

VOYAGER





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Spring 2023

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Spring 2023

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Voyager is an annual publication produced by the students of St. Thomas Aquinas College in Sparkill, NY

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Editor's Note:

As we lift off to set on our Voyage it is important to note that creativity powers this engine. A journey through life through the lens of our peers. This issue consists of hand picked literary works from students here at St. Thomas Aquinas College. With themes of nature to school to everyday life, these works touch on a variety of experiences.

We invite you to board the Voyage and explore the artworks and 23 pieces of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction these creators have sent in. Our first entry on the manifest, "Follow Your Heart," a nonfiction essay by Steven Guterl, depicts struggles we all face in a refreshing light: the highs and lows of grades, relationships, and everything in between through the lens of his work on cars.

As you make your way through the journey, stop and smell the roses and experience the aroma of "The Scent" by Jack Schiller. This poem lingers in the quiet moments found in nature and solitude. It embodies celebrating the small moments, the sweet nothings.

Be sure to check out our last entry, "The Art of Birding" by Katherine Cording, our Rachel Carson Environmental Writing Award Winner. This essay illustrates the practice of birding, celebrating both the beauty of nature and the beauty of family, the understanding between people that blossoms in silence.

Thank you to all of our contributors for sending in their work for our Spring 2023 Issue. Thank you for taking the chance and embarking on this journey.

Sincerely yours,
Voyager Editorial Staff

Katherine Cording
Jack Giacco
Thomas Maldonado
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Follow Your Heart

Steven Guterl

Old world blues

I'll begin with one of my favorite memories. It was late August 2019. The summer was coming to an end. I was sitting in the grass in front of my house with my cat, Joey. The sun was bright and beautiful. The day had a warm orange tint, the sky was blue and I listened to the birds chirping. Construction at Bertussi's was finally over. No more early mornings and endless days of working in dusty run-down hallways with fiberglass insulation that made my skin itch all day, working with concrete that made my skin dry up and crack, and digging bottomless dirt holes in the hot sun. I now had enough to buy my dream car and begin another semester of college as an accountant. I saw the flatbed truck pull onto the sidestreet, and my best friend Juzep, accompanied by Andrew and Mike, who were also my best friends, surprised me by popping a bottle of champagne that Juzep probably stole from his parent's liquor cabinet, as we were only nineteen at the time. Mike put on music to dance. Andrew ran to grab his camera out of his Rx7 to capture the moment. It was a surreal feeling — the car was cool, but seeing my friends celebrate like it was theirs too, jumping up and down and laughing with joy for something that meant so much to me made me tear up.

I spent the last of summer working on my pretty fixer-upper. Most of the time, Andrew was by my side in his blue and yellow camouflage pants giving me a hand. A 66' Mustang painted in deep candy-brandy wine red paint, with flakey silver

pinstripes down the middle. It gleamed elegantly, just sitting in the sunlight. My two beautiful cats, Joey and his twin brother Bolbous explored the ins and outs of the black and blue leather interior. It was an even more breathtaking picture to look at than the one on the poster that I had next to my bed. I popped the hood to reveal the engine, the heart that gave the car its distinctive aura. A bright blue Ford 302 V8, with an Edelbrock 650 4-barrel carburetor stared back at me like a time machine.

I began pulling old brittle wires and dry hoses trying to figure out what was keeping the car from firing up. Then I met you. I remembered you from high school, you were in the grade above me. You were beautiful, kind, funny, quiet, and down to earth. "Hi." I thought I was just hearing something, so I didn't pick my head up from under the car. "My friends told me to come here?" I looked at you in shock, I saw your gentle smile light up. Your hair was wavy and blonde. You were wearing a bright yellow shirt with a flower on it that made your skin glow. I was so nervous to say anything, so I just replied "Hi" back to you. I saw your newer Mustang parked in front of my house that you used to drive to school. You asked me if it was okay if you hung out and watched me work on the car while you waited for your friends to come.

I was used to friends coming to stop by and say hi or hang out while I do my car things, but this was something I never thought would happen. I was afraid I smelled from sweating under the car all day. My hair was all over the place and I was covered in dirt and oil. You sat in my hammock and told me you liked my pants. I grabbed some chrome letters that spelled out “M U S T A N G” out of my trunk, in packaging dated from 1967. I gave them to you because I knew you loved Mustangs, too. A few months later, I told you I loved you, under the stars at Island Pond. You told me you loved me, too.

Time flew by like I never knew it could. We spent our days listening to Fleetwood Mac and America exploring the world we knew together. You wrote me beautiful letters and told me how I was the one you have always been waiting for. You loved that I always tried to put others first. You drew pictures of the things that I loved dearly. You loved my passions and my friends. You loved how Juzep was so Italian and giving to others. You loved Andrew’s big mustache, and how he didn’t care about what anyone thought. You loved that Mike had the personality of a grandpa. He dressed like one too. You gave me so many things I didn’t know I needed. We bought the world’s sweetest and chunkiest little cat and named her Moo Moo on my twentieth birthday. She sneezed boogers everywhere and smelled like a fish so we would always make dates to bring her to the vet. Our favorite nights were when we would cook perogies in an electric fondue pot in your room and put Moo Moo in her bed, then watch movies in each other’s arms until we fell asleep.

Lonesome Road

Fall of 2019, I made it to accounting two, without knowing anything about accounting. I kept telling myself that I would get the hang of it and it would all

work out. I went to extra help and stayed up almost every night punching in numbers I thought were right, but deep down I knew I was lying to myself. I stopped visiting you in New Paltz so I could focus more on school, and you were supportive, just like you always were. The weather grew cold and dry. Every day I chewed my fingernails in class until there was nothing left to chew on. It was a Thursday night, and you were coming home to see me. We were going to visit your Dad’s family on Staten Island tomorrow. Your parents didn’t know you were going to be at my house so we set an alarm for six in the morning so I could drive you home before they woke up. We spent the night together watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*. You told me how I reminded you of George Bailey.

That morning, I drove you home and parked down your street and walked you to your door. The morning air was calm, and the sky was starting to turn different colors as the sun came up. I was driving through a green light, looking at the sunrise over the hill. A black Mercedes hit me in the side, which sent the car into a pole. I didn’t realize that the pole ended up in the passenger seat. I opened the door to try and approach the other car and I fell to the ground. I remember lots of glass and blood, and that I couldn’t move, or feel any pain. When I woke up at the hospital my mother was in tears. Everything started to hurt, and doctors were using scotch tape to pull tiny bits of glass out of my face. My phone lit up with texts from people asking if I was okay, saying that they saw pictures of the car. I was ashamed for worrying all the people I cared about. I never saw my mother so scared and shattered in my life. My friends brought me cards and made sure I was okay. Juzep, Andrew, Matt, and Mike told me that they’ll always be there for me and that they’re happy I’m still here, and that they don’t know what they would do if they lost me. At some point, they started to cry, which made me cry.

Just like they felt my happiness, they felt my pain just as much. I was grateful to be alive, but I was overwhelmed with guilt for all of the stress that I caused everyone.

Once I was finally home, you visited with me your family after you came back from Staten Island the next day. You brought me cards and stuffed animals. Xavier gave me his Saint Benedict necklace to protect me. You were upset that I didn't have any way to come visit you in school, and that I missed out on meeting the rest of your family.

We went to see the car which was towed by Billy Holland's shop. I grew up and went to prom with his daughter, Daniella, who was the first one to come to see me in the hospital with my mother. They all ran to hug me when they saw me. I went to the back to see the car hoping it was fixable, and I broke down in tears. Daniella's little brother, Patty, hugged me and offered me his old Ford Fairlane.

That week, I went to get a haircut. I remember having a piece of glass stuck in my head from the accident that I had no idea was there until the lady cutting my hair got stuck on it with the buzzer. I kept my head turned to the side so I didn't have to look at myself in the mirror. It was hard to go around in public for the first few weeks with my face starting to scab up. I remember how embarrassed I was to even look people in the face. When I got home, my Dad and I got into an argument over insurance, and a ticket I got in the mail that read "Imprudent acceleration due to wet road conditions." The town cameras didn't get the plates on the Mercedes as it fled the scene after running the light. He was mad that I only had liability insurance, and that I couldn't get any money for the car because I registered it before I restored it, lowering the value. He told me I should've got collision insurance considering I spent all my savings on college and the rest on the car. "That car was fifty years old. You had it for less than a year." Those words

hurt, but the worst thing about it was that he was right, no matter how much I did not want to admit it. Maybe if I slowed down, I would've seen the Mercedes. Maybe if I got collision insurance, I could at least have something to get me to school and work.

For the remainder of the semester, I got a job as a mechanic at my good friend Umar's shop, which was down the street from us. My mom let me borrow her car on school days to get to class, and Umar let me use his dirtbike on weekends to get to work. Finals came around and I studied as hard as I could. I didn't even know what I was reading anymore. Extra help wasn't working for me. After missing a week of school from the accident, my accounting and business professors considered me a lost cause. I couldn't follow along in class being a week behind. I was too nervous to draw attention to myself raising my hand because of my scabbed face. I couldn't make it by this semester with only homework and participation. How were my professors supposed to give me the extra credit opportunities I asked for if I had no idea how to even figure them out on my own? I started to hate accounting. I started to hate numbers. I started to hate STAC. I started to hate myself.

Term: Fall 2019

Major: Accounting

Principles of Accounting II F

Principles of Microeconomics C-

Writing about British Lit. B+

Quant Methods in Bus/Soc Stud D

Once finals were over, I got my grades back. I felt like I had lost the sense of direction or purpose in my life, and I didn't know what to do. Some nights

I didn't sleep because I was so worried about the future. I thought about dropping out of school and giving up my education. Maybe it just wasn't for me. Maybe I just wasn't as smart as everyone else was. Learning numbers was hard for me, and I felt unteachable. Maybe I was just meant to work with my hands. I was thinking about becoming a mechanic or going back into construction. I loved to work with cars, but I was stuck between "Do something you love and you'll never work a day in your life" and "If you turn your passion into your work you'll eventually grow to hate it."

It was snowing, I was heading to work on the dirtbike early in the morning with my tools strapped into a makeshift basket trunk I made for the dirtbike. I couldn't stop thinking about dropping out of school, and how it made me feel. Halfway there the basket fell apart and all my tools spilled out into the snow and I just cried. I grabbed all of my stuff and walked the bike and my tools to work, although Umar wasn't mad. He knew I was upset and asked me if I wanted to take the day off, but he knew I was trying to save up. Ten minutes into the day and I accidentally moved an AC condenser on a Honda CRV too far to the side while installing a coolant hose. I accidentally punctured it on a dent that was on the side of the car and it shot freon everywhere. We had to stand outside in the snow and watch as the car leaked all of the freon out because it was toxic. Umar patted me on the back and reassured me that it was no big deal. I was lucky to have a friend like Umar. I still felt like a terrible mechanic and a crappy student.

Honest Hearts

Winter break came, and you would visit me when I wasn't working. Our movie dinner nights were more special than ever. I always had to wake up so I couldn't go out to the bars with you. You got upset that

I worked too much. Ryan would invite me and Andrew over to help him work on his car. The rusty old Mustang I bought out of a barn my freshman year of college, which I sold to him. The 302 motor he had built over the years that was running on a stand in his garage inspired me from the start. It was ready to go into the car and bring it back to life.

Ryan was an awesome friend, and always taught me new things and cheered me up. He used to work at a machine shop and was super knowledgeable when it came to building motors and cars — or anything in between. I loved that about him and I really looked up to him. You didn't like it when I went to work on Ryan's car, so I usually had to keep it a secret. While we dropped the new motor into Ryan's Mustang, I met my good friend Stephon for the first time. I saw the impact Ryan and Stephon had on my well-being, and how easy it was for me to learn when I was around them. Both Ryan and Stephon would teach me more than I could ever thank them for, especially during such an important time in my life. I saw Stephon's turbo Miata for the first time, and Ryan bought an LS Miata a few days later. The two cars, along with their crazy motor-building skills, inspired me to build something that would mean everything to me. The same week, Ryan gave me a Miata V8 conversion manual written by Martin Wilson. The 302, the beating blue V8 heart of my Mustang was the only part that was still savable from the accident. I knew not anytime soon, but that one day, I wanted to bring it back to life. Ryan, Stephon, and I went to Billy Holland's shop and pulled the 302 engine from the wreckage. I would gather up all of my saved money and drive out to Long Island with Ryan's trailer to buy a Miata.

We got to the parking lot and I saw it for the first time. It looked like a blue frog. Ryan took it out for a test drive with me because I couldn't drive a stick shift.

We did a doughnut in a random sidestreet and Ryan said it was good to go. I handed thirty-eight hundred dollars to a girl named Holly and her Dad. Holly gave the car a kiss goodbye and I told her I would take care of it. It was really sweet. I finally had my own car again. I could finally get to work without that crummy dirt bike. I didn't have to borrow my mom's car for school or ask my friends for rides. I could finally drive with my friends and explore again. I could tinker with it late at night if I was stressed out. I could come to visit you in New Paltz and spend time with you and Moo Moo. For the first time in a while, I felt relieved.

I learned how to drive a stick shift that day. I picked you up and you were so happy for me. You took pictures of us driving together with the top down with my polaroid camera. I dropped you off at your friend's house, you were having a girl's night. Ryan, Andrew, Stephon, and I drove up to Harriman. Mike was riding in the passenger seat of Andrew's rx7. I watched as Andrew drifted the roundabout and a part of his muffler blew off. The outside air was cold. It contrasted against the heat coming from the vents that blew warm air on my face. It reminded me how much I missed having heat each time I rode the dirtbike to work. We got out to look at the stars and sit by the lake. I listened to the sound of the water and the wind brushing through the trees. Stephon's fingers tapped against the keyboard while tuning his Miata with his laptop. We sat there for a while without saying much. It was a nice feeling.

I heard my phone ringing in the car. I ran over to pick it up. You were crying and you wanted me to come to pick you up from the bar in Nyack. I said bye to my friends and hugged them. I drove straight to you. You got in my car and you wanted to go home. You looked worried. You wouldn't tell me what was wrong. I never saw that look on you before. Your eyes looked confused and you looked sad. You kept asking me to sleep over that night so I did. You held me tight that night. Tighter than you ever did, for the last time. I felt safe.

Looking back, I wish I could have given myself the strength and hope I needed. I wish I knew that some things are not meant to last forever, and that's okay. You can work your heart out to create the dreams that you have wanted forever, and sometimes those dreams and things you love the most might not work out, no matter how hard you tried or cared. And that's okay.

Tried and True

I would attempt what others told me was near impossible. The Miata always ran greater than I had hoped for. I always tried my best to take care of it. I held onto it when others told me it wasn't worth fixing. It always took care of me when I needed it. It was a blast to race on the track and a great car to go adventuring with. I knew that I was tearing apart something that was perfectly good the way it was. I would have to fabricate every piece of the car from scratch, with nothing but Martin's V8 conversion manual for reference.

Weeks and weeks went by. It was now early September of 2022 and school was two days away. Ryan was leaving for Texas to go back to work as a boat driver for oil dredging rigs. Ryan and Stephon were a huge help when it came to making motor mounts for the 302 to sit on. I had no idea how to get the oil pan to sit far

back enough to clear the subframe, and how I would pull off fabricating strong enough motor mounts. Without both of them, I wouldn't have gotten this far at all. Out of the kindness of Ryan's heart, he let me borrow his Mustang so I could get to school when I couldn't borrow my mom's car. As much as I love Ryan's Mustang, and all of the hard work we put into it together — it was not necessarily the safest. He gave me a big hug.

