of the world that I would create one step at a time.

I could not tell how much time had passed at this point due to not only my exasperated focus, but also do the remarkable blankness of this world. Almost hypnotizing in a way, it was making me my sense of self. Either way, all that would pass my mind once it felt

as if this rocking chair was picking up a little speed. Rocking a little faster, I felt my back and butt press more forcefully into the chair, making me feel as if I was gaining speed and moving forward in space. I hypothesized this to mean that the techniques I developed from watching Yoda do his thing on TV were exactly what I need to get the ball rolling for the creation of this new world.

Within little time, I realized that I was less within an infinite white space, and more so was just submerged in a large cloud in the sky. Once I exited this cloud, I observed myself floating within and endless void of sky, along with an equally dispersed set of infinite clouds stretching out as far as I can see. I also noticed that the chair ended up coming to a halt at some point, along with the rocking having stopped as well. I decided to take a deep breath and then observe the surroundings. "It is crazy how a dream can take on such a beautiful look." I said out loud in disbelief.

I could not help but to have my head tilted up looking at the sets of clouds combined with the endless blue sky above me, until I have my chair start rocking again. This time, the rocking only happened for about a minute, and then stopped abruptly. As far as I initially thought, there was no sign of any change happening. The whole scene looked the same, until I decided to tilt my head downwards and observe any differences that may have appeared below me. That is when my eye caught something not too bewildering.

It was just a rock. Placed about 3 feet across from me near my feet. A weirdly shaped rock, it was about the size and shape of my pointer. As a matter of fact, it was almost as if it was sculpted to take on the look of a finger, with carvings that helped my eyes interpret the looks of a

nail, along with the line indentations that appear on a finger. I did not know what to do at this point. In all honesty, I was highly disappointed that what appeared wasn't the all connected tree that I thought envisioned perfectly. Like what did I do wrong? Did I not have enough cosmic energy to bring my plan to fruition?

Either way, that did not stop me from accomplishing the goal of the initial plan. I focused my attention on the hypothetically sculpted finger-rock. Not necessarily trying to create anything out of it, I just thought putting my attention towards the rock may cause it to react in another way, which it ended up doing.

"Hello there." I heard coming from the rock's direction

Crazy the way dreams can work sometimes. One moment, you can be trying to create the world of your dreams, and the next you can be talking to a gray colored, old looking finger-rock. My sense of self also was starting to fade again within this moment, with the fact that I was talking to rock seeming to make total sense for the while.

"What's up" I say in a friendly tone.

"Nothing much. How are you doing today?"

"Pretty well, how about yourself?"

"About the same."

At this point, I realize that the rock has taken on a voice that appears to be the same as mine. I wanted to continue this conversation to see if I could find any meaning to the reason that there was a rock in front of me, but I honestly could not come up with anything. For some reason, I felt as if there was nothing that needed to be said between me and this rock. Deeper than that, it felt as if this rock was observing myself just as much as vice versa. Words did not need to be said for some form of communication to take place

between us.

“What were you looking to accomplish here?” the rock says softly.

“To build a world.”

“What kind of world?”

“I don’t know exactly, but I want to build something that I can call my own.” I say, while not acknowledging the fact that this rock is being pretty curious for just being a rock.

“Why do you want to make it here?”

“Because this is the only place that I feel like I could create something of that magnitude”

“What do you mean the only place you feel like you can?” the rock says, but with a voice that takes on a little more of a hiss, as if I was being mocked.

“I mean that is just the fact of life, I would not be able to create something of the magnitude that I would like to create in the world outside of here.” I said with ease, gaining my sense of self back slowly.

“What do you mean outside of here?” the rock says with soft curiosity once again.

I started to wonder about why this rock was asking me questions that made me feel like I was being taught. Maybe I was wrong about myself being the Yoda of this dream, and failed to give credit to this wise-ass rock.

“I mean outside of this dream. Outside in the real world” This my voice taking on a lower tone.

“What makes this world different from the real one?”

“Things matter out there more than they do in here.”

“In what way.”

“Alright, you are asking way too many questions for not really making any sense out of them.”

At this point, the conversation took a break, and a deep silence occurred, to the point that I have become unaware of my own thoughts, to a point where I lost sense of self and could not tell that I was dreaming again. The silence then broke again, with the rock opting to this reflective test of sorts.

“In what way do things matter more?” The rock asks once again.

At this point, the visuals start to become blurry, the world becomes darker, with the bright blue sky taking on more of a navy-blue look, and the clouds becoming less visible to the eye. The rock also started to take on a different appearance as well. It was still gray, but was not glowing, making it the brightest physical structure that I can make out within this realm.

“I mean that you can’t just take time out to create a new world like how you can in a dream. There is simply no time for that. The real world does not allow for that position.”

“The position for what exactly?”

“For the position to be God.”

At this point in time, all the clouds have disappeared, with the sky having went from a sky blue, to a black abyss. The only thing that was visible was the rock, and even that was starting to fade. With a few last words to share, the rock said:

“What if I told you that role is has already been given to you.”

Without a chance to respond, the rock ended up disappearing a couple second after its conclusive question, and then everything went black.

It was October 11th, and the seasonal transition that takes place between summer and fall was starting to happen. Leaves were falling from trees. Leaves were also changing colors, taking on various

combinations of red, yellow, and green. Not really green, but most definitely red and yellow.

It also was getting a little colder than my liking. Well not that I didn't like it, but more so the fact that I was not prepared for the change. For some reason, my body felt as if I had never experienced a cold day in my life. Like how am I shivering when it is only 65 degrees Fahrenheit with slight wind in the morning?

Well, that is beside the point anyway.

Back to the casual morning that It was supposed to be.

I got out of bed, put on my usual pair of grey whatchya-mccall-it pants (plaid?) with a long-sleeve pink cotton (I believe it to be?) shirt, brushed my teeth, and then went and made myself some eggs because your boy was starving.

Now at this point, I am feeling more refreshed than ever. Even had myself a cup of orange juice to make sure that I was extra-energized to take on the day that I was about to embark on. At least that is what I thought until I was just about to shut the front door on my way out of the house and into my 2002 Honda-Something (AKA my baby). My eyes spontaneously bolted towards the small, also casual, but peculiar looking object bestowed on the ground about a foot away in front of me. To be honest, I really have no real reason that I should have noticed this object in the first place.



Autumn Leaves

Malik Bennett

In the midst of dark, fallen trees
Day by day you feel the night cold breeze
It's time for a new birth for these autumn leaves

The pace changes, clear white
As you walk you lose what's out of sight
Stop! Be careful of these blinding lights

Wet puddles form and you start to yearn
In your eyes, it starts to burn
But things don't last forever, and you start to learn

The sun comes out shining away
In your mind, you feel these constant delays
Slowly you remember the birth of these autumn leaves
Slowly and surely throughout the day



Promises

William Lenau

I have always loved books, never once was there a time where I thought that my life would be any better without them. I went to the library every chance I could, what else could I do, I had no friends or siblings to speak of. I had a specific spot picked out in the corner near the window. I have been obsessed with books ever since my mother read me a story about creatures from another world far away. Whenever I come to the library, I grab a new book so I can read something I have never experienced before.

However, this time when I'm looking for a book, I find something strange. I find this book titled 'Magical Realist Fiction', a book I have never seen before, never heard of before, tucked in between two brand new books that looked like they had never been opened. Once I sit down with my new prize, I open it to find a story about someone walking in a field of butterflies, but as I turn the pages, so invested in the story, the words begin to glow beautiful and vibrant blues, greens, and pinks. The words jumps from the page and swirl around me before forming into butterflies. With the speed of light, they take off in different directions, towards different sections of the library. I rush in between the sections till I find one sitting on a book, but it slips away when I try to grab it. The book it is sitting on fell open and just as before, the words begin to glow and before me floats the equation for gravity and pictures of atoms. The butterflies make whatever they touch come to life before me!

Before I can take it all in, I am snapped out of my daze by an older man snapping his fingers in front of my face. Apparently he'd been telling me to pick the book up, but I can't hear a word, I'm more concerned with everything in front of me. He bends down and puts the book back on the shelf and in an instant, it is all gone, all the magnificent and colorful things are all gone. At that moment I leave

the library more confused and excited than I ever had been before. “How did he not see them?” I keep asking myself. “The equations, the atoms, the butterflies, does nobody see them but me?”

The next day I arrive at the library early and rush to find that the book of magical realism has been returned to its normal spot. I open it up and this time I find a picture of the moon hovering above the waves. Just like before the picture glows but instead of the pictures leaping off the page like last time, I’m pulled into the book. I remember screaming as I fell into the ocean until a hand reached out and pulled me back. I look up to see a beautiful woman with long flowing white hair and dress. “Who are you?” I ask in amazement.

She responds with a chuckle, “I am the moon, could you not tell?”

I look at her, puzzled. “If you’re the moon, why do you look like a beautiful woman?”

She sighs, “Every magical realist author usually describes me like this, I think it’s because I’m supposed to represent beauty or lust or some other metaphor for something. It gets kind of old after a while, but you get used to it, I’m in thousands of stories and I’m described the same way in all of them.”

“All of them?” I ask.

She replies with a nod. “Every single one. There are a thousand ways to describe one thing, my child, and I am one of those things. Anything can be a metaphor.” We start to walk into the forest that is just beyond the beach. “You were the one who let the butterflies out right? Thank you for that, they rarely get to stretch their wings. Did you know they are a metaphor for change, authors love that one too, it’s one of the classics.”

I remember the butterflies well, how pretty they were, how they made things come alive. “Where are we going?” I ask the moon.

“To see an old friend, he’s not here right now, he’s a few chapters ahead,” she replies.

Then it hits me, the sudden realization. “Wait. You know you are in a book?”

She laughs, “Of course! Everyone here does. That is a trope in



our kind of stories, not every author uses them but enough of them do that you can call it a trope.”

“Then how did I get here? Was it magic? Was it imagination? Is this really happening?”

The moon thinks for a moment, “If I had to hazard a guess, I would say magic. But then it could easily be your imagination, your interpretation of the story.” Out of nowhere a raven appears on a branch and starts cawing, making me nearly jump out of my own skin. “Oh, ignore him,” said the moon, “he’s meant to symbolize death, there was this one author who loved using him. I honestly think he’s getting to be a bit worn out and his ego is far too big,” she chuckled.

“The bird or the author?” I ask.

“Yes,” replied the moon.

I look to the sky and see there’s still no sign of it changing. “Is it always nighttime?”

“For the purpose of this story, yes. Actually, I think I was supposed to help a fisherman find his way home right about now.” Almost on cue we hear a man crying from the ocean. He is crying for the moon to show him the way home. The moon sighs. “You know what? I say we keep walking; my friend should be here soon.”

“But aren’t you supposed to help him?” I ask.