"I love ya kid. Take care of her for me," he said.

"Thanks, Ry, I will," I replied with a smile on my face.

"Just... try not to wreck it." He laughed, as he got in his Ford Bronco, towing his boat and his tools on the trailer behind him. What makes this Mustang different from all of the other ones that I have driven is, well, a lot of things. The 302 Ryan had built made so much power that he snapped three rear axles. To avoid snapping an axle, he put tires from a Mazda minivan on it so they would spin out of control rather than send the force to the mechanical parts. He called it a "screaming metal death trap". The car also lacked any creature comforts whatsoever. To fit his wiring in the dashboard, he ripped out the heating ducts. This meant no heat or A/C which I was fine with. Having no defoggers, wipers, turn signals, tail lights, open tri-Y headers, and 450 horsepower to the rear wheels was the part that made this car, well, whatever Ryan liked to call it. But it still felt like home to me when it wasn't blasting my eardrums out or sliding sideways trying to go in a

straight line.

Every day after work, as soon as the clock struck 3:30 pm I would push the gutted-out Miata into the second bay with Al, and get to work before he would kick me out at 7 pm. The weather was beautiful, and for a second I thought about what it would be like to spend the day sitting under my favorite pine tree or being at the race with my friends instead of doing the same thing that I'd been doing for months. I knew I just wanted to finish. I look at the clock — hammering and measuring, hammering and measuring, ducking under the car and making sure not to step in the small mess of oil on the ground on the way to the grindstone. Running back and forth to the workbench to measure again, and the same piece still won't fit. Hammering and grinding down the same pieces of metal for what seemed like years. "I only have so much time to finish, but I know I can't rush this," I thought to myself. I tried my best to conform the stubborn piece of metal for my differential housing bracket so it would set the correct pinion angle for the driveshaft.

I notice a red pool on the floor. I look directly at the lift to see if the hydraulic line blew again, spewing out red fluid all over the floor. No, this isn't hydraulic fluid, I thought. It's too red. I then noticed my arm shooting out blood like a juice box that had been jumped on. A small piece of metal chipped off of the housing. It somehow made its way deep into my arm, and I had no idea. Everything started to ring. I couldn't get the ringing out of my ears as I still could not believe what just

happened. I stand up to go to the sink but all of the lights get really really bright. I caught myself on the sink and noticed how much red was mixing into the water. I leaned over the sink, not sure if I would pass out or just throw up looking at the metal sticking out of my arm. Al brought me a rag and some rubbing alcohol and I pulled the metal out with some pliers. I wrapped my arm with some gauze pad and let my legs give out onto the floor. Looking out of the garage, the sky was almost blinding. It was so bright to me. My ears were still ringing and I couldn't think about anything else. I just wanted to lay on the floor and sleep for a while. I looked back out of the garage and I saw the bright beautiful sky again. "Can you believe it's only 10 o'clock?" Al said.

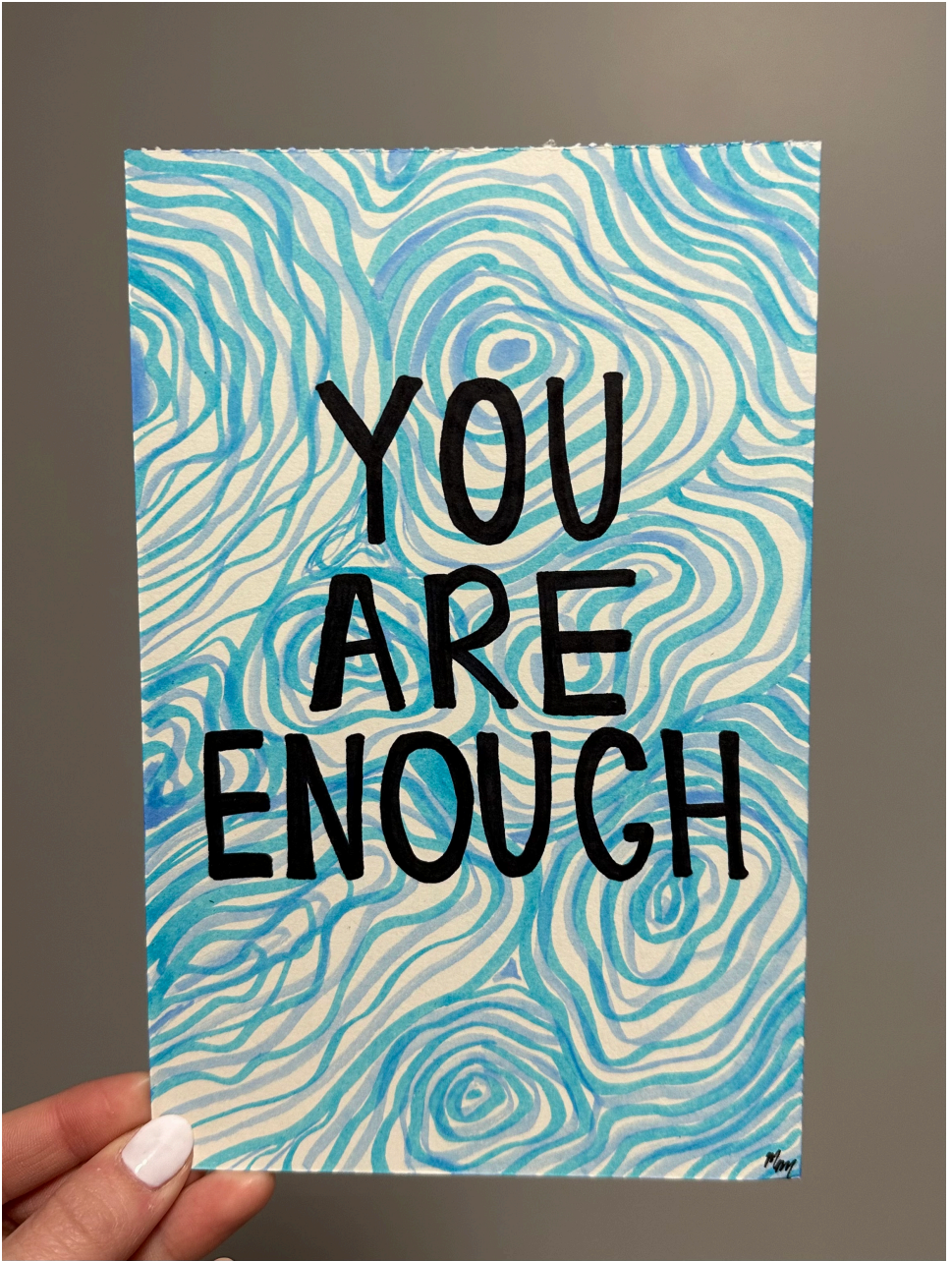
November 2022, 4 months of gathering parts, conducting research, and fabricating. I looked down at the engine bay of the Miata, which was empty and desolate for so long. Now, filled with signs of life, the old Ford V8 is waiting for its chance to beat again. I listened to Andrew read off Miata wiring labels over the phone. "The brown wire with the yellow strip is 12 volts for the coil, the solid green one next to it is for your tachometer," Andrew said. We ran the wire through the loom and heated up the soldering iron and connected the wires to the big red distributor on the front of the 302.

It was more than a motor swap. It was more to me than building something. When I crashed the Mustang, I knew that I left behind a piece of myself with it. The only piece that was savable. The heart. The little blue Ford 302 that brought my friends and I together, on that one summer day.

For a long while, I felt like I had lost myself. Every hot weld that burned its way into my hands, every scar, every piece of metal that took me hours to make

that ended up being junk, every late night that I was stuck, out of hope, and ready to give up. It was the love and learning that surrounded me through it all that made me realize that I wasn't just rebuilding a car, I was rebuilding myself.





Madison Mavrogiannis

Perfect Pink Dreams

Brooke Biamonte

The perfect, precious daughter.
Holds her head high,
In hopes of making her parents proud.
Her pretty, pink, pants match her
Pretty, pink, painted toes.

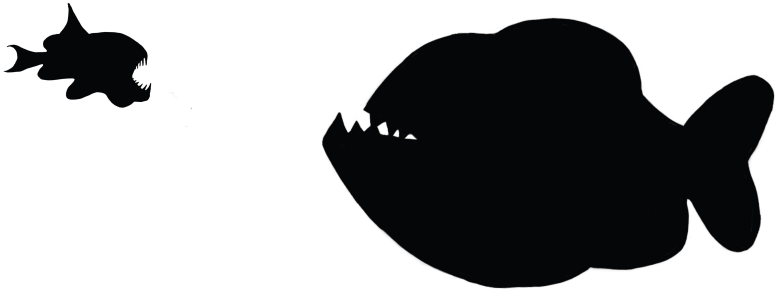
Everything must be perfect and pristine.
Nothing ever out of place because
It's simply not acceptable.
Perfect, pink, dreams will never be fulfilled.

Mom

Brooke Biamonte

My mother, so beautiful, so kind.
Nurtures her children all the time.
The love she gives forever prevails
Bet yet still, she never fails

Her smell permeates through the sky.
Her spirits lift us up so high.
The comfort she gives will always be
My beautiful mom, one of a kind.





Jake Holland

Just Visiting

Chris Harvey

Walking through Ancient Rome, moving past what once was a full and thriving civilization and culture, I could feel the history on the grounds. People lived, people died, they rejoiced in the streets, and were attacked and killed in wars. It's a place that is now just dirt roads, remnants of buildings, random columns that now hold nothing up, and even though most of what was is now gone, the history is in the air. I didn't need to get a history lesson, or know what life was like when the columns to nowhere were an integral part of holding up a massive building.

It was there in the feeling. The idea that there were so many people that lived and died in these areas, that entire civilizations can thrive so greatly just to be reduced to a tourist attraction where we view the rubble of what once was, it makes me cry. And honestly, my emotions are selfish. I'm crying for myself because my life, just like those of so many before, will one day be lost to time.

I went to Italy on a school trip during my junior year of high school. It wasn't for a class or anything like that. We went to explore different Italian cities and immerse ourselves in the culture. There were no assignments we needed to do, aside from take in the country and have a good time. Honestly, my high school rocked. And to think I almost didn't go. I learned about the trip at the beginning of the school year, and my friend Kyle and I were thinking about going. Quickly, however, I got cold feet. My anxiety was at an all time high that year. Honestly, it was the worst it had ever been in my life. I

had a hard time leaving the house, let alone leaving for another country.

Kyle at the time was different from me. Where I was quiet, shy, and consumed with anxiety, he was loud, outgoing, and seemingly free of worry. He was like a lawyer, he would never shut up. God forbid you were to get into a disagreement with him, cause jeez, he would not rest until he was proven right. I never really had to deal with that side of him though. I was much more passive at the time, and would not have argued back. Anyway, he was one of my best friends, probably because we were so different. While I was internally freaking out at the idea of going on this trip, Kyle was determined about going. In fact, he knew he was going, and he knew I was going with him. It was the last day to sign up for the trip, October 6. It was now or never. That lunch period, he came in on a mission. See, I was the only person he knew that showed any interest in going, I was the only real hope he had to go on the trip with someone he knew.

"Why not!" Kyle yelled.

"I don't know, it just doesn't seem like something I really want to do," I replied.

"Oh please, two weeks ago you were hyped for it, what changed?" he continued.

"I don't know, I guess the reality is different from the fantasy, what if I hate it?" I said.

"What if you love it, what if it's the best time ever and you miss it because of fear!" He was really determined for me to go.

"Well..." I started.

“Well you’ll come?” He finished the sentence for me. I was going to say how I didn’t want to go, come up with some excuses, but I knew he wouldn’t relent. I also knew he might be right. I was really excited two weeks ago. I thought that maybe I should go.

“Fine,” I said.

“Really! Oh shit! Okay, we need to sign up today!” Kyle exclaimed, the level of excitement on his face was actually really cool to see. I rarely saw someone get that excited.

Right after lunch, in between classes I texted my mom, asking if I could sign up. We had discussed me going for a few weeks prior and she was trying her very best to convince me to go. Of course, she said yes. Later that day, Kyle and I signed up for the trip. The countdown to Easter break was on.

The time between signing up for the trip and actually going was some of the most pivotal months of my life. It was when I realized my anxiety was a problem. One of the things about life that I haven’t come to terms with is the fact that one day I will die, and that all memory of me will be lost to time. That in a hundred years from now, no one will even know I existed. The idea that I would be lost to time brought on the worst anxiety I ever had in my life. I had consistent anxiety attacks and I was unnaturally quiet and guarded. I had always been on the shy side, but this was a different kind of reserved. It was the kind that would avoid conversations, avoid asking my friends about how they are doing. I would never respond to texts and if I did it would be hours late. I was a shitty friend. Around Christmas, my anxiety got so bad that I knew I had to make a change. I began to try and work on myself and my perspective of how I looked at life. I began to reframe my thinking and work on living more in the present, and not taking everything in life so seriously. I was trying not to think about my eventual end and

focus on the life I was living.

By the time the trip rolled around, I still was not in the best headspace, but I was improving. I felt like I was changing from a more quiet, meek person to someone who is more confident in speaking up for myself. To me, going on this trip was like jumping off a cliff into the ocean. You get a head start running toward the edge and at some point, the ground beneath you is gone, and without even thinking about it, you have jumped and are now free falling down to the water below. Leaving my comfort zone and stepping out of the very narrow existence I have lived thus far filled me with anxiety. Leaving for this trip was the cliff that I was jumping off of, leaving all of my previous insecurities behind me. In fact, as soon as the trip started, I felt myself changing. Looking back, there was a clear change in my confidence from before and after that trip. There I was, standing with my friend Kyle at the entrance of the airport, my parents have driven off, there’s no going back. The ground I once stood on, for better or worse, was gone. I was free-falling, and it made me feel at peace.

Our trip took us to Venice, Florence, Pisa, Pompeii, and Rome. There had been small cracks here and there between me and my friend Kyle that started as soon as the trip began. Kyle was always really loud, which never bothered me before. However, having to deal with the constant yelling and loudness with no breaks became exorbitant for me to deal with. We got into small fights on the bus about who got the window seat and how I wished he would stop trying to talk to the locals in Italian. In Florence, our hotel room had many weird features, one of them was that we needed to put a key card into a hole in the wall in order for the electricity in the room to work. We were supposed to use our hotel room key cards, but we could have used anything. I put in a thin piece of paper that way we never had to worry about

losing our electricity and we wouldn't risk forgetting one of our key cards. This led to a big fight between the two of us. He was determined to use the key card and I didn't see the point. These small frivolous fights continued though the majority of the trip, which caused a strain, but it didn't come to blows until the second to last day of the trip, the night we got back from Pompeii. It all started at breakfast that morning.

"Wait for me," Kyle said to me. I was leaving the breakfast table to get my jacket, which I forgot in my room. It was the beginning of April and the mornings could be a little cold.

"No, it's fine I'll be right back," I said, I really would be right back.

"I'm almost finished here, I'll come up with you," he replied, a little louder in tone, which irked me.

Also, he was in no way close to finishing his breakfast. I would have been gone and back before he finished eating.

"Just let him go," George said to him.

George was a year older than me and Kyle, a senior. He was dead set on a career in politics, with the look to match. He looked like a nerdy Ronald Regan.