The moon sighs. “Very well, wait here.” She rockets into the sky and appears before the man. “Oh, my lovely moon, my goddess, my...”

“Listen fisherman, my wonderful and loyal fisherman, we’ve done this song and dance before, and I am quite tired of it. The shore is right over there,” she says pointing towards the cliffs with a lighthouse on top. “If you don’t mind fisherman, I have company and I am not in the mood.”

The fisherman tips his hat. “Of course, I understand, I shall see you tomorrow then? Same time, same shore?”

She smiles. “Yes, my fisherman, same time tomorrow and every day after that.” He smiles and waves goodbye as he rows away.

Suddenly a deer appears before me. His golden eyes are

mesmerizing, it's like I cannot see anything else but the deer. I snap out of whatever trance I was in and feel compelled to write a story about this deer, about the life of all deer trapped within the confines of this novel. Deer should not be caged; they should roam free. In the distance I see mountains and fields, the deer's natural habitat and the only thing I keep thinking about is how lonely it must be in here. I love reading books, they provide an escape from everything outside, everything that is chaotic and scary about the real world, and yet the idea of being trapped in here both has a certain appeal and a sobering feeling in my stomach. I want to stay here forever; I could learn so much but at the same time this world is not real. It could only teach me so much. I keep looking around at the trees, the animals, even the raven appeared again on a rock right in front of me. What it means I can only imagine, if the raven means death, then what is it? Is it the death of me or maybe the death of something else? It is all fiction, right? It's not like fiction can imitate life or something. But then why else would it be called realistic fiction? At that moment it felt like I answered my own question.

The moon returns and she leads me to our destination, a beautiful pond full of fish from all over the world, but not just fish apparently. I see a small axolotl at the bottom of the pond, swimming around happily with the other fish. But then the eyes of one fish starts to glow just like the deer. Suddenly I'm looking up at the moon and myself, in a literal out of body experience. The moon sighs for what feels like the hundredth time. "Every time. Sorry about this, there is this one author, I forget his name, he pulled a similar trick at the end of one of his stories. It had a little too much meta-fiction for my taste but who am I to judge, it did make him famous after all."

With a snap of her fingers, I'm back in my own body and just as before I feel the compulsion to write a story about life as a fish, trapped in a vast ocean of endless possibilities but never able to truly find the one we are seeking. The



moon smiles. "I should have expected that to happen."

I look at her, puzzled. "There was never a 'friend' here was there?" In mere moments I see the warm and welcoming smile turn into a frown that I can only describe as pure regret given form.

She sits on the ground and starts skimming her fingers over the pond, "You figured it out. I was hoping it would be you." She sighs. "Why me?" I ask sitting next to her.

"Because, you let the butterflies out, the fact that you saw them means you have a writer's soul, a spark of creativity, the magical touch, whatever you want to call it. You could stay here and write a whole new story for me, one where I do not have to repeat the same journey over and over. The life of a story is one of creativity and endlessness, when one person finishes the book, another starts it, and the story resets. But all of the characters in the book remember everything that happens, most accept this fate, I wanted more. I could have a new friend. I am lonely. I do not want to be a symbol of lust or a guide or anything. I just want a friend who does not see me as a plot device, I want to be in my own story, not someone else's."

For the first time all day I finally understand what I have to do, I understand what the deer and the fish were trying to show me. "Moon. I wish I could stay. I do. But I have people back in my world who would miss me terribly, and some of them do not know it yet." I sit next to her. "I read books to escape the stress of the real world, the mistakes I made, I can pretend I'm taking a journey with friends. But if I stay here all day, then I will never know what it means to have real friends outside these pages." I smile. "But I will make you a deal. I will write you a new story in a book of my own design where you are your own character. How does that sound?"

With a tearful smile she hugs me tight and suddenly I'm back in the library.

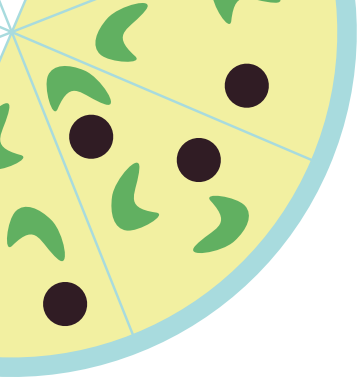
Years later I would meet a lovely woman and we would settle down near a library, I would make friends with the staff and with the patrons who came and went. I never gave up my love of books, but I also learned how to be human. I would also publish my own book where the main character has thoughts and feelings of her own and is not a plot device. I titled the book 'Luna: A Promise Fulfilled'.

Paralyzed

Aileen Genovesi

There I lay, unable to move anything but my eyes
I can hear him
Fear overwhelms me
1,2,3,4 other guys outside the door
They pull him back
Yell at him
Everyone knows I am not safe
How bad will it hurt this time? I wonder
Where will the hit be?
Bang, bang, bang
The door will break if I don't get up
Finally, I can move
I open the door
"I failed," I say
Though it was not the truth
The apologies start, the same as always
"I'm sorry but maybe if you opened the door
none of this would have happened"
Of course, it was my fault, it always was
Did I get hit?
I can't even remember, maybe when the others weren't protecting me
I was paralyzed
I watched this happen from above,
like a dream





Pizza's Ready

Mark Keegan

Pat & Louie's was home to the best slice in all of New York City. When I walked through the door I became instantly hungry. Every time I came in there the place was hopping. The store was run by two brothers named, you guessed it... Pat and Louie. They both had personalities that could light up a room and an undeniable passion for what they do. Louie shouted, "Hey! Johnny boy I knew you'd be coming in. I gotta couple slices all ready for you to try." I was lucky in that way. Whenever I came through it didn't matter how big the line was or how busy the phone lines were. The second I walked through those doors I was taken care of. When I was younger I never understood why, as I grew older I started to realize.

"How you doin today champ? So far so good?" Said Pat.

"No complaints here. How much do I owe ya?" I said.

"No, no, no, for you free of charge today. Let your father know you and the boys eat for free from now on," explained Pat with an awkward grin.

A bit caught off guard I said, "Are you sure Pat? Come on, I want to give you the business. Here take this I insist." I offered him a fifty dollar bill for just one slice.

"Tommy, I said what I said. Let your father know. Ok?"

"Alright Pat...thank you, I greatly appreciate it." As I walked out I could feel

the anger and frustration radiating off of the people waiting in line. It was as if I had stolen the pizza right out of Pat's hands. I knew they had a reason for doing this... My father just hadn't informed me why yet. As I strolled through downtown New York my mind couldn't help but wonder... why? Why would Louie and Pat give me the pizza for free? My family offers them protection but that doesn't have to do with it. My father, Mario, always made it a point that we never rip off Louie and Pat. I even remember him saying, "Louie and Pat are good men. Upstanding Italians. They never did anything to nobody and they deserve the business. As long as they make their monthly payments on time... we pay to eat just like the rest of the suckers."

When I finally made it back to the office, I came in with the slices for all the guys. The boys were happy to see me. Inside the office was my father, Mario Genovese, my Uncle Billy Battaglia and my other Uncle Bobby Sirico. Uncle Billy was especially excited to see me. We called him Billy Boy, dear god the guy could eat an entire horse and still be hungry after.

"Hey! Tommy! How's the shop kid?" shouted Billy.

"Eh it was alright. Very busy as usual and stuff like that," I said in a monotone. It was right then my old man walked into the room. He was dressed to the nines because of a meeting he had with Marcello

Ricci, the Boss of the family. The meeting was in just one hour. "Tommy, what's the matter? Everything ok?"

"Yeah dad, I'm just a little concerned about Louie and Pat that's all..."

"Oh God, can you shut up? What are you bustin my balls for, eh?"

"What? What'd I do? I was just a little worried. They didn't seem themselves is all."

"You're a real jerk, you know that? I thought you actually had somethin serious to say." My father walked into the bathroom, while the other guys just laughed. I didn't expect anything less. Afterall whatever happened really wasn't my business anyway. I was only an associate in my family, which is essentially the bottom of the barrell. As an associate you don't have much say. You're supposed to blindly take orders from the Capos and that's the end of it. I wanted to move up ranks in my family more than anything, but the only way for that to happen was to become a made man. Becoming made in my life is a huge honor. It means you're officially welcomed into the family and that they have your back no matter what. But, most of all... it meant respect.

I would've had to prove myself big time in order for someone to sponsor me. You see I was only twenty four at the time. Becoming made at my age meant I had to do something that shows I'm all in on the family business. I had only been involved in the family about three years at the time. I still had more scars to be endured.

"Alright fellas, I'm outta here. Hopefully Marcello has good news for me." Mario confidently walked out the door and went on his way.

"Hey kid you're with me. Your Dad told me about this thing we gotta take care of," Bobby said as if I already knew what he

was talking about.

"Alright when we going?"

"Eh not right now. Listen for your pager, meet at my place with the car ready."

Bobby hurried out of the office without another word said. Hell he didn't even wait for me to respond.

"I'm heading into Jersey for a pick up. You sticking around here kid?" said Billy.

"Eh I think I'll just head home. Wait for Bobby to be ready."

"Sounds good big guy." As Billy went to open the door he turned to me one more time.

"You know Tommy... in this way of living..." Billy paused to sharpen up his thoughts. "We have to do things sometimes that don't always seem right. But I promise you... your father, Bobby, and myself, we all have the best interest of this family as number one. There's always bigger things at play. Hey, even sometimes I'm left in the dark about certain things. But that doesn't mean I don't trust the judgment of your father and those above him. Do ya understand?" Billy paused with a look that I could never quite explain.

"I understand Billy. This is more important to me than anything... I swear."

"I believe ya kid. Now head home before it starts pouring out here. You see those clouds? I swear if my car gets any more water damage... I'm gonna have to go to heaven myself and ask God if he's got some kinda problem with me." Laughing all the way to his car, light rain started to come down. I wasn't sure what my father had planned out for me to be a part of, but I could tell it wouldn't exactly be a walk in the park. I went out of the office and locked the door behind me. As I walked through the city more clouds began to form. Slowly the light faded away and a dark fog crept over the city like some kind

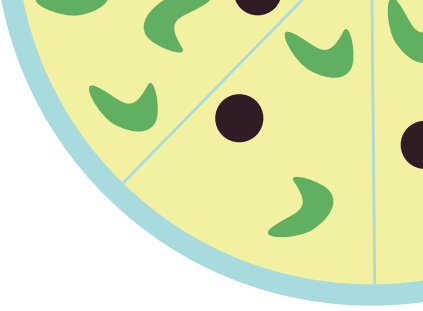
of blanket. The rain got heavier with each step I took. When I finally got in my car I turned the heat on and booked it straight home.

“Fly me to the moon, let me play among the stars, and let me see what spring is like, on a Jupiter and Mars...Sinatra you’ve done it again you good fella you.” I made my way into the driveway as Frank Sinatra’s latest masterpiece carried me inside. The rain was relentless and thunder began to roar through the skies. I began to walk up the steps to my front door. I went inside and grabbed a coke, for me it took the edge off more than a beer ever could. I sat down and turned on the tv. I didn’t want to lay back and risk falling asleep. Ever since I was little, rain and thunderstorms always had a way of just knocking me out. The problem was that at this point in my life I lived alone. So if I did fall asleep by accident no one could wake me up, except the pager but I was too deep a sleeper to ever hear it.

Three hours came and went. By this time my head was bouncing up and down while my eyelids grew heavier by the second. I kept getting up to stay awake but my legs felt heavy. I went to the bathroom and splashed my face with water. Right as I was deep sea diving in my sink, it happened. I got the call. It was go time. I ran out of the bathroom. Grabbed my cross, put it around my neck and right outside back down those concrete steps I went. Another half hour went by and I was outside Bobby’s place. As I pulled up I saw Bobby standing in a trench coat. I pulled up and opened the door for him.

“Where the fuck you been?” Bobby was already waiting outside his front step.

“What do you mean? I came straight here. I went as fast as possible.”



“Drivin twenty miles per hour isn’t fast, asshole,” Bobby said as he got in the passenger seat.

“I stopped home for a few hours. What’d you want me to park outside your house and wait around for you all day?”

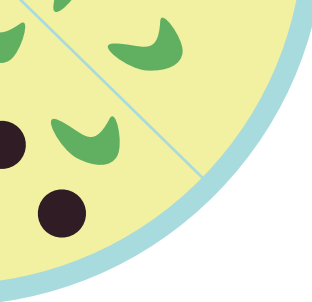
“You wise guy, piece of shit, get driving!” shouted Bobby.

“Where to?”

“Head over to Pat & Louie’s. Step on it, they’re closing in fifteen minutes.” Bobby had a harshness in his voice that night that I knew wasn’t good. Nevertheless, I stepped on the gas pedal and went straight to Pat & Louie’s. The rain only got worse and the temperature dropped all the way down to a blistering twenty degrees. It was truly a miserable day to be outside.

“Alright pull over here.” Bobby pointed forward about two spots away from Pat & Louie’s pizza shop. We waited there for about ten minutes until we spotted Pat and Louie walk out and lock up the shop. At this point in the night it was dark, foggy and the rain was vicious. It was really hard to see more than a foot in front of you.

“Come on kid, follow my lead.” Bobby opened his car door and started to approach Pat and Louie. It was right then and there that I knew. Pat and Louie were going to be whacked. I had known those two since I was no more than three years old. I had some of my best memories of my life in that pizza shop with my friends and family, laughing the night away. All of those great memories... only to be one of the guys that killed them.



“Pizza was a little soggy today,” Bobby said while pointing a gun to Pat’s throat while he had his keys in the shop door. Both men stopped in their tracks, I came up behind Louie and pointed my gun to the back of his head.

“Come on fellas, let’s take a drive.” I remember feeling as if I wasn’t present at that moment. It was as if I had left my body and was watching from above. My legs felt weak and I could barely breathe without thinking about it. We shoved Pat and Louie in the back of my Cadillac and I began driving.

“Where to Bobby?” I said, hoping that he would never answer.

“Let’s show these two around Justifier woods. See what they think of the scenery,” Bobby said while his gun was pointed to the two of them in the back seat.

“Hey what is this about? Please Bobby... what do you want? Haven’t we always been good to you guys?” Pat stammered through trying to hold back tears.

“Tommy, you’ve been my little buddy all these years. Don’t you remember the times I let you behind the counter when you were just a child?” Louie explained as if he had a frog in his throat.

“Shut the fuck up I don’t want to hear it. Now drive,” Bobby said without hesitation. I knew very well where Justifier woods was and I also knew very well that absolutely nothing good ever happened there. As I drove through the rain and thunder I was fighting back the tears. I also remember being confused on what these two could

have done. Pat and Louie have been loved by my family for years, in order for my father to order a hit on them, they had to have screwed up badly.

The thunder got louder and Bobby leaned in to whisper to me. “No promises kid but if all goes well tonight... I’m gonna put in a good word and sponsor you.” Bobby leaned back over and pointed his gun back at Pat and Louie.

I couldn’t believe it. Bobby wanted to sponsor me, after three years I was finally going to become a made man. I would be ranked up to soldier, I would be put on more serious task and make more money for myself. This was my dream, I’d finally be on my way to becoming a respected figure in my family. Of course there were still two things in the way of all of that though... and both of them were in the back seat. Those two were scared so shitless they didn’t say another word the whole time. I glanced back at them in the rearview mirror and saw tears running down their faces. But I couldn’t focus on that, I had to keep my priorities straight, I had to prove to my father that I was worthy of being made.

“We’re here.” I parked the car on the side of a dirt road, right outside the woods.

“Alright you two out of the car come on. Move it!” Bobby ripped Pat and Louie out as if they couldn’t move themselves.

“Tommy grab that fatass Louie,” Bobby said as he grabbed Pat with a gun to his head. I did the same to Louie and followed Bobby as he walked deeper into the treeline. We both had flashlights in hand to help. Justifier woods were darker than ever that night. We walked straight forward for a good five minutes. Louie was sobbing and whispering prayers.

“Please father save me. Forgive me for what I’ve done, I know the error of my

ways and beg you God to spare my brother and I. We love you God and ask for your guidance at this moment..." Thunder slammed through the skies as if God was telling Louie he didn't want to hear him. Finally we got to where Bobby felt was far enough. We threw Pat and Louie to the ground on their knees.

"You see these two bastards, Tommy? These two blubbering shits have been talking to the fucking F.B.I!" Bobby shouted in disgust.

"No! No! Guys it ain't like that, we would never..." Louie got cut off before he could finish.

"You would never? You've been talking for months. Not only that but you also let those fuckers bug your shop so they could listen to us discuss our business," Bobby screamed. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Pat and Louie had been whistle blowing to the feds for months apparently. My father always used to have us meet up in the back room of the Pizza Shop. We used to discuss serious family business at least twice a week. But we hadn't been meeting there for the past three weeks, I should've known something was up from the start.

"We're sorry Bobby! We can make it up to you guys, I swear on my mothers grave. Let us fix this!" Louie pleaded for his life.

"Enough of this shit. It's cold, wet and I'm tired. Here kid blow away these rats." Bobby handed me a Smith & Wesson Model 36.

"Tommy! Please don't do this. You don't have to do this," Pat cried.

"Tommy, we love you ever since you were a little kid, you know that!" Louie said with tears streaming down his face.

"If they loved you so much why would they go talking to the feds eh? Shoot these two miserable shits," Bobby said with

force. I had the gun ready and pointed forward. I could hear the voice of my father in my head saying, "He'll never make it in this life. The kid can't earn, he can barely serve us a drink without screwing up. It's only a matter of time before he fucks up and walks away." It just kept playing over and over and over again in my head. It was like a broken record. All while I had a pistol pointed in the faces of two honest working men who I've known and loved my whole life.

Rain was pouring, thunder was roaring and finally lightning struck a tree nearby. It had to be just two yards out and it was enough to startle everyone. After the lightning struck, Pat and Louie panicked, they must've thought I fired my gun and missed. The two sprinted into the woods.

"Shoot 'em you jerk!" Bobby shouted as he reached for another gun in his coat. His hands were soaked and the gun slipped and fell to the ground. Bobby picked up his gun and turned on his flashlight again.

"Well don't let them get away!" Bobby yelled. I put my gun by my side, turned on my flashlight and began to run towards the woods with slight hesitation. The hot pursuit of Pat and Louie began. Bobby was older and had trouble keeping up with me as I ran. At first I was going off pure adrenaline. I wasn't even really giving much thought to where I was running

Finally I dialed back in. Pat and Louie were both very overweight so I knew they couldn't have gotten very far. I decided to slow down for a second and listen. The rain was loud but I was able to zone it out just long enough. Finally I heard a snap of a branch. Someone was nearby just to the left of me. I flashed my light at the tree and saw the side of Louie's stomach hiding behind. I could hear my father in the back of my head.

“A made man? If there’s one thing my son is not, it’s a made man. He doesn’t have the balls for it. Sure he can rob some random low life he doesn’t know. But do you actually think he can actually send a problem away when the time comes?” I was angry. I was angry at Pat and Louie for betraying me. I was angry at my father for thinking I’m some kind of good for nothing jerk. Most of all I was angry at myself. I have an opportunity to shut up my father and prove to everyone that I have what it takes to be part of la Cosa Nostra. I ran over to Louie and threw him to the ground.

“You traitor! How can you make me do this you piece of shit!” I said with authority, as if I had done this one hundred times before.

“Tommy... T-Tommy. You’re a good kid, d-d-don’t be like the rest of em.”

“Why’d you do it? Huh?” I said with pistol straight to his skull.

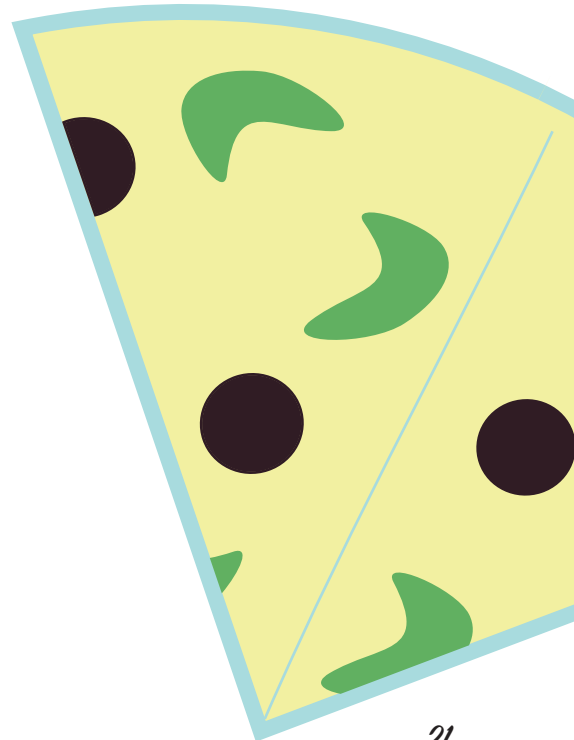
“They said they would close us up. They said they had enough to put Pat and I away for years. We have families, Tommy... this was the only way,” Louie said with a look of defeat.

“I have a family too, Louie. Trust me this isn’t personal.” Thunder roared through the sky. The next thing I remember, I was standing above Louie. I had my cross in hand gripped tight. I began to pray. “Forgive me God. I know I have sinned. I do not mean to forsake you... I love you. God I promise you, I do these things not out of enjoyment but rather for the best interest of my family. Amen.”