"Stay out of it!" Kyle barked. He continued on about how ridiculous it was that I wouldn't wait for him. And I found it ridiculous he wanted me to wait for him to finish eating just so he could walk up to our hotel room with me, so that I could get a jacket that I was extremely capable of getting on my own. Does this sound like a stupid thing to be having an argument about? Yeah, I thought so too. Although, I did something that I would not normally do, which was leave the table and go to get my jacket alone. Before, I would have probably just waited, and complied because I didn't want to fight. Although, as this trip has progressed, I found myself growing in confidence and finding my voice.

Although, this caused more problems than I would like to admit.

During our day trip to Pompeii, the bus ride was prolonged due to traffic. I thankfully was able to snag a seat next to George, so Kyle was left to sit with another friend we made on the trip. Many of the other students that were on the trip with us saw George as a snob. I understood, he had strong opinions, some controversial, and he was not afraid to launch into a debate with you about anything at any time, even when you really didn't want to be bothered. He also got really drunk in Florence, threw up in a teachers hotel room, and then snatched on more than half of the students for going out to bars at night. Most of the students on the trip actually really hated him. Seeing how I wasn't snatched on, and I stayed far away from anything that could launch me into a political debate, I found George pretty funny. His snarky commentary on seemingly random topics was actually humorous. I respected that he held firm in his beliefs, even the ones where we disagreed. He was easy to have playful banter with, which is always important. I found it a great relief that I got to spend the better part of three hours seated next to him on the bus ride. It warded off a storm that was brewing a few seats behind me.

Pompeii was probably the most interesting place we went on the entire trip. As I walked down what used to be streets and entered what used to be bath houses, all of which were buried under pounds of ash for centuries, I thought about all the people that used to live there. People walked down these streets and bathed in the bathing houses. This place was nothing



more than where they lived; they had no idea that thousands of years later people would come in droves to walk their streets in awe of a doomed city. I stood there admiring a civilization whose people are nothing more than ash.

Well, not all of them. As I walked with my tour group, we passed a section of ruins that was gated off, inside were glass cabinets that contained artifacts, and some that contained remains of people who died during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. A grown man was encased in stone, so perfectly preserved you could even see his facial expression. His hands lay carried against his stone head, like he was in a deep sleep. He seemed peaceful, which was an ironic juxtaposition to the method in which he must have died. There was also the preserved body of a young child, no more than four, who looked like they were cowered down and a mangled dog, whose legs were crisscrossed in all directions. Something about these dead bodies, preserved by time, made me extremely jealous.

This trip to Italy completely changed my perspective on life. Seeing a culture that has grown and evolved for hundreds of years put humanity into perspective for me. I began to realize that life is not about being remembered forever, but about getting the most out of the life you're given. It's about experiencing as much as you can. When I was in Pompeii, and I saw these people preserved in stone, my immediate thought was how jealous I was that they got to be preserved by time, and, in some sense, lived on. However the jealousy was soon overtaken by something else, pity. Pity that they had to die in a horrific way. I then felt really stupid for being jealous. Why the hell would I ever want to die in a volcanic eruption?

After Pompeii, we drove back to the hotel in Rome. Tomorrow we would be visiting the Ancient Ruins in Rome. It was our last full day before going home. It took

forever to drive back due to the traffic. I sat with George again, staying far away from Kyle. Throughout the past two weeks, our friendship was really tested. We had gotten into a few small fights and I was afraid that these small cracks would eventually break open into something that would ultimately be an uncontrolled blowout between the two of us. I felt it coming the second I left him at the breakfast table that morning. All day I had avoided him the best I could, minimizing the change of a public fight and by the time we were almost back in Rome, I had fooled myself into thinking I might be able to get through this trip without a major blow up. I was wrong.

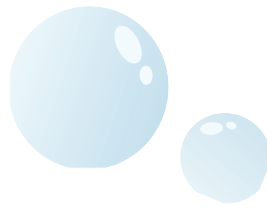
Getting off the bus, we immediately went to dinner, which was in the hotel. I can't fully remember the details of this dinner, but I said something that left Kyle really upset. He didn't scream and yell at the dinner table. Instead, he sat at the table in complete silence the rest of the meal. He was a loud and outgoing person by nature, so silence was a clear indicator that something I said got to him. I remember the rest of that dinner being tense for Kyle and I. George and a few other students from our trip didn't seem to notice. George was most likely launched into either a political debate, or he was giving unsolicited criticism to someone at the table. I tried my best to keep the feeling normal, but the awkward silence of Kyle's cold shoulder infected the air around me, suffocating me in tension. It got me pissed. Why do I need to deal with it on one of the last days of the trip?

We walked up to our room together in silence. The tension the silence created continued to make me stew in anger. Kyle was stewing just the same. I was walking faster in front of him and got into the room first. The lights from behind the pair of beds lit up the room in a dim orange glow. I threw my key card down on the dresser next to a half eaten chocolate bunny I got for Easter a few days prior. The window

was left open and a steady breeze overtook the room. It was cold. Kyle walked in a few seconds after me. The moment the door closed, he felt free to regain his voice, and the argument began. It could have lasted twenty minutes, it could have lasted two hours. Honestly, the moment is blurred and hazy, like an old dream. I wish I could recount the things we said to each other. Most of it I blocked out of my head. And what I do remember, I am too embarrassed and ashamed to write down for others to read. This was not just a fight, this was a blow out. And it wasn't a friend fight, it was a best- friend fight. He knew everything about me, he knew my fears, my anxieties, my best and most ugly moments, and I knew his. Everything came out in the room that night. He said things to me that were unforgivable, and I to him. It was ugly. After, when the yelling subsided, we were left sitting in silence on our beds. All I could think of was how could everything have gotten this bad? How could a few disagreements and spats lead to a full on World War III blowout?

"I'll be back later," Kyle said sternly as he made his way to the door.

We were able to go out in small groups every night, without adult supervision. So he went out with some of the friends we made on the trip. For me, I stayed back in the hotel room. That night I laid awake in bed thinking about my friendship with Kyle. I thought about how easily annoyed I was every time he would yell Italian words really loud in front of locals, trying to come across as knowledgeable in the language when all he did was embarrass himself and the people around him. I thought about how he was just so loud all the time, how I couldn't catch a break. He would expect me to follow him everywhere, and I didn't get a moment's peace. How I was able to ever put up with someone so loud and obnoxious and annoying? Then I felt guilty, because of course he was following me everywhere,



he didn't know anyone else. We didn't make any other friends until a few days in, and of course he was loud, that's who he was. He was probably so loud because he was excited to be in a new place. I felt like a bad friend for being constantly annoyed with him. I had slammed this whole blowup on him and his annoying ways, but maybe it was me, maybe I was the one who caused this. Ultimately, it was both of us. No one was in the wrong, simply two differing personalities that began to clash.

I fell asleep before Kyle came back, so I didn't actually see him until we woke up the next morning. Breakfast was strangely not awkward, we kept a slight distance, but he talked to me as though nothing happened. In fact, it seemed as though our other friends from the trip did not know either. I expected him to have told everyone how horrible I was. The realization hits me that he wants to keep up appearances to everyone else, he doesn't want people to know there was a big fight between the two of us. I played along. I smiled and responded when he spoke to me. He didn't speak to me often. We kept cordial just enough to not give off the impression something was wrong, while still keeping things surface level. It was a strange feeling, pretending to be fine when I knew that this once great friendship was over. Some things are said that can never be taken back, on both sides.

When visiting the Ancient Ruins, we walked from our hotel. It was only a few blocks, closer than I imagined. We started with the Colosseum, which was a really cool place to visit. It was so old that the

rows of seating was not really something you could sit on. But all I could think of was that Gladiators fought in here, which I found really cool. I spent most of the time here talking with George . He was giving a running commentary on something political, most likely to do with the U.S, which seemed unnecessary given that we were in the freaking Colosseum! But whatever, I didn't mind, he was interjecting snarky remarks about people that would pass us by that made me giggle. Kyle was behind me, we didn't talk. Then he was in front of me, then further and further to the front of the group where I couldn't see him anymore.

Walking through Ancient Rome, I found myself Googling before and after pictures, seeing artistic renditions of what the area I was standing in looked like thousands of years ago. How the single pillar that remained once helped to hold up a very important building. The artist's renditions of what the area looked like made it look imposing. The large marble stone structures with brilliant architecture that modern buildings only dream of being able to replicate. Golden statues everywhere and stone walkways covering the streets. The photos on Google looked magnificent. I'm sure it looked magnificent two thousand years ago too.

That last night we were able to once again go out. Unlike nights before Kyle did not come with us. Walking out of our hotel, the places we could go are endless. There was so much of the city we didn't see. I, however, wanted to return to a familiar place. The ruins of Ancient Rome were a few blocks away from our hotel, a quick walk. Walking through the ruins at dusk is much different than during the day. Without the constraints of a tour group, there is more freedom in where I could go. Although I found myself in the same spot I was earlier, kicking the dirt. The gravity

of how much history transpired in this area can still be felt, even at night. My friends continued to walk past me as I stopped to take in my surroundings.

The knowledge that I have grown on this trip creeps in. Change is always a good thing, I have learned that through time to accept change and to embrace it. Although this felt different because I was really sad. In the process of changing, and moving through a lot of my anxieties and things that held me back, I had also lost one of my best friends. I never would have imagined that Kyle and I would have fallen out. But growing into a different person coupled with the fact that we are in a new place put an unfixable strain on our friendship. We broke under the weight of this new world we ventured into.

The irony that I am standing in this ruins is not lost on me. My past is like these ruins; who I was before does not represent who I am now. The vast structures and beliefs that made up who I was do not exist anymore, they have been replaced by more modern structures. I think about Kyle, and how our friendship, which was once so great and grand, has crumbled into ruins.

That night, as I sat on a stone pillar, looking out onto the Ancient Ruins, on the last night of our trip, I took it all in. I took in every bit of history both from the country and my own self. I took in the cool early April breeze.. I leave my old self there, in Rome, in the ruins. And I leave as a new, better person.

empty rooms at the met

Katherine Cording

we wander in, slowly, one at a time.
i bring up the rear, hands tucked into my
pockets. it's darker in here, a stark contrast
from the sunlit painted statues we left behind.
the walls are closer too, blanketing us in a
heavy silence that rings in my ears.
they're called period rooms, little slices
of life plucked from history and preserved
for our viewing pleasures. a moment
in time, frozen and elaborately decorated
with woven rugs and sparkling
chandeliers and large mirrors that reflect
our own gaping gaze back at us.
there's ghosts among the furniture as well.
they brush their fingers along the walls and
waltz across the floor. if i reached across the rail
that separates us from the room, i could feel
the heavy weight of their clothes between
my fingers as they pass. they don't seem
to notice us, too caught up in their own time,
dancing to music we can't hear.
each room we pass is more beautiful than
the last. we ooh and ahh over the intricate designs
but i can't help but linger over the smaller,
softer things. the embroidered chair, pattern
worn down from years of providing a place to sit.
the small bed, covers tucked carefully under the
mattress. someone slept in this room once, curled
up under the same covers we examine now.
will the same thing happen to us, hundreds
of years from now? will historians
painstakingly reconstruct replicas of our
rooms? will people in the future marvel at
our furniture worn down lovingly over time,
hands tucked in their pockets as they make
their way one by one through the darkened halls?



Rachel Durandisse

Questions and Answers in Article Titles

Reagan Prior

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A Peek Behind the Curtain - Into North Korea
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Instagram Worsens Body Image
and Erodes Mental Health
Don't feel good?
Politics and Personal Relationships
What's At Stake As Political Lines are drawing?
Everything is a Red Flag Now
Feel like you're missing something?
The Escapist Male Fantasy of
the James Bond Theme Song
What is Congress even doing right now?
Passengers Held Up Phones During
Philadelphia Train Rape.
How'd They Survive?

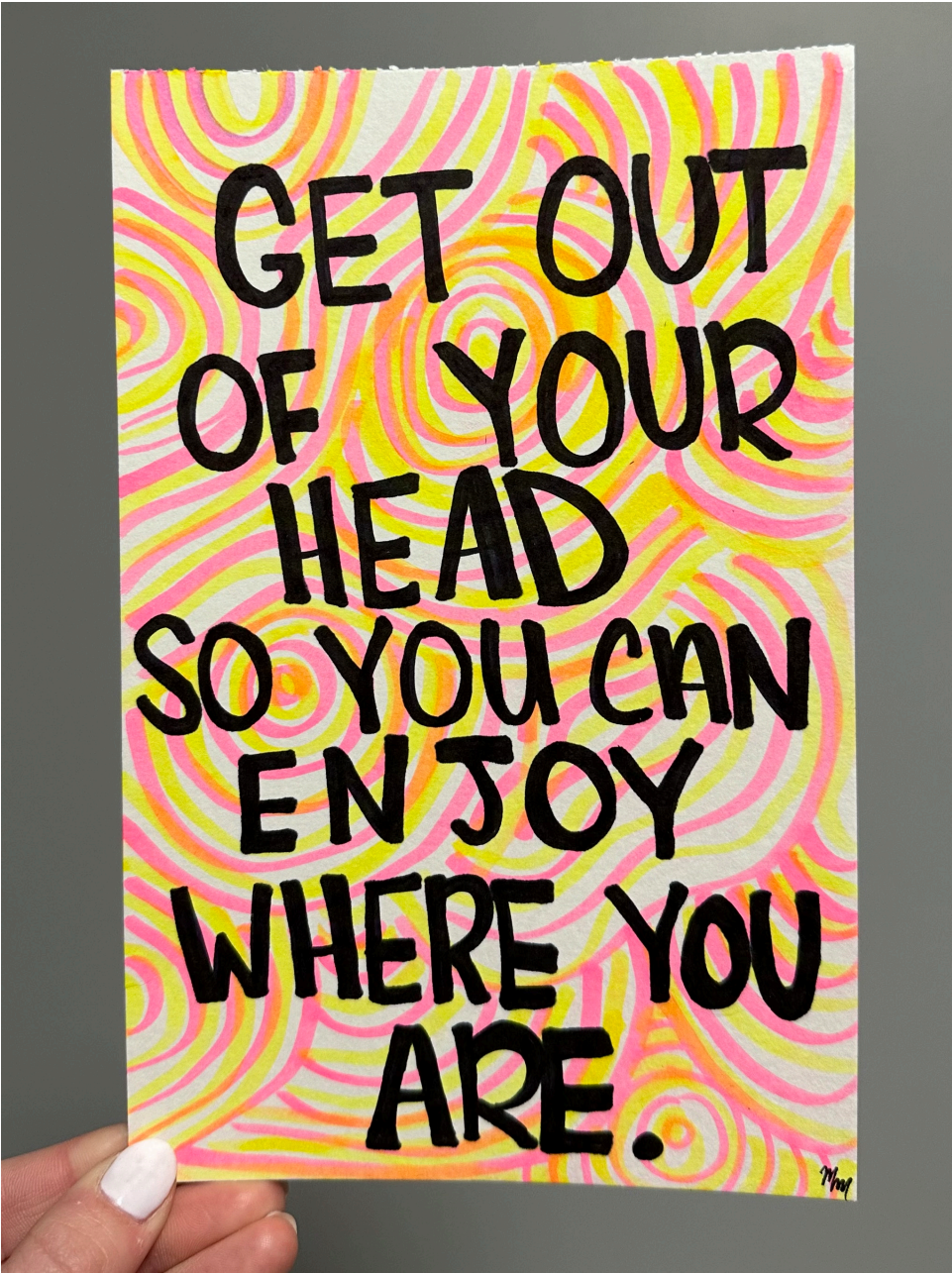
Office Politics

Reagan Prior

1. That dreary afternoon
at work
the man took out the pen
between his lips and held
it there
like it could replace
the cigarette he craved.
He sighed and dug into his
pocket.
He pulled out an e-cig and
blew out a puff looking
right into my eyes
He shared it with his
friend like they were
teenage
boys trying not to get
caught with smirks and
grins
but they were both well
into their forties.
As I passed by with files
one of them
looked up at me and said
“You should smile”
And I just laughed
because I did not
know what else to do.