Pat was found just minutes later. Again I prayed. “Forgive me God. I know I have sinned. I do not mean to forsake you... I love you. God I promise you, I do these things not out of enjoyment but rather for the best interest of my family. Amen.”

That night I killed Pat and Louie DeLalla.

I would go on to take the oath of omerta, and become a made man just a year and a half later. Six years after that I was promoted to Capo. In this role I went on to plan and execute a hit on Bobby Sirico for discussing our business with rival families. Four years after that I would become Underboss, in this role I was second in command to my father. I served ten years in this role. In those years my father got older and less smart with the family. In the best interest of the family I recruited two of my best Capo’s and three soldiers to set up my father. We rigged his “sanitation” routes and got him busted for selling drugs on the block. I paid off some people and had my father killed while in prison. By the age of forty five I was the Boss of the Genovese crime family. I tell this story to you as a reminder. Monsters are not born... they are made.



The Good Shepherd

Malik Bennett

I am the guide that will lead all my flock
Through tough times and beyond;
Come and I will shelter the many believers
Actions can be shady
And looks can deceive
But with these thin cloths,
and harden grips
I will open up a world,
like new sailing ships
With my blood I will care for the wounded
whom I will protect
Open arms for all with no neglect
I stare gazing in one direction
In a world of imperfection
I shall fix with obstacles and hurdles
I am the guide that will lead all my flock



Moon

Tatiana Teano

So far from home
Yet so close to my heart
Glistening in the dark
Filling my heart
Reminds me of him
I see his face on the moon
Exosphere, Atmosphere
Wherever he is I want to be near

Shhh listen to the silence like the peace
I feel when he's near me
Your absence feels as cold as minus 280 degrees Fahrenheit
But your presence feels as hot as 260 degrees Fahrenheit

I smell spent gunpowder when I lay my eyes on you
as fireworks explode in me.

A Cold Winter's Day

Sidney Reeves

In this world, being a gay man is a criminal offense. Such an offense that the penalty for such a crime is death. However morbid—one should smile at life's end, for my fate is a much worse affair. If not dying in the literal sense, prison becomes the sentence, and death of character eats away at you until you're nothing but an empty husk of what you once were. How could I let this happen?

“Soldiers, move out!” Marching orders from her eminence.

She is our commanding officer in this land of war. She means business in the battle for gay exclusion; she has fought hard to keep us gays silenced. Some call her warder, some call her mother nature, but I think she is a monster. It has been a little over fifty days since our platoon of gays deployed to fight against the people who fight for gay rights. Since then, ten have committed suicide, five died on the field of battle, her eminence has executed six, and four have fully committed themselves to the cause; lucky for them, being bisexual, it must be nice to have a choice in all this. Her eminence took the first man I thought I could love, but he proved himself a scoundrel. Although he

never told her of our homosexual actions because that would've undoubtedly led to our untimely deaths, he still left with no closure. Marching through this barren city, I see burned-out buildings, tattered curtains, and the skeletons of those who have walked here before me. I write in my journal as we walk because I want to be remembered and also because I am in love. Her eminence's second in command has stolen away from the man I love. Although we have only made love in the passing moments of our time in prison, it was like something I'd never felt before.

A bang followed by a thump on the ground, someone screamed. I looked up from my journal with my free hand to my pistol. From the hills, there were eyes, and further beyond the horizon, a sniper lay in wait. I swear I could see him staring at me, and I crouched down. A bullet whiffed by above where I crouched, and men jumped from the hills. Bullets flew all around.

“Retreat! They have us surrounded; they knew we'd be he—”

Her eminence couldn't even finish her sentence before a bullet smashed through her skull. The people from the hills had us pinned in their line of fire. Hyperventilating, I watched the bodies fall from behind our cover. I could hear my fellow soldiers screaming as they unleashed their load upon the enemies.

A sense of ease overwhelmed me; if our enemies were winning, it meant we were winning! My partners were fighting hard, but as the bodies collapsed around me, so fell the silence. All I could hear was the voice of an angel calling out to me, his voice saying my name.

"Marcel, Marcel! Marcel, what are you doing? We have to go!" He pulled my vivacious hand away from my journal.

"What? Just leave me to die!" I screamed back at him. Then, he took my face into his palms. They were so soft and warm I nearly lost myself; however, the tears forming in his eyes kept me rooted in this moment.

"I don't want you to die."

"Vanessa is her eminence now! The men on the hills are dead or retreating. I don't want to fight anymore, and even if I did, I can't take orders from her."

I was pouting, but I meant what I said. He picked me up like a fireman, and I struggled in his arms. Regardless of my plea to death, he began carrying me away.

"Just let me go! I'm not worth the effort."

"Of course you are. I don't want you to die!"

"Why are you being so selfish?"

"I'm not! I value our friendship immensely. Could you stop struggling!"

"That's a load of crap!" I rolled my eyes.

At that moment, I was the glint of the sniper's scope. I viciously shook myself out of his grip and kicked him to the ground. He watched in terror as the bullet splashed through my flesh. I fell into his arms, and he glared down at me.

"Why would you do that?!"

"Because I love you, idiot. If it wasn't obvious from before."

"Marcel, I told you—"

"—Yeah, you love Vanessa. You want to have children and start a family. I get it, but we could have those things too or at least should be able to."

"But we can't, Marcel." He patted my body, looking for the entry wound, his eyes still searching through the depths of my soul. I stopped his searching as he got closer to the bullet wound.

"Only a flesh wound, I'll be a pris—" I nearly choked. There was so much blood filling my throat I spit it all up. Then he began to cry.

"Marcel, please don't die."

I touched his face and wiped the tears away. "It's okay; I wanted it this way. The world has nothing more left for me. I can die in peace knowing that you're happy." I gave a weak smile, teeth full of blood.

"I'm not happy without you."

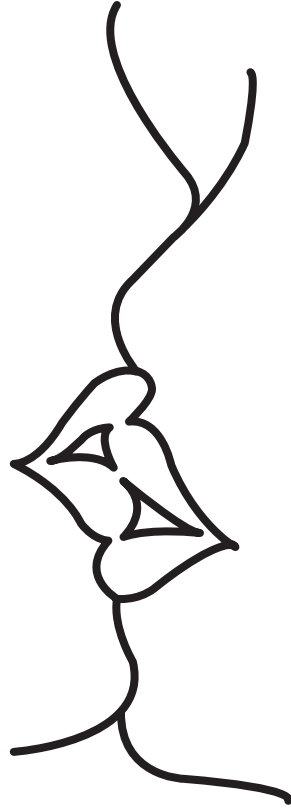
"Just forget me and go. Your love for me isn't strong enough to keep me breathing." He leaned down and kissed me. I lay there kissing him back. My chest was overwhelmed with the warmth of the soft, moistness of his lips upon mine and the blood flooding my lungs. I shoved him away and spat up more blood.

"Thanks for the gesture." I wiped the smeared blood from his face.

"Come on, please! Stay with me..." He embraced me, but I couldn't feel my arms.

"Hug me back, you nerd!"

I wanted to hold him, but I couldn't. The world lost its color, and I became cold with death.



Love

Sarah Scerbak

His smile,
it lights up
his whole face,
like that one star
in the sea of others
that grabs your attention first
because it's just
a little more bright
than the rest.

As his lips curl
they expose the beautiful holed deformity
tucked under his cheekbone.
The skin near the corners of my eyes crinkle
as the grin below my nose
grows and grows and grows.

My eyes and lips
giggle to one another
like two little girls
sharing secrets
on the playground.

I can't help but smile myself.

Oysters

Reagan Prior

We showed up underdressed
at the restaurant.
We saw the sea birds
fattened by fries and scraps
left by beachgoers.
You ordered oysters,
it was my first time
they were slimy and cold.
I felt like I was holding a raw egg
in my mouth.
They were too salty,
even for you.
We walked onto the beach
let the sand itch our toes.
It was going to get everywhere,
but the sunset and your arms
distracted me.
You picked up a
baby clam and commented on
How small its world was
in comparison to ours.
You and your green eyes,
and me in my 50's style bikini
trying to pull off my best Marilyn Monroe.
We kept sinking into the sand
as we watched the gray birds strut
and waddle,
I found a shell
colored like Jupiter.
And in that moment,
the world was our own.

Nine Lives

Madison Wood


The sun warms up your fur, melting
My fingertips at the touch. Your tiny paw
Reaches out and grasps at the air in front
Of you. Are you perhaps dreaming of
Chasing the leaves outside? Your once
Harmonic purr has turned rusty. Little
Tuffs of grey sprouted around your nose,
And your eyes, once a calm pine green,
Have turned milky and sour. I can't feel
Angry anymore picking your fur out of
My clothes as I mush down your pills
Into your wet food. The sickness has
Burrowed deep inside you and I am
Ready for you to tell me you
Have had enough.



Prom Night

Katherine Cording

when i first walk in, the room is packed. it's almost overwhelming - colored lights paint the ceiling, music pulses in my chest. i squeeze my way through the crowd, smiling when i catch someone's eye, and only letting out a sigh of relief when i get to our table. everyone else is there, laughing. none of us have brought a date except madison, a boy none of us have ever seen before and who she'll abandon in a few hours from now. i collapse into a seat next to you, shucking off my shoes (bright electric blue high heels) and tossing them aside. your dress is dark green, your favorite color. "it has pockets!" you yell over the music, sticking your hands into them excitedly. when my favorite song comes on i jerk you out of your seat and drag you to the dance floor, ignoring the way you squawk out protests. time blurs past in the form of laughing faces and grasping hands. one of the clearest memories i have comes when i'm standing alone in the bathroom, makeup smudged and chest heaving. the faint sound of music echoes against the tiles. it's like something out of a cliché coming-of-age movie, but instead



of crying i'm laughing at the way my sweat has
smeared my mascara. i clumsily rebraid my
hair (it ends up looking worse, but it's dark
and i'll be cutting my hair off next week anyway)
and rejoin the fray, grasping your hand and
spinning you in time to the music.
we stay long after everyone has left,
standing close together and singing along
to the music, warbling off-key.
i like it better like this anyway,
shoes clutched loosely in my hand,
hair falling out of my braid and standing next
to you in the dark. we're laughing at the way we mess
up the lyrics, stumbling drunkenly across the floor
and bumping our shoulders into one another.
when they finally kick us out of the dance hall,
we spill out into the fresh air. if this was a movie,
the stars would be lighting up the sky like a tapestry made of jewels
and a warm breeze would ruffle our hair. we'd end up
in the gazebo that's lit up by twinkling fairy lights
and the music would swell and maybe we'd even
kiss, because in those movies the main characters
never just stay friends. but this isn't a movie.
the stars are hidden behind clouds that threaten
to downpour on us, and the breeze is more like
a cold gust that tears at our skirts. instead of
a gazebo we sit on the curb, waiting for your
mother to pick us up, kicking our heels on the
pavement and talking until our voices are hoarse.



slender aphrodite has overcome me with longing

Katherine Cording

It's quiet this morning, soft light filtering in
the high windows and making the statues glow.
In a corner of the room, tucked away near one
of the doorways, lounges a woman of marble.
Sappho, the plaque reads, and I stare up at her
in awe. I've spent hours reading her poetry,
flipping through the well-worn pages with reverence,
and here she is in front of me. I wonder—
did Sappho think she'd be remembered?
When she was scribbling out her poems,
did she know her name would be taken
by girls who loved girls just as much as her?
Sapphic, they call us, in honor of her.
My family has long since moved on, wandering
towards other rooms that hold exhibits
rescued from history. But I can't tear my eyes away.
I want to reach out, caress the cool white marble cloth
and fold her hands into mine. I stand at her feet, and
the want is so thick in my throat that it chokes me. I stand
at her feet and pretend the cold marble is warm flesh.
Pretend that she's looking back at me, mouth curved in a
smile to tell me that it's okay. Pretend that she'll unfold
herself from her chair, wrap her arms around me and pull
me to her chest and tell me I'll be alright. She must know
what it's like, to hold your heart in your hands and be told
the way you love is wrong. Surely she'd know what to say.
But when I open my eyes, she's motionless, a cold figure
of rock with a face haloed by bright, morning light.



To My Best Friend & My Worst Enemy

Andrew Dacuba

To my future self
I want to give my heartfelt thanks
You're always willing
To make the sacrifices
I am not

A hard worker
Is what you are
I can imagine you now
Bent over a desk at midnight
The blue light of the laptop in your face
The sound of rapidly tapping keys filling a quiet night

To my past self
Get it together
I want to give you my coldest condemnation
You're always willing
To leave your problems to someone else
And who's the one who picks up the slack
I am

A procrastinator
Is what you are
I can imagine you now
Feet up on the couch when you should be working
The blue light of the TV in your face
The sounds of snoring filling the day

Enough

Reagan Prior

They used to believe
in geocentric theory;
that the earth was at the center of
our solar system,
and the sun revolved around it.
That was a lot like my love.
I was the sun, revolving around you.
Maybe it was too much,
too consuming,
too vast.
Maybe you started to melt
under my beams of affection.
I wanted to read
the encyclopedia of you
from cover to cover
And stay up at night with a dying flashlight
It may not be as brilliant or bright
as the shining stars above
but for some people
it's enough.
Like the way a dog begs for
the whole meal, the whole pie,
and they only get crumbs.

Perspective

Sarah Scerbak

It was hot.
Not the easy
relaxing
crisp air
you breathe
in the beginning days
of May.

It was musty, humid.
Like noodles in soup
your hair swims in sweat,
dripping into your eyes
like condensation running
down the bowl.

Your lungs cry out
pleading for another breath
but all you get
are strained airways
and a heart banging
on the walls of your chest;
a claustrophobic
in a shrinking box.

It was Hell.
Every step you take
emits pain
that is too much to bear.
Are you walking on coals?
Your feet feel like wood
that has been burned
past it's capacity,
one more misstep
and they will crumble to dust.

Your eyes are tightly shut,
finding more comfort
in your own created darkness
rather than the one surrounding
you.

It was Hell,
sure.
It seemed that way
all except for one.

She had an imaginary beat
flowing through her ears
the lyrics and melodies
pulsing through her veins
like an electric current
igniting her soul.

Her eyelids were closed too.
Not because she was afraid,
No.
She found relief in the music
that encompassed her being
as her sly smile
told her eyes to relax.

Her feet had a mind of their own
controlled by an unconscious
rhythm.
Every beat
kept her moving graciously
as if her world
wasn't as it appeared.

Sweat covered her skin
like tears of joy
expelling from her pores
as she danced around
everyone else.

Hell
will be Hell
if you make it that way.

Starry Night

Michael Parrott



I sit on the porch staring up at the dark vast empty sky. A cold beer sweats in my left hand as I put myself into a stupor with each drag from the joint in my right. I feel the chills of a slight Michigan breeze and I can see clouds moving quickly overhead. As I stare into the empty void, I pray tonight's the night the stars come back. Hoping all god has to do is flip the switch to some circuit breaker up in heaven to turn them back on

This is how I spend most of my nights. I put myself in this state because I can not fully comprehend the effect the empty sky has on my mental health. However, it is only when I am not sober that I feel I can accept the stars being gone. I can accept everything that's wrong with my life. At this point, I can't tell if it is the high that is saving me, or an overall numbness to the constant pain that fuels these thoughts in my head. I feel tears start to well up in my eyes but luckily for me, the clouds move fast enough to provide an excuse with the beginning of a slight drizzle. I take the last few puffs of my joint before it becomes ruined from the rain, kill my drink, and stare at the sky one last time before I get ready to head inside. Behind me I hear the sliding glass door open and see the silhouette of my brother standing there. I can't see his face but I know he's glaring at me with an expression that he's made all too familiar.

"Come on inside Rick, it's gonna start storming soon. You have to be up early for work tomorrow, so come on let's go," he says with his usual drill sergeant tone.

"Piss off Julian. I don't care how much older you are, you're my brother not my dad. Plus Dad wasn't nearly as uptight as you, you know that."

"Yeah, well, we both know how dad really was. Too drunk to care. He did always say my house, my rules and this is my house so the least you can do is respect that. You're lucky I even let you smoke here."

"Oh come on it's been legal for years now you as—"

"Uncle Ricky!" I hear my nephew shout from inside the house. "You promised you'd read to me before bedtime."

"I know John-boy! I'm coming!" I shout back.

I brush past my brother as he gives me a disapproving look and head to my nephew's room. My nephew is the only light I have left in my life. A light more important to me than the stars. It's hard to believe that such a seemingly perfect person can be the offspring of my complete asshole of a brother. My nephew asks me to read to him almost every night and, if I'm sober enough, I'm more than happy to try my best. My brother doesn't approve of this; he fears I will corrupt John-boy with my stories about the stars, or that I will be a negative influence walking in reeking of weed and alcohol. But he doesn't want to upset his son by denying him my stories. In reality, I think Julian's just jealous his son likes my stories more. I can't blame the kid though, my brother has always been more corporate than creative.



“Alright, so which book would you like me to read tonight John-boy?”

“No books! The stars! The stars! Tell me more about the stars!” he says emphatically.

“Shush John-boy. Shush,” I say as I try my best to quiet him down and contain his excitement before his dad comes in and shuts us down. “I’ll tell you all about the stars, you just have to promise not to tell your dad.”

He looks at me and nods with a smile stretching ear to ear, waiting as if this wasn’t the fiftieth time I’ve told him about the stars. I tell him everything I know about the stars, everything my father taught me.

“There used to be millions of stars that filled the night sky. Each star had a name, and they painted beautiful pictures across the dark dull sky that would completely captivate you. There were even stars that would fall and shoot across the sky. If you were lucky enough to see it, you could make a wish for anything you could ever want.”

I explain to him that the stars have been gone for about 20 years. To him that seems like an eternity, but to me it sometimes feels like it could’ve been yesterday. I tell him all about the man named Orion and his belt made of stars. The countless adventures sailors took decades ago, using the stars as their maps. I describe the old concept of how, when someone dies, you can see them again as a new star in the

sky. How some people believe the stars could be openings in heaven, where the love of your lost ones shines down to let us know they are happy. I talk and talk until I see him struggling to keep his eyes open. I finish my stories and just when I think he’s about to doze off, he turns to me.

“Why do you know so much about the stars?”

“Your grandfather was an astronomer, a man who studied the stars.”

“Will they ever come back?”

“I’m not sure, but I hope so.”

I sit and wait until John-boy falls asleep, but the questions he asked left me dazed.

My mind starts

running due to my alcoholic haze, and I can’t stop thinking about the past. Looking at John-boy, it breaks my heart knowing him and his generation will probably never see the stars. I’m more than glad that he is happy to listen to me talk about the stars, but I know he doesn’t fully comprehend that they will most likely never return. He isn’t old enough to really understand the concept of light pollution, human advancements, or population growth, but he is enraptured by the idea of a world with lights shining down from the sky rather than up from the ground.

My mind jumps back to when I was 12 years old. The stars were still around, and so was my father. It wasn’t until I was about 14 that all the stars had disappeared. My father, my brother, and I watched them vanish one by one like flowers being

plucked from the soil, until all that's left behind is the cold, dark earth. It was because society was forced to build ridiculous, colossal, luminous cities in order to keep up with the constant upsurges in the population. Light pollution spread like a quenchless fire, engulfing most of the planet until it was surrounded with constant radiance. Overpowered by industrialization, the stars were forced to leave their home.

As I sit in John-boy's room, with my head spinning and my mind running in circles, I know it's time for me to get some rest. As I lay in bed, my head does not stop spinning from the alcohol, but my high tries desperately to put me to sleep. As hard as I try, I just can't seem to fall asleep. John-boy's question just keeps bringing itself to the front of my mind.

"Why do I know so much about the stars? What even is the point anymore?"

I then start to reminisce about my father and his knowledge of the stars. He passed most of his knowledge along to me, and he was the main source of my love of the stars. Dad always dreamed of being an astronaut, but everyone knew that would never happen.

"I swear, one day I'll be able to see the stars up close and in person. When that happens, I promise I'll bring you both with me." This was

something he'd often say when he was drinking. A habit he passed along to me.

I knew it would never happen, but, as he looked into the night sky, seeing that big dumb smile between those flushed cheeks really made me hopeful. My brother, on the other hand, could not care less. He is four years older, so he was 18 at the time. He always thought that stargazing was little kid stuff, and he didn't want to be distracted from the real world.

I feel myself beginning to fall into a slumber. It's crazy to think about how that man dedicated his whole life to the stars. He spent years and years studying them. The amount of stress and hard work that went into building his career as an astronomer. Memorizing almost each and every one and the beautiful pictures they created in the sky. His knowledge was so boundless and great that every time he spoke of the stars, it felt as if they were just an extension of him. And now they're gone. The tiny flames in the sky, extinguished by the advancements of mankind. But what does that mean for my father's legacy? Now that they're gone, was his life a waste? Was the knowledge he spent years attaining completely useless?

My thoughts of my father are cut short and I wake up to the blaring sound of my alarm. I somehow feel more tired than I did going to bed. The overwhelming pressure in my



head from my hangover wishes me a good morning, as it does most days. I turn and look at my phone; it's seven o'clock in the morning. I have two hours until I have to clock in at the plant. I can't be late or else I'll make my brother look bad.