2. Paper, Print, Pin,
Post-its, Tape, Thumb-
tack, Coffee
Calculator, Stapler, File
Cabinet, Smile.
It’s an endless cycle.
The walls vary in color
from white to beige to tan
to ecru.
As I go through files I
imagine
burning them. The dust
seems to stick to my skin
And gives me
goosebumps. I pause to
read police reports.

3. “There are boys in
there,” HR says,
“You can’t dress like that.”
I shake my head, look at
my sweater and jeans and
think “They are grown
men, at least
20 years older than me.”
I think about the woman
who told me she “wouldn’t
work with Israelis,” like
that was a normal thing to
say.
Or when I answered the
wailing phone
to a woman who said she
was harassed
by employees of this building.
I told my coworkers and
they laughed it off
and said “She’s probably
a bitch.”
I go to the bathroom and
stare into the bags under
my eyes, gray and heavy.



**GET OUT
OF YOUR
HEAD
SO YOU CAN
ENJOY
WHERE YOU
ARE.**

Madison Mavrogiannis

Something to stimulate the senses is hard
to come by. This is not the quick and easy
dopamine rush, but the momentum needed
to make the Earth shake,

To make the people shake,
To make my soul shake.
Waiting to be awakened.
It is the irrefutable earthquake

that causes the world to erupt in awe.
Something like ecstasy
written within a notebook
or maybe even a dream.



Jacob Holland

2012 Adolescence

Thomas Maldonado

The crazy thing about smoking laced weed is that all it takes is one hit. One swift inhale and before you even feel it in your chest you feel the jagged smoke hit the back of your throat and the lights go out. I'm not an expert and can only speak about what I know. I know one thing about that summer night before sophomore year of high school and it's that I didn't just smoke any ordinary weed that night. We smoked a substance beyond our comprehension.

In high school, I was a pothead for sure, but this is the early 2010s and being a pothead was not something to parade around. It was very much still an illegal drug that you could only buy in super illegal ways. It was always someone older who would sell it to us whether it was someone's brother or a fellow peer who didn't give a shit about my friends and me and was just in it for the money. The funny part is that we knew we were getting skimped every time, but how could we complain? We always took what we could get and appreciated it.

The reputation of a pothead was not a good one. It was always associated with a lack of hygiene, lack of intelligence, and lack of motivation. The thing is I didn't see that in any of us because my friends and I were smart and we were athletes. We weren't white kids with dreadlocks and we didn't wear tie-dye shirts. We were normal young teenagers and in my friend group we had all walks of life, smart kids, skaters,

and jocks, and we covered all the bases. So I refused to buy into the stigma bullshit about weed. God forbid some of the popular girls in school found out you were a pothead. That would ruin all our chances of getting laid – as if that was something we knew anything about anyway. Kids got expelled from school all the time, but as I said, my friends and I weren't idiots. We knew what we were doing, except for that night.

One thing about weed that they never taught in school was that it is a social drug. A tight community of people smoking weed for their reasons, but coming together to indulge in euphoria, even if it's only for a limited time. It was an escape from pain. Smoking weed was like having the wardrobe from Narnia, in the back of your mind. You smoke some weed and this door opens up to a new world of sensation and beauty. Food was better, movies were better, laughing was better, smiling was better, and everything felt right when I was high.

I

Growing up I was a pretty lonely child in my household. My dad worked and traveled so much that I rarely saw him. My mother worked from 6 in the morning to 8 at night. My two sisters who are seven and six years older than me were trying to figure out ways to move out of the house.

I did my best to keep myself busy with friends. I was blessed to grow up in a neighborhood so fruitful with kids my age. My best friends were only a few houses down. I couldn't get enough of hanging out and bullshitting around the neighborhood. My parents came from poverty and had plans on never returning to that life, which in turn, made them workaholics.

My father was a champion bodybuilder who became an NYPD detective. At least that's what I think, we never really talked with much depth. Just surface-level things about my life. "How's school going?" he would ask.

I would reply "It's good." And that's about as far as that would go.

My mother was a no-nonsense type of woman. She stood at around five feet eight inches tall, but I swear in my mind she was at least six foot two. She had light brown hair a little longer than shoulder length, sincere brown eyes, and a heartwarming smile. However, she was like a coin, because she most definitely had two sides. Her disciplinary side was a sight to behold. If all the moms got together and started a football team my mom would be the running back, and not because she is fast but because she will look you in the eyes and run you over. Naturally, she combined forces with my dad which made my home similar to a military household. For my entire life I was a bad listener, and most of the time it was voluntary. I couldn't stand the surface-level bullshit with my family. I was jealous of the relationship my friends had with their families because it seemed like they could talk about anything. And

although my mom claimed we could talk about anything I knew her better than anyone and I knew depending on what I said she would explode and smack me upside the head. I got so good at dodging my mom's smacks that she would miss the back of my head with her palm, but immediately come back with her backhand straight to my mouth. I was a smart ass, but that's what happens when you have older sisters.

My sisters were my saving grace. For my entire life, I appreciated every single aspect of them, which says a lot because they could get mean. These girls seemed generations older than me so all their comebacks were just too good and too swift. Their tongue made of swords would cut me down like a knight in battle. It was cool though. It put me years ahead of people my age. My oldest sister Lauren was my favorite growing up because she took me under her wing. She was the oldest out of us three and she took the brunt of the wrath of my mother for a long time. She was born and raised in East New York just like my other sister Tonya. I was born in East New York, but soon after my parents bought a house in Rockland County to start their new life far far away from the ghetto. What my parents didn't know was that the opioid epidemic was fierce in Rockland County.

My sisters taught me how to dress and what to say to girls and how to be respectful.

"You should get your ear pierced," Lauren said

"Me? No way" I said, but deep down I

knew Chris Brown had his ears pierced and all the girls were obsessed with him.

“It doesn’t even hurt and you’ll get all the ladies this way,” she added.

A few weeks later I was in Claire’s in the Palisades Mall sitting in that chair by the window as one of the workers prepared the ear-piercing gun. When I returned to the fifth grade with my left ear pierced I got made fun of for a little bit, but I didn’t care because I felt like Chris Breezy.

Lauren also put me onto music like Eminem and punk rock in the early 2000s like Green Day and Simple Plan. I knew I owed my wisdom to my sisters, but what I didn’t have was real-world knowledge. I didn’t know how enticing certain things would be like cigarettes and weed. I didn’t know how strong peer pressure could be when you’re growing up. As kids, we grew up in a world where all we did was go to school for the majority of the year so our peers played a significant role in our lives. Whether you were trying to fit in with a crowd or blend into the background everyone was conscious of the way their peers perceived them.

II

It all started with my best friend whom I grew up with, Tim. We did everything together: we rode bikes, we ding dong ditched, we played basketball. In middle school, he started to hang out with a different kind of crowd, but he never pushed me away. In fact, he invited me in. I was reluctant to follow the crowd at first because I was a shy kid. We would do dumb stuff like get dropped off at the Palisades Mall and wreak havoc for no reason. Eventually one day they decided that they wanted to go see the Justin Bieber

movie *Never Say Never*. And like every boy that age we all sarcastically went to see it because we all loved to hate Bieber, but by the end of the movie we all couldn’t deny what we saw was amazing.

Before the movie Tim texts me. “Yo.” “What’s good?” I replied.

“Me, Josh, and Benson are about to go to the movies in New City to see the Justin Bieber movie. Wanna come?”

At the time I’m pretty sure I was still texting on env 2. “Yeah, I’m down,” I said.

He quickly replies, “Ight and I think we’re gonna smoke a little before, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to I just wanted to let you know.”

I looked down at my phone and thought about it because I knew this question would come. I was nervous because not many people my age smoked weed so I didn’t know what it did, but these kids seemed to always have a great time on it. I weighed the pros and the cons thinking about how bad my mom would beat my ass if I got caught. Like she would smack me up and down the block if she ever found out. I remember reflecting on the movie *Pineapple Express* and how I thought smoking weed looked like a good time.

So I replied, “yeah I’ll smoke.”

And without even seeing him in person I could tell that he lit up with excitement and I trusted him with my life.

We smoked in the back of the Blu Fig parking lot in New City so we could walk right across the street into the cinema after. The movie came out on February 11th, 2011. I remember it snowed maybe a week prior so it was freezing outside. We had to walk through the snow to get to the small patch of trees behind the parking lot to spark up. We smoked a little joint between the four of us and it most definitely did its job. Most people don’t get high the first

time, but I chalked up my inhaling skills to growing up with asthma and carrying my inhaler everywhere I went. I was only thirteen years old when this all happened. Unfortunately, I don't remember the feeling of when I first got high, but I know I got super stoned. I remember being in line waiting in the hallway to get let into the theater because there were so many people. We really must've made the whole place smell like weed because we were catching glares from everyone there. Girls our age, kids older than us, and even parents looked at us with either a disgusted or a puzzled face wondering if we were responsible for the marijuana stench. As the months went by this ended up becoming a habit of mine. I didn't smoke every day. I only smoked occasionally, like once or twice a month, and then with time, those occasions started to become more and more frequent.

III

By 2012 I was smoking quite a lot of weed for a fourteen-year-old. I didn't smoke every day, but if I had a car it probably would have been every day. It was hard to smoke weed a lot when you needed to get driven everywhere. No license, no permit, and no car, just always asking your parents for rides and then really long days of walking around everywhere after.

A couple of my friends started smoking cigarettes too. Marlboro reds, Marlboro 100s, Newports, or anything we can get our hands on. When you're not 18 there are only a few things you can do to get cigarettes. A popular yet less effective way was to "chalk" your New York State ID. To do this you needed to cover your ID with wax paper and grab a few colored pencils, one to match the background of the ID and one in the color red or black. Then

the trick was to sketch on top of the last digit of your birth year to adjust the date to anything that makes you 18 years old. One time we sent my buddy Chris into the BP in Congers to get some cigarettes with his older brother's chalked ID.

"I don't know about this one, guys. I never tried it here," Chris said reluctantly.

All of us that were jonesing for some cigarettes in unison said "C'mon Chris you'll be fine."

He went into the store and lucky for us he was one of our only friends who could grow a mustache at the time. From the outside things seemed to be going smoothly until we heard shouting from the inside. We see the clerk waving Chris's brother's ID around faking like he was going to smack Chris in the head. He ran out of the store and as the door swung open we could hear the clerk shout, "-and I'm calling the cops!"

So we all took off running.

Another tactic we had that was way less sanitary would be to hunt the ground for what we called "Hobo Boges", which are cigarettes that people smoked and threw away before they smoked it all. The most dangerous and disgusting tactic out of all of them, but you would be surprised how many people were so addicted to cigarettes that they would buy a pack, take one drag out of a cigarette, and toss it on the floor. We camped outside of Dunkin Donuts and Titanic Deli for "Hobo Boges". Last but not least, was my personal favorite technique called "Hey Mister." This technique was the hardest to execute, but the most rewarding. The plan was to hang out outside of a gas station or a convenience store and send our oldest-looking friend to ask a patron, on their way in, if they could buy a pack of cigarettes for us. Most people shook their heads in disappointment, but every so often

someone would ask how old we were and someone would lie and say they were 16 or 17 and people believed it. They would buy us a fresh pack of cigarettes and then walk around the corner of the store to where we were waiting and then we would pay them.

IV

In the summer of 2012 Congers was my new home. I would hang out with Benson and a bunch of my new pothead friends and we would walk around all day smoking weed. My best friend Tim would come around now and then, but we started to grow apart because he started down a dark path. A path I was strong enough not to go down. I don't blame Timmy, he was adopted and misunderstood by his parents. His older brother was also adopted and he showed him a lot of things that teenagers should not see. But Benson and I grew closer and we would sleep over at Benson's mom's or his dad's house depending on which parent had custody that week. It was great because sleepovers were the secret formula for smoking weed all night with no repercussions. The plan was always to wait until the parents fell asleep and then sneak out of the house to spark up.

Later that summer my friend Tyreek and I slept over at Benson's mom's house in New City. All the sleepovers we had were always harmless. We would smoke weed, then immediately come inside to indulge in snacks and Netflix. We would go on youtube and listen to Mac Miller's mixtape KIDS or Wiz Khalifa's mixtape Rolling Papers and just chill. It was classic stoner music that justified our bad behavior. Like every sleepover prior, this one was going according to the plan, but the only issue we faced that night was that we weren't able to buy any weed earlier in the day. Thankfully Benson had an older brother, who was quite intimidating, but he could easily hit up some of his classmates

and get them to sell us weed. So that's what he did, he hit up the infamous Mac Valley.

Mac Valley was the plug of all plugs. He was precisely three years older than us and we all went to North High School together. Before he dropped out we used to see him walking in the hallways with his girlfriend Kristy and they resembled Jay-Z and Beyonce straight out of the 03' Bonnie and Clyde music video. He looked like a super athlete, but he was way too cool for sports and he was making way too much money to stay in school. He had tattoos all over his neck and a black Jansport that probably didn't have a pen or paper in it. No one knew what the deal was with Mac's home life. He lived in a small house in Congers and we heard that his older brother was his guardian, but his brother was in the army. All everyone knew was that he had the best weed in Rockland County. He was the kind of businessman that knew he was in high demand and wasn't concerned with customer reviews. You would sometimes get weed in a bag, wrapped in tin foil, or even just plopped in your palm straight from his palm.

So that night of the sleepover there was no guarantee that Mac would be willing to make the trip to New City for nothing more than two grams. Benson's brother made a quick call and told us that Mac would be here in an hour and then proceeded to leave the house. We didn't see him for the rest of the night. About an hour later Benson got a call, it was from a random number, and he answered it on speaker.

"Hello?"

On the other side of the line, a girl responded. "I'm outside."

All three of us looked at each other with devilish smirks because we all knew it was time to smoke.

Benson went into the street to retrieve the weed and he said that Valley wasn't there and that his girl dropped off the

weed. We didn't think much of it and got right into the process. I took a dollar bill out of my pocket, folded it vertically, and ground the weed up with my hands. Benson was in charge of preparing and rolling up the Dutch Master. He prepared the Dutch by peeling off the outer leaf of the cigar and handed it to Tyreek to keep it moist by cupping it in his hands and blowing hot air onto it. While that was going on Benson cracked the cigar longways down the middle to empty all of the insides. We then dumped the weed into the shelled cigar and folded it tightly onto itself. To get it to stick he applied the moist outer leaf and voilá, the perfect blunt.