I sit up and open the drawer of my bedside dresser. I stare at the contents inside, contemplating who to choose as my champion against this overpowering hangover. It's between a bottle of Jack Daniel's Tennessee whiskey, that has about a third left, or a thin poorly rolled joint that I can tell I made on the precipice of a blackout. I choose the joint because I know I cannot risk getting another DUI. I was fired from my last job after my second DUI, and if I were to get one more that would be a felony. I know showing up late with the smell of alcohol on my breath would not only threaten my job, but it would also put my brother in trouble. He is the one who worked so hard to get me this job.


I check to see if anyone is home. Julian and his wife must've left for work and taken John-boy to school not too long ago; there is still a thin layer of condensation left on the mirror from a hot shower. I splash cold water on my face and use the towel to wipe the mirror. As I look at myself, I am not sure if I like what I see glaring back at me. My eyes are bloodshot, though I am not high yet. My once thin, some-

what fit body is being taken over by a gross protruding gut. I am in desperate need of a haircut, as my brown straggly hair is starting to look like a mop atop my head.

I head out to the porch to smoke a joint, and once again I am met by the cool Michigan air. I light my joint and can feel my headache leave with every exhale of smoke. I know I will be hungry in about ten or fifteen minutes now, so I crack some eggs and cook quickly.

I head to work with no high expectations, knowing to prepare for the monotonous day ahead of me. The work I do is the same as it was yesterday. It is constantly the same shit, just a different day, over and over and over. Very similar to when I worked in the factory. I am amazed and confused on how this process has not been automated yet.

Once again I find myself getting lost in my thoughts at another dull, unvarying job. Fantasizing about going to space, or thinking of my father and the things he's taught me. Losing myself to my mind, fascinated by just the thought of stars. I am unsure whether this is because my mind is constantly clouded, since I am often high, or because I just hate reality so much. I am a prisoner trapped in an uninteresting reality. Locked in a cold, dark cell where the lights have been taken away. Every day when I clock out, I feel a weight lift off my



shoulders as I am lifted by a sense of freedom, a sense of freedom that vanishes when I see my brother.

Once I am home, I head straight to my room to finish that bottle of Jack Daniels discreetly. I gargle some mouthwash in an attempt to hide any possible evidence, and head to the fridge for a beer. It is late enough in the day that it won't make me feel guilty to start drinking; I just don't want to be berated by my brother. I sit and drink, watching movies I've seen countless times already, while my brother helps John-boy with his homework and his wife starts dinner. I do nothing productive whatsoever, I just sit and wait for the sun to set to see if tonight is the night my wish comes true. I'm back out drinking on the porch, switching between a joint and a cigarette. Inside I can hear Julian and John-boy playing hide and seek, or some kind of game. It makes me start to think about my father, and how he was either too drunk or too busy with the stars to really play any games with us. Once again my thoughts are interrupted when I hear my nephew shout.

"Uncle Ricky, where are you? It's bedtime!"


I ash my cigarette and head to his room. For some reason, I am really unmotivated to talk about the stars tonight. I set my beer down and grab a random book from the shelf next to his bed.


"No, not that book. Read this one," John-boy says as he holds up a tattered crimson notebook with a smudged star drawn on the cover. This notebook unlocks memories that I have somehow forgotten. Memories of my father that were pushed to the very back of my brain and buried from all the drinking and smoking. Memories from some of the last few days I spent with him while he was still coherent and able to move on his own. I remember him handing me this notebook. I remember feeling a warmth not borrowed from his hands, but emanating from them as he made sure my hands were firmly gripped on the book, like he wanted me to never let go. I remember running my hand over the cover, feeling a sense of power. As if it was emitting something softly electric, like static on cloth.

"Where on earth did you find this book?" I asked, trying my best not to show him how flustered I was.

"In Daddy's closet when we were playing."

I could not think of a reply. I sat there gawking at the book trying to figure out if this was reality or not. I did my best to pull myself together, because I could see John-boy patiently waiting for me to start reading. I almost began to cry when the first page said "these studies are dedicated to my sons, Julian and Ricky." I took a big sip





of my beer and started to read my father's studies and findings to John-boy. I know he didn't completely understand everything I was saying, but he sat there with his usual big smile, bouncing and giggling like we were reading his favorite superhero comic. The closer and closer we got to the day the stars vanished, the emptier the pages became. Luckily, John-boy was asleep by the time I got to the part where the stars had completely vanished.

I cracked open another beer and continued to read to myself. The rest of the book just contained various locations my father visited hoping to be able to still see the stars. He determined that the only places left where the stars are still visible would be the oceans and the north and south pole. It is common knowledge that the oceans were dangerous due to the effects of global warming. The elevated sea levels made the waves higher, and the tides and currents immensely stronger making the oceans extremely dangerous, taking thousands of lives each year. The last thing written in his notebook was "Good luck". The rest of the pages are blank and I flipped through them hoping to hear more from my father. Towards the end a folded piece of paper falls out that was stuck between the pages. It was a note to me. All that was written

was "Ricky, Lake Superior. I love you buddy." I can feel tears rushing down my face. I knew exactly what this meant. There is one last place I could see the stars from. Lake Superior is the last of the Great Lakes not to be industrialized. Lake Michigan and Huron now have a spider web of bridges connecting Wisconsin to Michigan and Michigan to Toronto. Lake Superior is the largest making it the hardest to tame. I also remember hearing about boating accidents on the lake because there was no lighting for the night.

I grab my keys, rush out of the house and stumble towards my car. I am erupting from the excitement. I start my car and blast my favorite songs for the twenty or thirty minute drive. I'm not worried because I've been a lot drunker behind the wheel in the past and not been caught. I pop a mint in my mouth for good measure and to ease my paranoia.

The closer I get to the lake, I start to look in the sky to see if I see anything and I can feel the car swerve as I search for any signs of stars. The drive felt like ten minutes and I'm not sure if it's because I'm drunk or if I was speeding. I park my car and step out and see a police car pull up behind me with the lights and siren on. My heart drops out of my chest and I start sweating like I just ran a marathon.



It's all over. The cop hops out hand on his hip looking like he's ready to kill me.

"What the hell are you doing?" he screams. "I've been following you with my lights and siren on for a little more than five minutes while you were swerving."

I apologize and explain how I just came out here to see the stars, how my music was too loud to hear anything and by the time I got so close I wasn't even looking behind me. He looks at me like I have six heads and starts to chuckle.

"Are you high or somethin' boy?"

I don't feel too drunk anymore so I refuse his tests and opt for a breathalyzer. I blow .02 over the legal limit. The officer puts me in handcuffs and once again I feel tears rushing down my face. My third DUI. In Michigan your third DUI is a felony charge. I knew I was going to be locked up. I sit silently in the back of the cop car and get lost in my head. I contemplate every decision I've made in my life up until now. After a few minutes, I decided to break the silence.

"Excuse me officer, may I ask you something?"

"You better not be asking me to pull over and use the bathroom now"

"No sir. I just... I need to know if you can really see the stars from the lake."

I hear him chuckle as he replies,

"You're a couple years too late son. They've been working to light up the lake better at night because of all the boating accidents that were happening. You won't see any stars in the sky out there now."

After hearing those words all hope leaves my body as I slump back down thinking of John-boy and wonder what my brother is going to think.

It's strange, the prison reminds me of the plant and I feel like I am back at work. Except this time I can't clock out for a few years and there's no sense of freedom to carry me out. My brother stopped visiting after he told me I can't speak to John-boy anymore. He probably throws away all my letters. I am a prisoner trapped in an uninteresting reality. Locked in a cold dark cell where the lights have been taken away. Now I sit on my bunk, staring at the small dark ceiling wondering if any of the love of people I lost is shining down or if they left me too, along with the stars.

Little Mexico

Madison Wood

A father works on his truck in the driveway,
Beer cans pilling up in the yard as he continues
To collect unemployment. A rooster crows from
The backyard of an elderly women hanging up her
Sheets on the clothes-line listening for the
Timer to go off in her kitchen. The windows
Of her house barred up from the pleading
Request of her daughters.

A boy no older than fourteen walks down the road,
He carries a backpack weighed down with little pills,
And powders. He only has a few more deliveries
To make to pay for the dinner of his
Younger brothers.

An older man pushes his cart filled with
Ice cream and snack. His little bell ringing
For the kids to come out and buy a cold treat.
He only tenses when he sees a car slowly drive

For the kids to come out and buy a cold treat.
He only tenses when he sees a car slowly drive
Down carrying men who ride
With pistols in their laps.

The children kick a soccer ball back
And forth in the street, running over
The shells of a 22 caliber that made
Them cover under their sheets
From the night before.



Your Rosie

Kaylee Krok

Death. The only thing inevitable in life
No one wants to talk about the end,
But everyone should.

I still remember the way you smelled on your last day.
The dirty hospital blankets,
The dust on the TV,

The dim lights and little bit of sunshine,
From that tiny window you loved looking out of,
The old iced coffees on the table,
The stains on your clothes because you could barely move.

Feeling the pain because you were motionless,
And no one could choose.
It was a choice, to let you suffer or let you go

A choice was made to end your pain,
At this point, no one was sane.

Then it happened.
I saw you, inhale and then exhale.
For the last time,
Opening your mouth by yourself for the first time in days.

I looked around the room;
Everyone in tears,
As I was in a puddle of my own.

As everything seemed to get quieter and quieter,
No one realized the life we just lost.

My best friend
My biggest supporter
The person I could always go to.

The anger I feel now because I never thought about losing you
I could've visited you more,
I could've brought you more coffees,
I could've made sure you felt loved.

I could've, but I wish you were still here.

The way your eyes lit up when I walked in the room
The way you smiled when I brought you another coffee.