Benson lit the blunt and passed it to me once I hit it I coughed so hard my lungs rattled. I quickly passed it to Tyreek who took one hit and almost threw up. Immediately after, my body started to react in a way I never felt before. A sensation zapped my brain and it felt like my body was on fire. The heat climbed to my head and felt like my brain was replaced by the sun and it was scorching my head from the inside. My temples were searing from the inside out and the pain caused me to shut my eyes tight as if I had a severe migraine. When I opened my eyes I couldn't see anything. It was midnight, but just before I was walking around Benson's backyard just fine. I'm not sure what happened to Benson; it seemed like he faded away into the dark and was gone. The only person I remember being with me at that moment was Tyreek. We both unknowingly traded our vision for a sea of darkness. The blunt was long gone, I wasn't sure where it was or where Benson was, but we wanted no part of it. Our eyes refused to adjust and what seemed like a slight hill that we were standing on before had turned into a steep slippery cliff. Our legs were shaking just from how steep it looked. It didn't take long for the panic to set in.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Tyreek exclaimed

"I-I can't see shit," I replied as I was putting my foot forward to get a feel of the landscape. We decided the best way to get down this hill was on our asses. We sat down and I held onto Tyreek with my left arm and felt around in the darkness with my right. As we scooted down this hill I felt my throat closing and that has never happened to me when I smoked weed. There was no way of knowing what it was we smoked, but we knew it was bad, very bad. My mind started to wander and I knew I needed my asthma pump. We slowly trudged our way down what seemed like an entire cliff and I could still barely see. Tyreek and I managed to get to the back door and bust it open with no discreteness whatsoever. There was no time for stealth because we thought we were dying. Mac Valley sold us tainted weed that sent us into a panic attack. Once we got inside I don't recall where anyone else was. I got my asthma pump, took two puffs of my inhaler, and laid back on the couch. My senses were dulled down to nothingness. I couldn't speak, I couldn't feel anything except my heart beating at such a rate it sounded like a drumline in a marching band. I remember trying to close my eyes and fall asleep, but my brain was operating at 1000 mph and when I opened my eyes I would see shadows swinging all around the room like trapezists. I tried talking to myself to calm myself down, but nothing worked. I don't remember how I managed to fall asleep, but I assumed it had something to do with my hyperventilating.

I woke up the next day to the early morning summer sun grateful for the fact that I was no longer hallucinating. I see Tyreek sitting on the other end of the couch with his eyes as wide open as an owl's in the night. "Dude, did you sleep last night?"

"I don't think so," he murmured as he continued to stare out into space. "My mom should be here any minute if you

want a ride.”

I looked around for the cable box to find out what time it was and it was a little before 8:30 am.

“Sure,” I said and that was it.

Benson was still not in the living room with us and when I got up to look out the window he wasn't in the backyard either. I assumed he went to sleep in his bed, but even thinking about it was too exhausting for my brain. Neither Tyreek nor I had the words to articulate what had occurred. The entire incident felt like a dream turned nightmare. As I became more and more awake I realized that my surroundings, although familiar, seem unrecognizable. As if I had never seen the room I was in, which can't be true because I was having sleepovers here almost every other weekend. “Hey, are you g-”, before I finished the question, Tyreek cut me off.

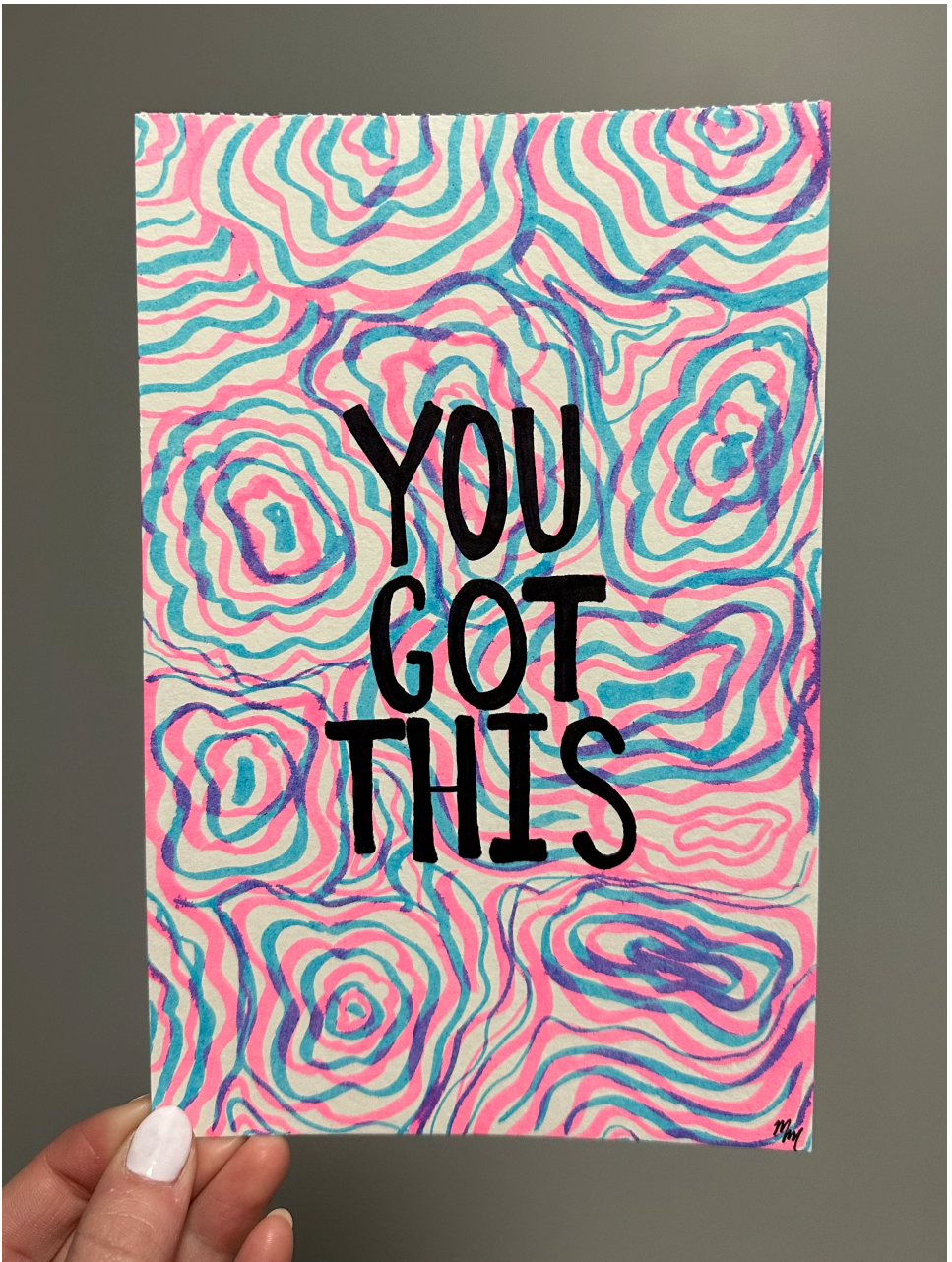
“Let's go, my mom's here.”

“Okay,” I quickly gathered my things and proceeded to follow him out the door.

That night wasn't discussed for a while, and despite being mentally stuck in a haze, life seemed to go on. I was scared of weed for a while and for the first time in my life I started to have anxiety attacks. I developed severe social anxiety. Crowds, cute girls, and important events all seemed to affect me in a way I never felt before. As an athlete I would be so nervous before a match or game that I would shake and vomit uncontrollably and then would follow that with two puffs of my inhaler. I wasn't sure if it was all related to that incident, but I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. My parents just assumed they knew what was going on in my life, and my sisters were busy living their own lives. As much as I trusted my sisters with my life, I felt like they wouldn't understand what I was doing smoking weed in the first place. Being raised in East New York

made my sisters solid as rocks, and I wasn't. They never tried drugs until much later in life and even then they were strong enough to know that wasn't the life they wanted to live. I bottled the experience up inside and figured I would move on. I didn't quit smoking weed until years later. I wish I could say that incident made me stop smoking weed, but it didn't. My close friends were my family, and smoking weed is what my family did.





Madison Mavrogiannis

The Scent

Jack Schiller

The half finished cigar was sitting on the edge of the truck bed as the page was turned on the last novella.

It was a large book consisting of 4 small novellas that he promised he'd finish months before.

Yet seated there on the quiet, winding road leading beneath the bridge that brought traffic to and from the nearby city, he felt a tranquil sense of peace and quiet.

He thanked himself for procrastinating.

He was finishing up a novella that was just fine, he thought.

Nothing he would go on about remembering in fondness like the others he had read before.

This allowed him to temporarily get away from his surroundings for just a while.

To smoke his cigar, phone-less.

The wind's fair, he thought, and not strong, designating it as a soft breeze, as was usually the case near bodies of water.

The river's scent; strong in salt and sewage.

A scent that was not noticeable to him. His familiarity with the area and its surrounding features held no surprises or shocks.

The multitude of roads riddled with potholes dangerous to low graded tires, the aggressive drivers or the equally aggressive smells for example.

A scent, however, was on his mind as he was sucking and blowing smoke from his short cigar, a cigar that he was beginning to slowly fancy. He was a casual smoker, but recent events had forced his hand and now he was on his third day straight.

The smoke and the scent felt what the characters in the novella looked like and what they wore on their backs or what they talked like.

He read page by page and chapter by chapter until there was a brief moment where he stopped and took in the surrounding silence.

He turned his back, seated in his pickup truck bed and peeked at himself in the reflection on the rear windshield.

A child in retrospect looked back at him.

He was incredulous at the sight of himself,
as if he was always watching
himself throughout the entirety of his life.

Looking and observing, critiquing, judging and laughing at all of his quips, jokes,
mannerisms, embarrassments, silly remarks, good deeds and acts
that brought on shame.

And moments such as these.

It was this keen observer that watched his every move and analyzed his every
thought.

It was the God he saw in himself,
in his eyes.

He didn't enjoy this much.

Waking to your observer each and every day.

He thought that he was beginning to say this to himself on more than one
occasion.

And when he looked at himself at that moment, his cigar moved up to his mouth with
his left hand, holding the book in his right.

The eye contact ceased for a moment after.

He looked at his book, his cigar, the flow of the river and the surroundings then he
turned to himself in the reflection once more.

What looked back at him was a smirk that
from the corner of his mouth
back to the river where the scent lingered.

stemmed
as he turned

A Mind's Diet

Jack Schiller

Going downstairs was not an option.

Going downstairs meant eating again and, at that hour of the night, it wasn't an option to eat again.

The young man had eaten his last meal of the day and his whiskey had put him right to sleep.

But not all the way asleep.

The young man woke up and immediately contemplated going downstairs, but this was out of the question, he confided in me.

When asked why, the young man said because there's food downstairs and that means eating again.

The young man was starting a new diet, the reporter learned, but was, at that moment, in the process of exchanging it for his old one.

The old

one consisted of a drink and hard liquor with two to three heavy meals a day. The hard liquor supplants the last meal of the day.

The new one consisted of no drink or hard liquor and more frequent eating to aid metabolism.

Eating and drinking are two separate things and one is more fun than the other.

The young man was forced into the realization that he would have to make it the rest of the night with one bottle of water in his room.

The reporter learned a valuable lesson:

Being downstairs means eating which means being downstairs which means eating.

This reporter is more than happy that he will have made it through the night with the one water bottle by his bed. He enjoys a large breakfast the next morning while I still feel the whiskey inside.

White

Antonio Michel

A second like hours,
or an hour like seconds.
Rotating in a pattern,
appearing almost nonexistent

Dependent on the emotions,
The thrills,
The boredom,
The fascination.

The happiness leaving
as quickly as it has arrived.
While the pain
would rather go on for eternity.

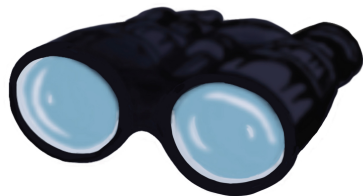
Black

Antonio Michel

I am alone.
The atmosphere's shade is pitch black
fueling my creativity,
making me feel at home.

The house is sleeping,
yet I feel more awake than ever.
As this silence gives me momentum
to dive into the subconscious.

The type of silence that can be found within a church.
Let there be a moment of silence
for our prayers to be heard.
Amen.



Chrysanthemum

Maddy Solis

I watched her from a distance; the way her Mary Janes clanked on the tiled floor, the way her black skirt rode up her thigh with every step so that her black shorts peeked out slightly from underneath; the way her curls bounced on her shoulders like pop-up toys in a repetitive way. She looked familiar in a way I could not pinpoint.

Something about the way she moved fascinated me, captivated me in a way where I could not look away once I caught sight of her. She had a routine: at three sharp she'd walk down the corridor alone and at four o'clock she'd walk back in the other direction. I had a routine too; though mine was less exact. I'd perch myself on the windowsill underneath an old stained glass painting of a saint I'd forgotten the name of and open a book to read. As the clock struck three, I'd glance up and watch her go by before returning to my text, and when the clock struck four, I'd look up again to catch her on her return from wherever she went at that time. She may not be aware of our little ritual, but it calms me to know what to expect every afternoon. It was a nice change from the old, lonely monotony.

That day, I was reading a collection of short ghost stories. Normally, I preferred romance, but I wanted something a little different. I wanted something a little gorey that made my stomach twist. Something a little paranormal. Maybe that's why our little routine messed up. Not only was she different, I was too.

Instead of passing at three, she came into my view at three o' four. And

she looked different too. For one, she didn't wear the Mary Janes that echoed through the entire hall, but rather a pair of bright blood red converse. I had never seen her wear colors before. She also had disregarded the skirt in favor of a pair of khaki shorts that fell just below her knees. Her button down was red, not too unlike her converse, and the curls that normally bounced on her shoulders as if on a trampoline were straightened, the tips of her hair falling to just above her elbows.

I almost thought it wasn't her, but I knew better. Though the texture varied, her hair was the same pitch black, so dark that it must have come from a bottle, and she moved in the same way: back straight and head held high like she owned the world. Maybe she did, I wouldn't know.

She paused as she passed me, something she'd never done before, and shivered. That was strange, the stained glass window was shut and the hall was empty besides us. And I did nothing different than I normally do, besides changing genres. Nothing should have sent goosebumps down her arms.

"Hello?" She called. I'd never heard her voice before, but decided at that moment I liked it. It reminded me of the honeycomb I used to eat as a child. She didn't glance in my direction—no one ever did—instead calling to the air. "Who's there?"

I placed my anthology down beside me and stood up. My soft leather boots did not echo like her shoes normally did, they hit the floor soundlessly, like a tree falling in an abandoned forest. I made my way

towards her. It wasn't until I was beside her that I did speak. "I'm here."

She screeched, looking around frantically trying to find my form. I knew she wouldn't, so I spoke again.

"No need to fret, I will not hurt you. I am always here."

She backed away from the sound of my voice; scarred from its raspiness from no use. "What?" she stuttered out.

"You are different today," I noted. I took a step forward, though she did not know. "You do not have your black blouse and skirt, nor your Mary Janes."

She hugged her chest, the goosebumps I noticed before started to swell to warts on her tanned skin. I could see her eyes from here, too. They were bottle-cap green.

"How do you know that?"

"I see you everyday," I explained. "At three and at four. You are rather hard to miss."

Her eyes began to well up with tears, and I noticed the barest specks of mascara on her lashes. "Please leave."

I cocked my head to the side, though she did not know that. "That I cannot," I informed her, "Though, it is peculiar you should notice my presence today above all else."

"Who are you?" she whispered, fear rippling off her.

"You may call me Chrys," I said. "Though my full name was *Chrysanthemum*."

A loose tear streaked down her cheek, taking bits of mascara with it. "I've never felt you here or heard you speak before."

I gestured towards my windowsill uselessly, "I sit on the windowsill below the stained glass portrait every afternoon and read. You and I have quite the routine."

"Stop," she mumbled out.

"Maybe it is my new book," I said, "Normally, I stick to romances. I rather

lack a love life myself, you see, and so I do adore reading about others. Tough, that's a little silly, even if the story was a little paranormal."

"But you're—"

"A ghost?" I interrupted. "Yes, one might call me that. Unlike you, I cannot change my appearance. Though, that does not matter, as you cannot see me."

Part of me wishes she could. Maybe she'd recognize me. Maybe her familiarity will click in my mind.

The mascara stained the back of her hand as she wiped away the tears. "I'm going insane."

I chuckled, "Fear not. I am real."

"Where are you?" her voice trembled.

I stepped closer to her and grabbed a strand of unnaturally straightened hair. I lifted it slightly and let it drop. "Here," I replied.

She did not cry out as her hair seemed to move on its own. "Your name's Chrys?"

I smiled broadly. "That is what I recall, yes. And while I've seen you often, I do not recall ever hearing your name."

"I shouldn't," she mumbled.

"I cannot steal names," I laughed, "You can tell me."

"No," she shook her head. "I'd rather not."

I stepped back, "I cannot force you." I paused for a second, watching her peculiar facial expressions. Though she was facing me, her eyes darted around the room. "Can I ask why the delay today, though? And the outfit?"

She looked down at her own clothes, fingering the helm of her button down where it had untucked. "Work," she replied.

"That's nice," I said, "I never did get to work."

A frown donned her features, "How old are you, exactly?"

“Eighteen.”

“How long have you been eighteen?”

“Years and years. I have watched you since you began to take this route.”

Her face twisted in thought and before I could stop myself, I blurted out, “You look familiar, is all.”

She no longer looked fearful, though she still had streaks of mascara running down her cheeks. “I do?”

“I do not know why,” I admitted, “I don’t remember much from my time being alive.”

“Your name is Chrys?” she asked again.

I frowned, though she could not see the confused expression on my face. “Yes, I’ve told you this. As far as I recall, my name is Chrys.”

She pulled out a device from her pocket, a little rectangular box that lit up as she tapped it. I’d seen phones from a distance before, but never up close. I stepped towards her and watched as she typed in the six letter passcode: C H S M U M. I do not know if those letters have a meaning or not.

She flipped through pictures until she landed on a picture of an older photograph taken. I gasped. Both looked about eighteen, but that wasn’t what shocked me most. What did was the fact that the person on the left was clearly me; she had the same leather boots I did, and her hands were shaped the same way mine were. The person to my side looked awfully like the girl in front of me, with straightened hair and colorful clothes.

“Do you know anyone in this picture?”

“That’s me,” I said pointing. When I remembered she could not see my hand, I reiterated, “With the boots.”

“Do you know the other person?”

“Looks like you,” I commented. “But, no. Familiar, but no.”

“That’s my mom.”

I reached out and grabbed the phone from her. She gasped; from her sight the phone was floating away. “I don’t remember.” I said, zooming in on the faces on the screen. The picture was slightly pixelated.

“Mom told me about the girl in the picture. You?”

I nodded, keeping my eyes fixated on the dark brown from my former self. “Me.” I replied after a moment, glancing up.

The girl made eye contact with me, and I found myself drowning in the bottle-cap green moat. I do not know how she managed to meet my eyes perfectly. “Chrysanthemum,” she mumbled.

“Yes?”

“No.” She paused for a moment, “That’s my name.”

“Your—”

She nodded, reaching out and grabbing her phone from my grasp. Her hand brushed against my invisible yet corporeal skin, and she shivered slightly. “No wonder you were fascinated by me,” she laughed.

The only good part about being invisible is the fact that she couldn’t see my flabbergasted expression. I could feel my jaw nearly unhinged as I stared at the girl in front of me; Chrys, a child, well adult now, named after me. A legacy of mine I hadn’t even known I had.

She looked at her phone for a moment, eyes widening, before shoving it in her khaki pocket. “I’ve got to go,” she said quickly. “You’ll still be here?”

“I never leave.” I said, “It’s just me and my books and my windowsill.”

Chrys gave a bright smile, though her eyes were looking slightly off to the side. “Well, goodbye for now Chrys.”

I waved, though she could not see, before returning to my windowsill to read my ghost stories.

Nightly Rituals

Katherine Cording

the beach is cold at night
without the sun reaching out its
fingers to touch the sand with its warmth.
there's no light, save for the flickering
lamp posts that line the streets,
casting their pale shadows at odd angles.
the only sound that can be heard comes from the ocean
as it pulls itself onto the shore, calling out to the dark sky above it.
the absence of the birdsong is startlingly apparent,
leaving an empty space that hangs heavy over the sand.
there's a fragile peace here, waiting to be broken
with the first light of day. sometimes someone comes
and sits vigil over the beach, curled up on the abandoned
lifeguard chair and staring off to where the ocean
calls out from the darkness. They're a silent witness,
not interrupting the nightly ritual of the ocean's waves
beating down onto the sand. come morning, they will
be gone without any sign that they had been there to begin with.
there's a curious sort of reassurance about the lack
of impact they leave there; no matter what they do,
the world will continue on as if nothing had happened.

Seasons Changing

Danielle Harvey

Every time I tasted you,
I saw light blue.
Light blue like the sky on a sunny
day, and perfectly cut grass with
trees blossoming in the sunlight.

Clouds like marshmallows
and flowers in the fields hugging
and holding hands.
Just like you and I.
Except it was all a dream.
Instead, everything was black and
white.
I knew who you really were.
Once I opened my eyes,
the grass wasn't perfect.
It was just a little wonky with
patches of yellow.
The leaves on the trees were falling
off its branches, and the clouds
were dark and gray.
The flowers were leaning on each
other only because they were
begging for water.

Man Dancing on The Rocks

Antonio Michel

I couldn't help but feel stagnant. Life was almost unchanging, yet change was what I longed for. In the form of how this change would take place, I didn't know. Why did the world have to be like this? Why did I feel as if there was nothing I could do about it? Why was I trapped? Was I meant to simply go through the motions? Was this the reason I was born? Was there more to life than expected? I wanted to know.

I was sitting at my desk, looking to find inspiration for my next novel, but there was no inspiration. What creativity was I going to gather from a world that appeared to be so black and white? Maybe I should've given up on creativity when I had friends telling me to. I could've searched for something more practical; the type of job that people could admire. Something that would make people's faces ravel in awe. What type of career could make something like that happen? I would compare that type of status to a lawyer, or a doctor. Those types of careers were not only promising, given the due diligence, but would leave you with a check, feeling satisfied.

That's not the life I wanted. I was already complaining about life and its structure, yet I was thinking about another job that was pushing for those same issues to get in my way. It didn't make any sense. It felt as if everyone around me wanted to take the same path. I didn't find anything wrong with it, but it definitely wasn't fulfilling my inner desires.

What was so great about a person's desires anyway? As far as I was

concerned, desires can lead a person nowhere. They can put someone in the same box as everyone else who has yet to have ever achieved something great in their lives. I mean, look at me. I was 29 years old, looking for inspiration in the depths of my parent's basement. The only money that I was getting was from a part-time job at a grocery store. I didn't have anything going for myself, except for a possibility from an empty notebook. Nothing was coming to me. There was nothing to excite my flow. This world was wasting my time.

Maybe I was wasting the world's time. I could have taken the same route as Damien. He was my younger brother, but at first glance, you might assume for him to be the older one. He was doing something that actually had meaning. He had something to provide the world. He went and got himself a degree, which was something that someone my age should've had multiple of. He had his own place. He was getting married. And on top of that, he kept himself in great shape. He looked like a stand up guy. The type that any parent would be proud of their daughter getting to know. He was someone you could count on to be successful. Someone that the world actually needed. Someone that could do something besides taking up unneeded space.

I still sat at my worn out chair, twiddling with the pen in between my fingers. I thought that maybe I should just start writing anything. And through miraculous achievement, a Pulitzer-Prize-worthy story would make its way into this notebook. Maybe I would find myself rich,

with a dime-piece of a wife. She wouldn't be able to help herself, showcasing the ring on her finger to everyone. Including the puppy that she was waiting to add to our family. This was the life that was worth living. A life that would make me adored. I just had to wait for it and take action. I had to put something together.

A story like that only exists in the fairy tales that we see in movies. In the world of practicality, it took something of actual value in order to create the world that you wanted. You couldn't just wake up and make yourself the best author the world has ever seen. Situations like that meant you had to compete against thousands, or tens of thousands, or maybe even hundreds of thousands, of people looking to achieve the same thing. That wasn't practical, that was just crazy.

But then on the other hand, I guess I couldn't be one to talk about crazy. I mean, maybe it would have been more efficient to put my time into becoming a doctor or lawyer. Maybe that was something worth going for. If I was able to get into the right college, get the best grades in my classes, and have a better transcript than the other thousands of candidates, I could've found myself in a position worth boasting about. With this same strategy, competition was always there. This always made me wonder, what was better about becoming a successful lawyer versus a world renowned author?

I thought the main difference came with conventionality. What was expected for a person to become? It isn't often that someone could find themselves with the opportunity of carving a new path for future generations. This made the path that I wanted almost impossible to start with. I was looking at a path that I heard of no one else taking. It left me with only my desires and hope for success. No one was able to show me what can be done, and no one could teach me how to write the story that brought out my own skills. I had to do

it. And even if I did create it, there was no telling if anyone would be able to resonate with it.

This would leave me stranded. Still at the same desk, looking outside my window. Watching the world transition from light to darkness, yet no spark of inspiration would appear. The worst part had to be the negative self talk that I would give myself. Even if I wrote anything, that wasn't enough. I needed a story that would make the minds of people shift. Something that was made to break down the systems that humanity set in place for realism. I wanted to make the abstract a reality.

I knew that this could sound almost childlike, but what could I say? I am in an adult's body, with a mind still filled with wonder and awe at the unimaginable. To me, there was still hope. There was still magic existing within this left hand. All I needed to know was how to wield it. How to make this magic work in my favor. I wanted to become a magician, looking to unfold all the unknowns that this world seemingly had no idea of. I wanted to take away the curtains, and show everyone watching that there was more to it than what we believed for us to already know.

As much as I thought for these ideas to only be fairy tales, I still couldn't help but immerse myself in them. Maybe these fairy tales were made for someone to unlock the door, almost like the closet in Narnia that separated the known from the unknown. I was all for it, as long as my work wouldn't have been in vain.

Either way, I wasn't getting anywhere thinking about all of this. As far as I'm concerned, this overthinking caused me to still not have a single word written in my notebook. I needed to find inspiration. Something that would show me that I could have an impact. Something that would break open my inner spirit. I just had to find it.

I decided to stop my mission, and put down my pen. I got up from my seat, and opened up my chest. I let my head and arms swing back, giving me the most satisfying release for a body that was scrunched up and agitated for a long time. I looked around the room, and everything was still the same as how I left it. My room was messy. My bed was undone, dirty clothes were on the floor, and I still had an empty pizza box standing up against the wall. I left my excuse to the tedious work that laid before me. It didn't make sense to attack other trivial issues if I was still dealing with a major one.

I made my way upstairs and exited my house through the garage. I was soon outside. I was happy to find that the sun was still up, as I didn't let the whole day go by without anything being done like the day before. It happened to be an issue of mine. My father knew this especially. My mother was supportive, but she never favored the vision I had for myself. I wanted to make her proud, but never in the ways that she would have liked. She was one of those parents who thought I should have continued my academic progress. She wasn't the happiest when I decided to drop out, which in turn caused a major shift in our relationship. While I had friends who were already fully immersed into their adult lives, I was still at home searching for independence.

While she would heckle me to get my act together, she was never the type to abandon me. She continued supporting me, allowing me to stay under her roof. With reason, I may not have appeared to be thankful for her support. I guess I wasn't the best I could've been either. I understood that I should've been somewhere by now. Not only that, there didn't even look to be a chance at success. At least that's what I thought. One could argue that I never gave myself a fair shot either. My output never felt to be enough. One thing that I had an issue with was

my self confidence, which always tended to get in the way of finishing projects. Even if I did manage to piece together something that I found interesting, I always hesitated.

This was a pet peeve that my father always used to call me out for. He would sit me down and lecture me constantly when I was younger. He knew I wasn't giving it my all, and told me that I needed to get aggressive about the life I wanted to live. He was the one person that was always able to see my vision. He kept pushing me forward. At least up until the end of his own life.

While it was still daytime, it wouldn't last for long. It was around 5:30, and it was November. The sun was going to set soon, but I couldn't be home. I needed to change up my location. I thought switching up the scenery might get my creative juices flowing. So I decided to go for a walk. Leaving my driveway, I took a right which would lead me down the street.

I was surprised when I found myself lacking production, being surrounded by green life. I lived in a grassy area, where you could always hear the sounds of deer and squirrels adventuring around the woods. The sounds they made were soothing. Whenever I heard them, it was another reminder of the freedom that life contained. To hear wind sore through the trees. The very breath that was keeping humanity alive. It always would bring a smile to my face. It left me in peace. Sometimes, I wished that I could be one of them, taking on the woods for my own curiosity. Being able to move about without the inner thoughts that I had. That was true peace.

How annoying the mind could be. Constantly looking to distract me from the magical landscapes given to us in the present moment. Always making me revert back to the person I would believe for myself to be. Not only that, but maybe

it was the noises of the civil life that were messing with my thought process. I'm not saying that I didn't agree with the "mind over matter" stance on life, but sometimes it wasn't so easy to put your own self worth over the environment around you. In the world that we lived in, we had to learn to survive. This came with learning to fit in, regardless of whether or not you disliked the general consensus on things.

I was still walking through Campbell avenue. Probably half a mile out at this point, but I wasn't looking to turn back. I had to find some inspiration before I made my return. My mom was probably on her way home too. The last thing I wanted her to see was another failed attempt at creating the future I was promising. Regardless of how long it took, I had to do this for myself and for her. I couldn't turn back. My honor wouldn't allow me to.

I was on the right side of the street, which made me closer to the civil part of things. If I crossed the street, I would find myself closer to the woods. On that side, I took note of a dirt hill made up of trees at first glance. If I were to venture into it, I would have to get past the thorn bushes first. They stretched alongside the whole road, and looked to have about four rows of them. Almost like a defense mechanism for keeping unwanted trespassers away. That didn't stop me from going into the woods when I was younger.

My brother and I ventured into the woods near my house in the past. It wasn't difficult, as I lived in a rural area. From what I remember, we would always use the territory to play simple games like tag. Either that, or we would act like we were going on the adventure of a lifetime. We would roleplay, and act like we were one of those explorers from National Geographic. It was always exciting, although we never did it as often as we would have liked. My parents never wanted us to go into the woods. There was always the chance of running into a bear,

or getting ticks. They weren't fond of the idea of breaching into unknown territory.

For some reason, I thought the woods might be exactly what I needed to gain clarity. I wasn't going to get anywhere by looking at the same things I had already seen a thousand times. I had to venture deeper into my own mind, and what better way to do that than to venture deeper into the woods? This might be my path to freedom. This might show me what I was missing to overcome the barrier of my own self-consciousness. I crossed the street with ease, as there were no cars in sight. It was actually much quieter than I would've expected. Usually, there might be a car or two passing by. It was better this way as I didn't want people seeing me venturing into the woods anyway. Someone may have told me to stop, and I wasn't looking to be stopped. Making no hesitation, I approached the bushes that were blocking myself from freedom.