And

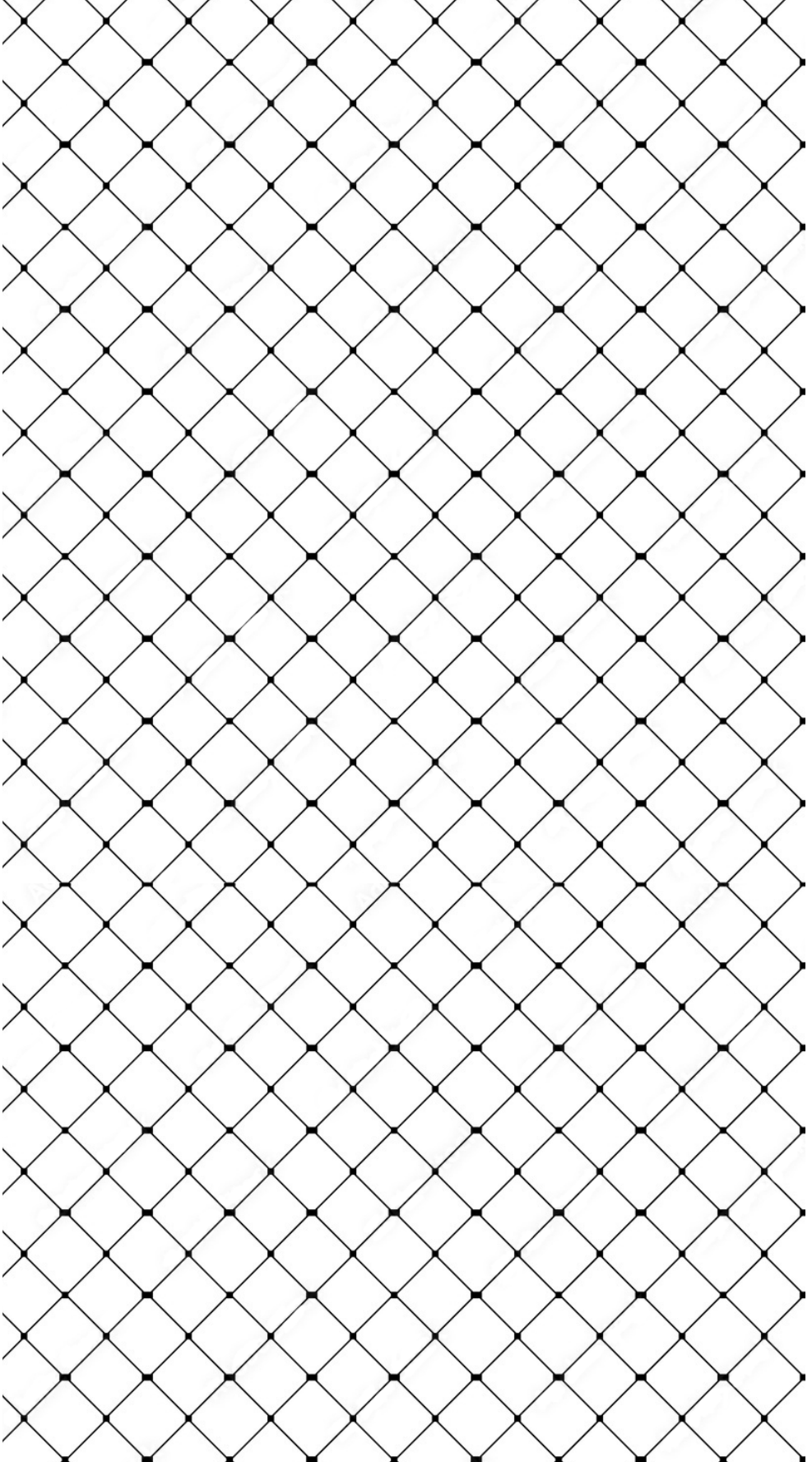
The way you made me feel
When you called me "Your Rosie."

Dear J

Aileen Genovesi

I was broken, you broke me
A year went by before I realized what you did to me
Three years later I still have nightmares
You knew what you were doing
The fear I had every day made you feel powerful
You stabbed me day after day with words
I am still scared of you, what you will do to me if I see you again
Fear has paralyzed me before, but now I am a rock
But you don't have power over me anymore
You can't control me, yell, throw, hit, push, or cheat
You are powerless, a coward
I share my story to help others, no matter how bad they were hurt
I am not a victim, I am a survivor and I will forever be free from you.





Two Worlds

Veronica Vuelva



I woke up to my head hitting the school bus window.

Stifling a pained groan, I leaned away from the offending glass and rubbed at the sore spot on the side of my head. I sucked air in through my teeth with a wince—that’s what I get for dozing off, I guess. It couldn’t be helped, though. I’ve been on this stupid bus for six hours now.

The bus had been rowdy at first, being full of middle schoolers and all, but after the first two hours, everyone sort of mellowed out. My classmates were now busying themselves with any forms of entertainment that they had brought with them, or sleeping comfortably somehow. So much time had passed, and this wasn’t even the start of our field trip. Apparently, the plan was that we were to start our bus ride at the beginning of the school day, get on a plane for a few more hours, stop at a hotel to rest and relax, and then the following day the field trip would actually begin. On another freaking bus ride. Thankfully, the second one would not be as long as the first, but I was getting sick of sitting in place for hours. Instead of ending up at a hotel after the second bus ride, however, we would reach the reason for our field trip: we were visiting The Bisect.

What was The Bisect? Well, gee, everyone of every age knows about The Bisect! It’s pretty hard not to learn or hear about it, considering that it’s kind of a growing concern for the continued existence of

human life itself. Basically, once upon a time, humanity had screwed up the Earth really bad. Like, people completely gave up on trying to clean the environment, no one cared about finding an alternative to their fuel at the time, stuff like that. So, right when humanity was on the brink of collapse, scientists had devised a solution: choose the better half of the Earth—the more inhabitable and farmable one—and transport as much of humanity there as possible. For the rest of the world, the land was used as one big landfill for all kinds of waste: municipal, medical, electrical, and nuclear. Yeah, now that people have actually started to care about what kind of fuel we use, mostly everything runs on nuclear energy now. And since an entire half of the planet is uninhabitable, many parts of it were drilled into in order to bury all the waste that was produced. This was why scientists built The Bisect: to keep regular people from wandering into Humanity’s Biggest Failure As A Species. Because as much as we feel bad about our mistakes, humans can still be pretty stupid, you know?

The Bisect itself is an enormous wall, spanning miles upon miles in both width and length. Made from a mix of lead and other metals, it stretches across continents,

breaking only when it reaches bodies of water. For the areas where there's water, such as lakes or oceans, large nets were casted across the water to prevent boats from sailing to the other side. And just so animals don't find a way around or over the wall, or people still aren't deterred from trying to cross, there's loads of security surrounding the outside of the wall from both sides. I sure wouldn't want the job in the wasteland, that's for sure. It isn't that no one is living on the other side, of course—that would be impossible. Even with today's technology, there isn't a way to transport all eight billion people at the time to one side of the Earth. I'd figure that particularly stubborn, sentimental, or poor people were left behind while the rest of us used their land as our personal dumping ground. Too bad that their descendants aren't allowed to cross The Bisect, years after their ancestors had made terrible decisions, or were unfortunate enough to not be able to. That has to be rough. And as large as The Bisect is, it obviously wasn't built in a day. Several hundreds of years have passed since the project to save humanity had begun, and I, fortunately, got to live in the future where I'm comfortably living on the better side of our walled-off world.

So why were we visiting The Bisect?

Well, I think it's to... teach us a lesson, or something? I think we're supposed to be struck by how awful our ancestors were and become inspired to... make the world a better place, I guess. I don't know. We were never really told beforehand.

I decided to find out. Once the bus had reached the airport and we were waiting to board our plane, I asked my teacher, "Why do we have to visit The Bisect? Don't they want people to not come near it?"

He sighed wearily and replied, "Well, it's an important part of human history,

and history exists so that we may learn from humanity's past mistakes. Besides, all school-age children are required to visit The Bisect at least once."

I blinked, not expecting that revelation at all. Why have I never heard of such a requirement before? Was this trip that important? "We do? Why? It's just a wall that we're not allowed to visit normally. It's also dangerous to even go near it, I've heard."

My teacher opened his mouth to speak again, appeared to realize something, and then stopped himself and scratched his beard. Instead of saying whatever he originally planned to say, he waved me off with one hand. "You'll see when we get there," he simply said.

And that was that. As much as I tried to prod my teacher for a proper explanation, he just gave me increasingly vague answers until I finally gave up and left him alone. I fell back into my seat with a huff. I thought teachers were supposed to tell you about things. Maybe I shouldn't have asked him when literally everyone was exhausted from this boring trip so far. Luckily, soon after that conversation, our flight number was called over the speakers, and we all shuffled into the plane.

The flight was uneventful. By the time we landed, it was nighttime, and boy were we tired. We were sluggish while loading out of the plane, half-awake while walking to the hotel, and practically zombies while checking into our rooms. I collapsed into my hard mattress with a sigh, not bothering to kick off my boots. As I laid in bed, slowly but surely drifting off to yet another empty slumber, I had but one thought in mind:

This trip had better be worth it.

Bright and early the next morning, we got ourselves ready as quickly as possible,

had a remarkably mediocre breakfast, and plodded one by one into another stinky bus. The only couple of good things that would come out of this bus ride were that one: I didn't have to bring my luggage with me this time, it got to stay in my hotel room; and two: I'd finally get to see what the big deal is about The Bisect. I mean, besides the obviously important parts that I had already explained about it. Like, water is important. If all of Earth's water were to disappear, it would be really bad for humanity, but you don't see us visiting an ocean or something just to learn about that.

Now that I think about it, I would've preferred visiting the ocean. At least then we could go to the beach, which sounds way more fun than whatever was happening on our current trip. All beaches had been almost entirely cleaned once humanity decided to move to this side of the planet, so the environment there definitely looks less gross than it used to be—at least that's what I've seen from pictures in my textbook. Almost everything that I've learned about The Bisect is from school, actually. Maybe that's why I'm treating it like every other useless subject that I'm never going to need when I'm an adult.

As the bus pulled into our stop, I glanced out the window, frowning my brow when I did not see a large, imposing wall outside. Instead, we were apparently being dropped off at what looked like some kind of checkpoint: a flat, rectangular gray building that looked safe and clean inside. My teacher then explained to us that after getting off of the bus, the rest of the journey would be on foot. The reasoning for this was because there are no roads leading to The Bisect, which further discourages anyone from going there. You

know, since driving there would make the trip more convenient.

Yeah... it would be convenient if we could drive there, wouldn't it. Maybe I shouldn't have complained about the bus rides so much.

Entering the building, I noted that it was just as dull and sterile as it looked from the outside. After my teacher had spoken to some lady at a desk, we were ushered into a white, tiled room with a bunch of young adults inside. Unlike the other employees in this building, these people looked out of place—unprofessional, like volunteers. I was then paired with an adult who held some sort of white clothing in their arms. Later on I would find that this article of clothing was a small hazmat suit, which was approximately and appropriately middle-schooler sized. After putting on blue latex gloves like the volunteer had instructed me to do, she helped me with putting on the heavy lead suit, hoisting the halves of it over my shoulders. Once it was zipped up, the volunteer duct taped the zipper—weird decision—and handed me a pair of safety goggles and a facemask to put on. I did so, and the volunteer checked to make sure both pieces of protective gear were secure on my face. She then pulled the hood of my suit over my head, and placed another heavy piece of gear onto my person: a helmet with a transparent shield at the front for visibility. Then I had to put on another pair of gloves—these ones were larger and thicker than the first—over my latex ones, and the volunteer had to duct tape the open ends to my sleeves.

Sporting my nice, clean, white, and safe protective gear now, I hobbled out of that changing room as stiff as a dead starfish. After everyone was properly suited up, we filed into a hallway opposite from the entrance in an orderly line, looking like

a paper doll chain if all of the dolls faced each other, rather than held each other's hands. My initial thought was that the hallway would lead outside, but no, this thing looked like it stretched out into infinity. At least, it looked like it did. At the very end there was a black door, but from the spot where we came in, it appeared no bigger than a speck in the distance. How nice.

And so we began our trek down the featureless, grey hallway. We walked in silence, the only sounds being the dull thumps of our footsteps and the hum of fluorescent lights overhead. With the harsh, clinical white lighting on the metal walls, and us being dressed in hazmat suits, the whole scenario felt like something out of a sci-fi horror movie. Like this was the build up to something bad happening. It also didn't help that the whole class was surrounded by volunteers that were also wearing hazmat suits. It made me feel less like I was being escorted, and more like they were keeping me in line in case I wanted to escape.

I let the thought sink in for a moment.

And then I shook my head furiously. What was I getting so worked up over? This was just a field trip, geez! If they wanted us dead, or something crazy like that, they wouldn't have given us hazmat suits, obviously. And it's not like the volunteers had weapons or anything to stop us from leaving. I mean, as far as I could tell, the pouches they wore on their waists just had emergency duct tape and walkie-talkies. I could probably turn back and run if I wanted to, although that would get me in trouble with the teacher and my parents. Seriously, I shouldn't be so paranoid.

I spared a glance behind me, finding that the initial room we were first in was just a light grey square now. Facing forward again, the door we were heading towards

looked much closer. A few moments later, and we had finally made it. The volunteer in front of us opened the big, heavy door for us, and we were able to step outside again.

I couldn't have predicted what I saw next.

Around us was a forest of thin, black spikes that jutted out unnaturally from the ground, and extended up into the sky like an enormous trap. The spikes sort of resembled trees, except they were incredibly abstract, lacked any leaves, and looked entirely manmade. Some of them appeared to have fallen over halfway, and some had a couple more spikes that "branched" out from the middle of their "trunks." As I passed by one, I tried to get a closer look while still walking. They were made from some kind of smooth material—perhaps to keep people from climbing them? I wasn't sure.

I looked up and found a bright blue sky, completely void of any clouds or birds. It was a stark contrast to the ominous forest we walked through, if it could even be called that. The ground beneath us lacked any grass, and was instead nothing more than sandy, rocky ground that crunched and crumbled underneath our feet. No vegetation, no animals. The air was dry, and the sun was hot enough to make me feel suffocated in my hazmat suit. Whatever this place was, it wasn't supposed to sustain life like this side of the world was supposed to, that's for sure.

Shrouded in more of the strange trees was what looked to be a very long black line that stretched out infinitely from each side, far ahead of us. Of course, I knew better, and I knew exactly what that was. It was our whole reason for coming here: The Bisect. From where I stood, it looked about an inch tall on the horizon. I could only imagine what it looked like up close. Pictures definitely wouldn't be able to do

it justice. For some reason, I felt uneasy knowing that we were moments away from reaching our destination.

As we got closer to the wall, we encountered a field of metal signs that led right up to The Bisect. The signs had poles that were buried deep into the ground for stability, and they all had different things printed on them. Many of these signs depicted several humanoid heads with grotesquely painful, sad, and fearful expressions. Others had simplistic, black-and-white diagrams that I couldn't quite make out from where I was standing. And lastly, there were the signs with actual messages on them. From what I could tell, the messages were written in all sorts of languages—basically, if you knew a language, there was a message that you could read here. The signs with words on them were scattered all over the forest, but the ones that I could read seemed all the same in one area, but gradually changed as we approached the wall. So, over time, I was given one big message. This is what it said:

This place is a message... and part of a system of messages... pay attention to it! Sending this message was important to us.

We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture. This place is not a place of honor. No highly esteemed deed is commemorated here. Nothing valued is here.

What is here was dangerous and repulsive to us. This message is a warning about danger.

The danger is in a particular location... it increases towards a center.

The center of danger is here... of a particular size and shape, and below us.

The danger is still present, in your time, as it was in ours.

The danger is to the body, and it can kill.

The form of the danger is an emanation of energy.

The danger is unleashed only if you substantially disturb this place physically.

This place is best shunned and left uninhabited.

Suffice to say, I found the atmosphere more than a little jarring now. If I had to guess, I would think that the signs were just another deterrent for people who wanted to cross The Bisect, but why all of the weird trees? Why wasn't anything growing or living in this place? I would've asked someone, anyone—my teacher or any of the volunteers—for an explanation, but it seemed like everyone was content with staying silent. My classmates, because they were just as stunned as I was, and the adults, because they didn't want to ruin the moment. I wasn't about to be the awkward sucker who had to break the silence, so I also kept my mouth shut. Classic peer pressure.

In total, it took us half an hour to walk from the checkpoint to The Bisect. During that time, I kept watch on the wall—alongside my other observations, of course—as it appeared to grow with our approach. What had first been a measly line in the distance soon became perhaps the single largest manmade thing I had ever seen. I truly couldn't believe it. No building or skyscraper could ever compare to the towering structure before me. I had to tilt my head straight up in a futile attempt to fully see just how large in scale it was, which left me half-staring at both the wall and the sky.

And to be honest, all I could do in that moment was stare. I can't describe what had come over me, but I just know that whatever it was, it left me staring, mouth agape, at this enormous wall.

Towering several thousand feet into the air, The Bisect appeared to be made of the

same smooth, black material that the forest was made out of. I had failed to notice this in the forest, but the dark coloration of the wall seemed to absorb all light, which made it look like it was a gaping void rather than a wall. Utterly out of place, and completely unnerving in appearance—how fitting for the boundary between our paradise and their wasteland to look like this. Because in the end, it was more than just a wall to keep the undesirables out and the rest of us safe. It was then that I realized that The Bisect was several other things.

For one, it was a monument. A monument to humanity's failure to save our planet long ago. It wasn't celebratory in the slightest, not even in the sense that it was undeniably a feat of architecture and engineering to build. It was instead an ugly blemish, both on the Earth and in human history. A reminder of the tragedy that humanity had brought upon itself, and how we were too late to prevent it. The Bisect was also somewhat of a punishment. Humanity as a whole had paid the price of ruining the Earth by dividing its whole population in half. Countries and cultures and religions and races were already divided long ago—what could have possibly happened after a literal, physical division of humanity had occurred? What new conflicts had arisen as a result, both on this side of the world and theirs? Lastly, The Bisect served as another extension of the problem that continued to plague humanity: its unwillingness to change. Sure, we had switched to technically cleaner energy—nuclear energy as opposed to fossil fuels—but waste was still produced from nuclear energy, and we haven't found a better way of disposing it other than burying it on the other side of the Earth. Wasn't this exactly the same problem that had happened long ago? Have things truly

gotten any better since then?

I was pulled from my thoughts by the noise of some sort of walkie-talkie: an initial scratchy sound followed by a beep that indicated when someone with another one of the two-way radios was about to speak. The walkie-talkie belonged to one of the volunteers—the one that had been in front of us this whole time, whom I assumed now to be the leader—and she quickly ran back into the forest to speak privately with the caller. A few minutes passed before she returned. She had a grim, almost fearful look on her face.

When questioned by her colleagues, she took them all aside and relayed whatever she had been told. The group went stiff by what she had relayed to them, and slowly but surely, they all turned to look at our class. We all exchanged worried glances, murmuring to each other, but when I looked up at my teacher, he seemed... unfazed by the whole situation. Like he knew what was happening. He didn't look eager about it, though. In fact, he looked tired more than anything.

The lead volunteer then announced to us that our tour of The Bisect had been extended, and that we had been given special permission by our school to enter through the wall itself. She admitted that this was the first time that her team had ever made such an exception, and she sheepishly apologized in advance for any mishaps. Despite the nervousness in her tone, the leader made it sound as though this was a rare, but not impossible scenario that occasionally happened.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. Okay. It made sense why they all looked so nervous, then. Completely understandable. I know that I would be scared out of my skin if I were given an unexpected job that I wasn't confident in

doing. Okay, cool.

I thought that we would need to take some sort of detour off to the side of The Bisect, but we actually ended up being led straight forward to the wall. After the lead volunteer pushed one of the buttons on her walkie-talkie thing, there was a brief pause before a small section of the wall opened—just big enough for people to walk through. We all ‘oohed’ once we had seen what was behind the hidden door, which was... another door. This new door—which had a window on it, how exciting—automatically slid to the side and allowed us to enter the room behind it. Between the entrance and this other door was a very tiny gap, right in the floor, which was easy to step over as we filed one by one into the secret passageway. I glanced around. There were old, worn seats built into the walls, yellow poles that lined the space in-between them, and straps hanging from the ceiling. Cheap LED lights above us illuminated the strange room in a bright white.

This place looked... like a subway car. Suddenly, there was a loud slam behind me. I whirled around, finding that the door we had entered from was sealed shut. From its window, I saw that my teacher was standing at the other side of it, eyes downcast. We all made noises of alarm, rushing to the metal door and frantically asking what was going on. Our confusion was short-lived, however, as a loud beep startled us into silence—an intercom had been turned on. A prerecorded voice then spoke from speakers in the ceiling.

“You have all been chosen as part of your town’s annual selection process. In order to keep unemployment and poverty rates as low as possible, the value of all children in our world is determined from an early age in order to predict whether they will succeed in the future or not. This current

group has exhibited—” the voice abruptly changed as its sentence was filled in, “—excessive apathy, abnormal irritability, general restlessness, lack of respect toward authority, lack of social skills, and a range of less-than-average to poor grades in school.” It then spoke normally again, “You will now be sent to the other side of this wall, where you are all free to live among the rest of the waste of our world. Thank you for your noble sacrifices to make our world a better place.”

My breath hitched, and my face went cold. It felt like time had stopped. Selection? Value? Sacrifices? I could hardly believe what I was hearing. This couldn’t be real. My hometown, my school, my parents—there’s no way that they’ve all unanimously agreed that I deserved this. That I was worthless. That I’m just as good as the trash we threw out everyday. I knew I could be a bit rude sometimes, and yeah, I’ve never been very good in school, but this wasn’t right! There had to be some kind of mistake! I didn’t do anything wrong—

The subway car lurched forward without any warning, and we were all practically thrown into the door we came from as our car rocketed through a tunnel inside of The Bisect. I ended up accidentally hitting my head on the window, and I would’ve fallen to the floor if I hadn’t managed to catch myself before then. Staggering to my feet with a pained groan, I tried to get one last glimpse of the people responsible for this—the ones that had the nerve to throw us all away like we were nothing—but I never got the chance as the entrance into The Bisect rapidly grew smaller and smaller in the distance, until it disappeared entirely in the darkness within the wall.



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