Luckily, I was wearing a long pair of pants. Jeans to be exact. Along with a plain green sweatshirt for the occasion. This meant that the thorns wouldn't be able to scrape me up as bad as it could've. This wouldn't be the same fate had I done this during the summertime. I was able to make my way through it with ease. Taking giant steps, I tried to step in between the tight spaces that I found, keeping me from being scratched up as badly. I came out with very few thorns stuck to my apparel. Afterwards, I gave my jeans a pat down, in order to make sure that any thorns leftover didn't end up irritating me during the uphill battle.

I could tell the sun was starting to set, as the sky started to take on a more reddish complexion. The difference in lighting made it much tougher to make out the ground in front of me. While the trees around me were still visible, they started to blend into the darker atmosphere. It would've probably been best for me to turn around at this point. But this time was

different. I was desperate, and I wasn't going to go home until I found what I was looking for.

The terrain proceeded to get a little more rocky, along with the climb becoming much steeper. The trees helped a lot, regardless of how well I could see them. I found myself tired during this 30 minute climb. The trees gave me the chance to rest within short intervals of walking. Laying my back against one, I looked up into the sky. I was tired, but probably the most relentless I've been in a long time. The workout alone seemed to boost my adrenaline, and I found myself wanting to go back in for more.

After about another 10 minutes pinballing from tree to tree, I would make it to what felt to be the top of the hill. The surface became much more balanced, and I didn't feel slanted while standing as I did before. Walking further, I was given the opportunity for some rest, as I started to go downhill.

The scene was starting to change as well. The trees weren't as scattered as they were before, and they seemed to be surrounding a space that I kept pushing toward. In front of me, I could make out a lake. Little did I know, the lake started much earlier than I thought, as the running shoes I was wearing had water seeping through the front of them. Instead, I started to walk around the lake. There were bigger rocks around that I was able to step on. This allowed me to avoid the irritation of getting wet. I kept making my way around the lake, jumping from rock to rock, until eventually I was able to see a leveled dirt surface.

To my surprise, I would note that I wasn't the only person that decided to venture into the woods today. I noticed someone else was here. It looked to be an older man, wearing nothing but some cargo shorts. He looked to be doing some type of exercise. something in between stretching or dynamics. He didn't take

notice of me at all, as it looked like he was fully enveloped in whatever ritual he was performing.

Initially, I thought it would be best to turn around. I didn't know what this man's intentions were for being in the woods at this time. For all I knew, he could've been some serial killer. Ironically enough, I guessed someone could perceive me to have been the same. Not only that, but there was something about him that sparked ideas of freedom. But I could assert this possibility to him being the only person out in the woods, looking to not have a care about the environment around him. I don't know why, but I made out for him to be a guru of some sort. I thought he must've had knowledge on ways to govern one's lifestyle. He was dark skinned, with a completely bald scalp. He also had a beard that was able to reach close to where his belly button was. I knew if someone had the answer to obtaining the freedom I wanted, it had to be him.

So I continued to make my way, quietly enough to not throw off his flow. Watching while making my way forward, I eventually was on the same ground that he was. Up close, I realised that he had his eyes closed, but this didn't stop his dynamics. It looked as if he was doing lunges. It became more complicated as I continued to watch. He would lunge about 4 times on both legs. Still with his eyes closed, he would raise his right foot off the ground, and would swing that leg along with his arms counterclockwise, causing him to spin.

The pattern seemed unpredictable, as some spins would take longer than others. This caused his direction to change, and I couldn't make out where he would start lunging next. Soon enough, he would end up spinning in my direction. Still with his eyes closed, he started to lunge forward. I don't know why I didn't want to let him know of my existence. It seemed

important to me not to mess with his flow. He looked as if he was in a state of meditation. Or some level of concentration that I have yet to reach. I wanted to wait to see if he would end up noticing me.

He already had lunged about 3 times on both legs, and he still wasn't close enough to have reached me on the fourth. I'd say I was still about another 6 steps away before he would be within arm's reach. Once he made it to his supposed last lunge, he changed up the pace. To my surprise, he continued to make his way in my direction. This let me know that he was aware of my presence. I was shocked, but still curious as to what his goal would be.

Taking his last lunge, he stayed in the position. He stood there for about 30 seconds, with me being directly across from him. This actually kind of scared me a little. Maybe the dude was blind, because he still hadn't opened up his eyes the whole time. I was afraid he would attack me or something. The geezer was in shape too, so there was no doubt in my mind that he would catch up to me if I tried to make a run for it. He would get to using his ultimate technique, or whatever he had in store after training up here for God knows how long. So I just stood there in silence, and waited for him to respond.

Soon enough, he unfroze. Leaving the lunging position, he would make himself stand upright. Up close, he was exactly my height. From far away, I had thought for him to be shorter. But then again, him being far away before didn't make that perception mean much. Now, homie was eye to eye with me, but still had not opened his eyes. I guessed he must've been blind the whole time, because he would end up never opening them. Instead he would puff up his chest, and slam his fists against it.

It was a sight to see. It was like the guy thought he was a gorilla claiming

dominance. He pounded his chest another three times, then stopped. Once again, he wasn't speaking. He was still just facing in my direction. I didn't know what the fuck that gesture was supposed to mean. I wondered if he wanted me to do the same thing, so I decided to pound my chest a couple times.

He must've not been impressed, because he would puff out his chest once more, and slam his fists against it another 5 times. Not only this, but he would go on to say something for the first time.

“HEEEEEEEEEEEYYYYAAAAA
AAAAA!!!!!!!!”

He yelled out some type of battle cry or something, and continued to pound his chest. I wasn't completely intimidated by his presence, and after that yell I realised my inferiority. He had a deep-ass voice, and it didn't seem like he tried to hold back at all with that screech. Once again, he stopped. I guessed it was my turn, so I pounded my chest about 5 times, and let out a cry of my own. “Heeeeeeyyyyyyaaaaaaa!!!”

My yell wasn't as intimidating as his, but I did feel kind of weird doing it. I also wasn't looking to upstage the guy with whatever he got going on, so I decided I should refrain from using too much power. But that was where I was wrong. Once I was finished, the man let out a cry once more while pounding his chest.

“HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEYYYYYYYYYY
YYAAAAA
AAAAA!!!!!!!!”

This cry was even more aggressive than the last one. Then the man took both of his hands, and smacked them against my chest with open palms leaving me stunned. I thought he was really looking to declare battle, but instead he swung his arms up and down. I was confused at first, and he understood my confusion. Still

swinging his arms up and down, he let out another powerful cry.

To this understanding, I realised what I had done was not enough for his approval. He wanted me to embrace my voice. He was looking for me to become as aggressive as he was with those cries. Understanding, I did exactly what he was issuing for me to do. I had to become fierce. As fierce as he was. I needed to let the woods know that I was here.

So that's what I did. This time I even puffed out my chest in the same way he did. Then I pounded on my own chest and let out another roar. To this, I believed he was pleased. He even gave away a smile, which I didn't think he was capable of at first. I passed the first phase of what I would say was his "exam".

Not only that, but I took note of the feelings that were swirling through my body after those bouts of yells. For one, I felt more powerful. My guess was that it probably had to do something with the adrenaline, but I couldn't help but feel more in control. This was the first time that I felt I could really let go. What I just did in these woods wouldn't be so normal if I were to do it back home. I may have faced scrutiny for being as weird as this "guru" was. Yet, it was this same feeling that made me see myself as more than what I once knew. It showed me that humans had the potential to become beasts. I felt like a beast revealing my true fangs within that moment. The human was able to transform into a gorilla.

So now, the old man gestured for me to follow in his footsteps. He went back into doing lunges. The same lunges that he was doing before. I copied, maintaining a distance of about 3 lunges behind. After the fourth lunge, he would continue his ritual of spinning in whatever direction seemed necessary. After he made his turn, I made sure to stay within his order of lunges. I would make sure that I wouldn't

turn until after the last, turning in the same direction he did.

The spins ended up being a little more difficult than I thought. One thing I lacked was balance. I couldn't seem to hold the spins for the same duration that the man was. Not only that, I would never land in the same direction. Instead, I would find myself constantly needing to shift back into the same passage as him. We did 5 rounds of this routine, until he came to a stop. Facing in my direction, he shook his head. It seemed to me that he was disappointed in my movement, but I didn't know for what reason. Pumping up his chest and giving out another roar, he gestured for me to do the same. So that's what I did. I gave the loudest possible roar that I could give. I thought if my mom was at home, she may have heard my voice echo through the wind. I felt like a child in these moments. It felt like the past, where I would be roleplaying with my brother, playing someone different from who we were used to being.

This time though, I didn't feel as if I was playing as someone other than myself. It felt as if I was unleashing another side of my character. One that I had yet to come into contact with. That was until this geezer, that may have been shunned by society, showed the part of myself that I looked to keep repressed. Soon after, the man went back into doing the lunges. I followed him, but this time I decided to have my eyes closed. I wasn't aware of where I found myself headed. All I could feel was the ground of dirt that laid under my feet. This time, I would find myself reaching the designated amount of lunges. The difference was that at the end of the set, I would spin freely. Almost to allow my body to decide where I would fall rather than my own mind. I wasn't trying to follow the man in his direction, especially considering the idea of not being able to see him. I continued to

spin my way. And in this way, I found the confidence that I had been looking for. I didn't feel as if I couldn't do it. In this moment, I felt as if I could become anything I wanted. No rulebook was needed for the destiny that I wanted to fulfill. I completed about 5 sets of lunges and spins, and finally opened my eyes. From my spatial awareness, I found myself in the middle of the patch of land. From the looks of it though, the old man parted. I found myself alone in the dark. I knew it was best to make my way back home, but I wished I could have spoken to the man. At least I wish I could've thanked him for his training. While I didn't know the goal that he had for me when it came to giving me this experience, I felt a freedom that I didn't have before. Making my way down, I was surprised to notice how easy it was to balance against the downward slope. I didn't even need the trees to help me rest. I attributed this to the fact that it wasn't as difficult as the uphill battle. Whatever the case, I also didn't have the vision I had when making my way up the hill. Yet, I still found myself moving in a somewhat careless manner. I wasn't overanalyzing the steps that I needed to take to avoid injuries. Instead, I allowed myself to move without restraint. To move without order. To move in freedom. Soon enough, I found myself past the thorn bushes, past the walk alongside Campbell avenue, and eventually making my way back through my garage. My mother still wasn't home, which meant it was most likely a late night at the office. As soon as I got back, I knew I couldn't let this free flowing energy go to waste. I went straight to my room and opened up my notebook right away. I had to give this book a title, and I knew right away what I wanted to call it. The Man Dancing on The Rocks.

“Heeeeeeyyyyyyaaaaaaaaa!!!”

My yell wasn't as intimidating as his, but I did feel kind of weird doing it. I also wasn't looking to upstage the guy with whatever he got going on, so I decided I should refrain from using too much power. But that was where I was wrong. Once I was finished, the man let out a cry once more while pounding his chest.

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This cry was even more aggressive than the last one. Then the man took both of his hands and smacked them against my chest with open palms leaving me stunned. I thought he was really looking to declare battle, but instead he swung his arms up and down. I was confused at first, and he understood my confusion. Still swinging his arms up and down, he let out another powerful cry.

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Not only that, but I took note of the feelings that were swirling through my body after those bouts of yells. For one, I felt more powerful. My guess was that it probably had to do something with the adrenaline, but I couldn't help but feel more in control. This was the first time that I felt I could really let go. What I

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Facing in my direction, he shook his head. It seemed to me that he was disappointed in my movement, but I didn't know for what reason. Pumping up his chest and giving out another roar, he gestured for me to do the same. So that's what I did. I gave the loudest possible roar that I could give. I thought if my mom was at home, she may have heard my voice echo through the wind. I felt like a child in these moments. It felt like the past, where I would be roleplaying with my brother, playing someone different from who we were used to being.

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This time, I would find myself reaching the designated amount of lunges. The difference was that at the end of the set, I would spin freely. Almost to allow my body to decide where I would fall rather than my own mind. I wasn't trying to follow the man in his direction, especially considering the idea of not being able to see him. I continued to spin my way. And in this way, I found the confidence that I had been looking for. I didn't feel as if I couldn't do it. In this moment, I felt as if I could become anything I wanted. No rulebook was needed for the destiny that I wanted to fulfill.

I completed about 5 sets of lunges and spins, and finally opened my eyes. From my spatial awareness, I found myself in the middle of the patch of land. From the looks of it though, the old man parted. I found myself alone in the dark. I knew it was best to make my way back home, but I wished I could have spoken to the man. At least I wish I could've thanked him for his training. While I didn't know the goal that he had for me when it came to giving me this experience, I felt a freedom that I didn't have before.

Making my way down, I was surprised to notice how easy it was to balance against the downward slope. I didn't even need the trees to help me rest. I attributed this to the fact that it wasn't as difficult as the uphill battle. Whatever the case, I also didn't have the vision I had

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Observations from my Daily Run

Reagan Prior

I run down the sidewalk
and there is a line of traffic:
a woman yelling in her
New Jersey accent is
like a slap across the face.
A group of squirrels scatter
chestnuts through a yard.
My aunt says it's going to
be a tough winter.
The leaves take too long
to fall.
The middle-school pick up
traffic wants to kill me.
Anything is better than school
buses. Blue skies filled with
Post Impressionist clouds.
An elderly couple
with their happy terrier.
I escape the traffic procession
making my way towards the sunset.
The sound of sneakers slapping;
the sidewalk is my drum beat.
Brisk autumn air stings my throat;
feels like freedom.

Neanderthals Could Swim

Reagan Prior

Researchers on the coast of Italy
found evidence of shells, plucking
through hundreds, suggesting that
Neandtherals could swim.
Our ancestors who hunted with sharp
spears, running wild,
used pumice stones for exfoliation.
Did Neandtherhals have spa days?
Did they use a skin care routine?
Did they rub mud and berries
into face masks and use moisturizer?
When they swam, did they
stop and watch fluorescent
schools of fish pass by?
Did they admire the beauty of
nature around them?
Did they ever think to keep
fish as a pet?
Did they assign names to the things they
found, or to each other?
Did they ever tell stories around
a fire?
Did they gaze at the stars as they
tried to fall asleep,
wondering about their futures
and imagining other lifetimes?

Mall Birds

Thomas Maldonado

On Sunday morning, everyone begins their hustle and bustle as they prepare for the work week. But not me. On Sunday mornings I sleep in, but today the sun is just shining way too bright. It's the beginning of Spring which means mating season is upon us. Unlike my brother, I hate mating season. My brother Phil is an expert when it comes to getting the ladies. Me on the other hand, not so much. I would prefer to naturally find a mate, but that's just not possible in my culture. We are House Sparrows that have been living in the mall for generations. I live with my mother, father, and my brother Phil. Our nest is not really a nest; it is a couple of straw wrappers, napkins, and whatever else we find from the food court below. House Sparrows are usually towards the bottom of the food chain but my family has been safe from predators for quite some time. We have a great view of the sun when it rises. The food court below has a giant window with a wonderful view of the parking lot.

I am just on my way out of the nest when my mom comes home from her Sunday morning errands.

"And where are you going, mister?"

"I was going to go see my friends and see what they are doing for the day."

I love my mom, but she has always been a pain in the ass. Always asking 'Chip where are you going? Chip when will you be home? Chip, who are you going with?' I get it but come on.

This time she seems tired of my shit as she stands there with her wings crossed and her faint eyebrow muscles furrowed.

"Listen, you can't be out fooling around when it's mating season. You need to be out looking for a mate."

"Yeah, yeah whatever you say m—."

"Your father and I spoke last night and you should hear what we have to say."

I get this knot in my stomach that plops me back on the floor. "What is it mom?"

"Well, we decided that if you still can't find a mate, then we will arrange for a suitable mate. I know you may think this is crazy, but tons of parents do this every year. I don't mean to scare you, but you need a mate if you're going to help keep this family and community strong."

I am stunned and left with no words in my throat. Too many thoughts going through my head, and I need to leave. I turn to my mom and muscle out a few words.

"Whatever you say."

I leave the nest hoping to clear my head of this mess. I am getting old, and I do need a mate. But who says I have to marry a House Sparrow? What about a Blue Jay or a Morning Dove? Unfortunately for me there are none of those in the mall, but that's why I need to travel.

I always fantasize about the real world, but I never have the courage to go. Not to

mention that it's not the easiest thing to do. Humans have no regard for us; I don't even think they see us. So it's pretty risky and I don't think I want to die just yet because I still have so much life to live. My brother Phil and I are both two years old, but, since he hatched first, he's technically my big brother. The lifespan for us sparrows is about three or four years.. I had a great Aunt Claudia who lived to six years old, but she didn't look too good. My brother is not only my best friend, but he is someone I look up to, and I always confide in him.

"Soon I will be ready to go. I don't know when but soon."

He has heard me say this probably everyday for the last month.

"You already know my thoughts on that, Chip," he replies.

I turn my head to look at him, "What are you going to say this time?"

He looks at me with a soft grin. "You are crazy, life is amazing here. Why go out into the world when you don't even appreciate the luxuries we have here."

He's not wrong. We have it good as far as House Sparrows go. We eat french fries almost everyday. Wendy's are my personal favorite, but everyone says McDonald's has the best fries. We also get Popeyes biscuits that are just out of this world and rumor has it that, in the real world, Sparrows don't even get to drink lemonade. They live in trees and I think they eat worms, but no one knows for sure. I can't really imagine a life without some of that fresh squeezed lemonade leaking out of the Popeyes machine forming a tiny puddle on the floor.

Phil turns and says, "We truly do have it all."

"Yeah I guess so," I reply.

"How many Sparrows do you know in the real world that eat Wendy's fries and go watch movies at the AMC?" he asks.

"Well I don't know any Sparrows from the real world, " I say as I roll my eyes.

"But that's not the point; the point is you can't go because we all know what happened to mom's cousin Bernard."

I sit for a few seconds with my head hanging low. "Yeah, yeah," I add.

You see, Bernard was my mother's crazy cousin who tried to fly away into the real world. I don't consider him crazy, but everyone in my community does and as far as my mom: well, she doesn't like to talk about it. The story starts on a very sunny day without a cloud in the sky. After some strategic planning, Bernard had decided that it was a perfect day to make a break for it. Without a warning he took off straight for the exit; my mom said she remembers it like it was yesterday. He dashed, dodged, and weaved his way to the exit. The whole community watched as he got closer and closer to the door. All of the onlookers gasped as he met the clear glass with a loud SMACK! Bernard's feathers popped into the air like confetti. He then met the ground with a subtle thud, and laid there for what seemed like two whole minutes until something happened. A human who saw Bernard laying on the ground must have been an animal lover, because she picked up Bernard and brought him outside. From our view, that was it. Bernard was gone and there was no way he was coming back. Some believe he actually survived and is out there in the real world, but others say he is a goner. Bernard and my mother were very close. I love my mom

and it would hurt me to break her heart that way, but I don't want to be a mall bird anymore.

Most of the birds my age are all feeling anxious because mating season is around the corner. For the most part, us boys and girls find chemistry with one another and just take it from there. However, if you cannot find a mate then your parents will arrange a bond that we keep for life. Growing up, I was always fond of a classmate of mine. Her name is Mia. From the very beginning I thought Mia was remarkable, but I don't think she feels the same. Mia and I grew up together as friends because my parents were very close with hers. She grew up and became a beautiful sparrow and has gained a ton of attention because of this. Sometimes I wonder if she even remembers me. Mating season is breathing down my neck, and I can't help but hope I can get her attention before it's too late.

"Hey! Phil," I holler, "What are the odds of me and Mia ever mating?"

"Damn, bro slim to none," he replies with a deep chuckle. "I'm just being real with you dog."

He is right, I know he is. It still hurts my feelings, and I don't even think my parents have faith in me to pull this whole mating season thing off. I am completely overwhelmed, and in the back of my mind, taking a journey to the real world doesn't sound half bad. I mean how bad can it be? They have trees I think. I hope those are comfortable. And I don't even know the first thing about surviving in the real world. I can't eat worms, and what am I supposed to do when it rains?

Morning came around and my brother

Phil took it upon himself to let Mia know that I was looking for a mate. "Don't worry lil bro, I got the ball rolling," he says as he nudges me.

"Dude, why would you-"

Mia approaches. "Hey Chip."

Her voice is as sweet and soft as the cotton candy they sell by the ferris wheel. Mia has beautiful brown eyes that give me comfort. What intimidates me are her fierce colors on her feathers. She looks exotic and stands out as one of the most mesmerizing Sparrows in our community. Her feathers are bright copper brown to a point where it looks red in the sunlight. Along those feathers are small white spots that flurry amongst her back like snow falling slowly during a quiet night. Within those dots are smaller black dots acting as a freckle paired with each white dot.

I manage to squeeze out a response, "H-h-hey Mia, long time n-no see."

"Totally dude it's been a while," she replies.

"So what did my brother tell you?" I ask nervously.

"Oh, nothing really, he said you were being crazy and wanted to leave to explore the real world."

"Wow, why would he say that?"

"Well, are you gonna leave?" Mia asks abruptly.

"W-w-well, I'm not sure,".

"Well if you ask me, I think you should. All of this talk about mating season is driving me nuts. I told my parents I'm not finding a mate and they are gonna have to deal with that,"

"My parents said that if I don't find a

mate by next week then they will arrange something for me.”

“Wow, I would hate that,” she utters, “It sounds like you gotta take that journey to the real world a little sooner than you thought.”

“Haha, yeah. I guess you’re right,”

As I fall asleep that night I realize Mia is right, and I have no choice. My parents put me in this situation. Society put me in this situation. My future is at stake and I’ve run out of options. And I love my brother Phil with all my heart, but him calling me crazy really does hurt my feelings. I think he is the crazy one if you ask me. We look out at the sun, and that same old parking lot, and that’s all we got. I wonder if my brother ever thinks about the world out there. Our community has grown so big and strong in this mall that it’s evident no one wants to leave. Everyone is content with their lives. In their comfortable homes, where they eat delicious fattening foods, and pop out eggs to repeat the cycle. But I’m not content. I am far from it, and if that makes me crazy then so be it, but I have to leave and I will.

The next day Phil and I decided we should go to the AMC. Phil loves the movies. We usually go together, but recently Phil has been going more with his friends. I can’t blame him, he is a social bird and everyone enjoys his company. The AMC in this mall is stacked. It has IMAX theaters, over ten soda machines with 50 different flavors, and super high ceilings so we can go undetected. I find the yellow stained popcorn dripping in butter and gently coated in salt irresistible.

“Which movie should we see today?”

“Jackass 4. Man, what kind of question is that?”

I didn’t even want to watch the movie, but I wanted to make my brother happy. It would mean a lot if I can get him to approve of my journey to the real world.

The movie concludes and I feel like it’s a good time to say something to my brother, “Phil, I have to tell you something,”

“What’s up?”

“I hope you’re not mad at me, but I have made up my mind. I decided I am going to leave,”

“C’mon man. You can’t be serious. I kinda thought you were joking this whole time,”

“I just gotta go. I can’t live here anymore. Maybe one day I’ll come back, but right now I have to go,” I stated. “I understand lil bro, do what you gotta do,”

That wasn’t the exact approval I was looking for, but I don’t have a choice either way. Mia has given me faith in myself, and whether everyone thinks I’m crazy or not I have to go.

The next morning before I head out to start my day my parents are waiting for me in the living room. Usually by the time I’m ready to leave the nest my parents have already left for their jobs.

“And where do you think you’re going?” my dad says.

My stomach slowly starts to turn. I’m not sure if it’s from the popcorn or the scowl on my fathers face, but I feel like retching.

“I am headed out as always, Dad. What are you guys even doing at home?”

“Your brother has told us about your insane plan to leave, and I swear to God

you will not leave this nest!” my mother yells.

Blood starts to rush to my head as I think about Phil and what he has done. My own brother, my very best friend. Why would he do this to me? Does he really think I am crazy?

“I am leaving Mom and there is nothing you can do.”

“You are going to your room and you are staying there! We are mall birds, and we stay here. We have been here for generations. What makes you think the real world will be better?”

“I dont care mom. I need to leave. I can’t take it anymore!”.

My dad, red in the face, decides to intervene.

“What your mother is trying to say is that we have already made up our minds. Our word is final. We arranged for you to have a mate by next week.”

“Next week? Who is going to be my mate?”

“You will find out next week and that is the end of that. You can sit in your room for the rest of the week and think about how good our life is here in the mall.”

I lay in my bed staring out the mall window at the moonlit parking lot pondering about what possibly lies on the other side. I try hard to think about the pros and the cons of leaving. I am grateful for the situation I am in. I’m safe here, and our community has grown largely over the years. I understand that I may seem crazy to others the same way everyone thought Bernard was crazy, but I have to put myself first. I’m not happy here. I cannot live up to the cultural expectations of my community. I will miss my family, but like I told my

brother, I have already made up my mind.

Four days have passed. Each night I am sleeping less. I have a perfect view of the exit door from my room. The only people that come into the mall early in the morning are workers, so I will stalk the door like it’s my prey in order to time my escape perfectly. My parents left me feeling caged up like livestock. How can I appreciate what the mall has to offer if I am pent up in here all day everyday. In my head I keep thinking about what Mia had told me. How despite the community’s bias she knew I wasn’t crazy. My own brother thought I was so deranged that he secretly told our parents. I feel alone and my own family has driven me away. No matter how I have to get it done, tomorrow is the day I leave and don’t look back.

The sun is hanging high and shining bright without a single cloud to accompany her. The sounds of the early Sunday sparrow songs ring loud as the community awakes getting ready for the hustle and bustle. I sit and wait for my moment. My parents know that with the new week ahead of us means I am getting a mate. I can’t settle down here, not in this mall. I’m not meant to be a mall bird, I have felt this in my soul for a while now. I am different from the rest. The mall has me feeling trapped. When I was a kid I used to think I lived in paradise. I live in a facade of a utopia. Everyone lives in bliss because of their ignorance of the real world. I’m not afraid of hawks, or worms, or rain. My time to seize the opportunity is now.

My parents have been running errands in shifts just to make sure I am never home alone. All morning I have kept my eyes on them just waiting patiently to break free.

My dad kisses my mom on the cheek, and then she heads off for her errands. And right before my dad could even turn his back I hop up out of my room, dash across the living room and weave right past him straight out of the nest. I put my wings to my side and nosedive straight down to the food court floor. Right before I hit the ground I flap hard to hit the brakes. I dip and dodge underneath the tables to remain unseen, but it's too late. My father already hollered out to my mother who is darting straight for me. I flew straight through the rungs at the center of the ferris wheel to try and lose her, but it wasn't enough. I head left to go straight for the door, which by the looks of it, is already on its way to close, but I have to commit. To my surprise my mother is on my tail, but I don't think we will both fit through the door. I start to turn my body to squeeze through the door, and right before my mother comes with me, my dad swoops in and grabs her. I let out a light sigh of relief as I put my wings to my sides and twist through the door straight into the parking lot.

The warm sun beams down on me as I am liberated from my old world and headed straight for the real world. I made it.

Nature's Silence

Katherine Cording

the moon peers out from
behind a shroud of fog,
down at the empty world below.
her light is the only thing
illuminating the stretch of
mountains and grass, casting a
pale glow that reflects back up
at her from the river lazily
moving along its path.
there are no witnesses here;
no one but the trees, standing
guard with branches at half mast.
there is no one there to bask
in beauty of this quiet, gentle
moment; but does that make it
any less worthy?
must something be seen
to be beautiful?

Winter Dreams

Brooke Biamonte

The mountain is covered with white powder.
Glistening in the dark night.
The lake shimmers with gleam
As the waves crash to the shore.
The cold wind whistles through my ears.

In the morning the sun hides until dawn.
The sun finally appears and melts the snow.
Trees are dead and covered in ice.
Roads are slick and cold and await
The sun melts the ice.

The winter feels cold yet brings
Warmth into people's hearts.
The bright spirit of Christmas
And joy fills the air.
Winter feels like home.



Jacob Holland

The Art of Birding

Katherine Cording



A few years back, I accompanied my father to Rockland Lake. It was a cold winter day, cold enough that my breath hung in the air in front of me.

My father was standing on the edge of the path, binoculars pressed to his face as he looked around for any birds hanging about. He had the unfortunate habit of walking a few paces and then stopping abruptly. I had long ago learned the art of letting him take the lead, lest I find myself wandering ahead by myself as my father's attention gets wholly taken up by a sparrow.

I was his note-taker for the afternoon. He would see a bird, call out the name, and I would jot it down. It was certainly not the most interesting job in the world. But I did it anyway, content to wander behind him and watch the ducks floating across the lake.

After about twenty minutes of this slow progression down the path, my father once again stopped dead in the middle of the walkway in front of a large oak tree and

jammed his binoculars to his face. I didn't bother to look up, far more occupied with the lake in front of us. But then my father let out a hiss of surprise and shoved the binoculars in my direction. He didn't say anything, but the intent was clear. He wanted me to look at the tree.

I wasn't sure what I expected to see, exactly. A cardinal, maybe. A goldfinch, if I was lucky. What I wasn't expecting was a large bald eagle nestled in the branches, staring right down at me.

If you've never seen a bald eagle in person before, let me be the first to assure you that they are rather magnificent birds. They're large, imposing, and always manage to look like you've just disturbed them from something very important.

My dad was ecstatic. He'd never seen a bald eagle at Rockland Lake before, and he quickly grabbed the binoculars back from me to get a closer look.

No one else around us had seemed to notice that a large bald eagle was sitting directly above their heads. Their attention was on their phones, or the people they

were walking with. As they moved around us, they didn't even bother to glance at what we were so engrossed in.

It was like we weren't even there. It was just us and the eagle.

I never fully understood my father's love for birding. It just didn't seem interesting to me, going out and looking at birds. But as I stared up at the eagle perched above us, I began to see what exactly my father got out of birdwatching.

Looking at birds as a source of entertainment rather than just a source of food began in the 18th century, during the Victorian Ages, when people began to fully understand the importance of observation in science. We have Francis Willughby to thank for this revolution in ornithology; he published a book (coincidentally also called *Ornithology*) which was created to set forth a classification system of birds based on anatomical features — including, but not limited to, the bird's beak and overall size.

My father's foray into the world of birds was not nearly as revolutionary.

"I've always been interested in the natural world," he tells me with a shrug when I bring up the topic. He talks about the different field guides he would keep in his room, ranging from bug identification to picture books of natural parks. His

definition of birdwatching — keeping a list of each species he sees on a daily basis — wasn't something he actively did until he was in college.

For a class, he was supposed to keep track of all the birds he saw over a certain period of time. It had never occurred to my father to actually keep a record of the birds he had seen. Usually, he'd see a bird, think it was cool, and then move on with his life. This class made him realize that birdwatching was something people actually did.

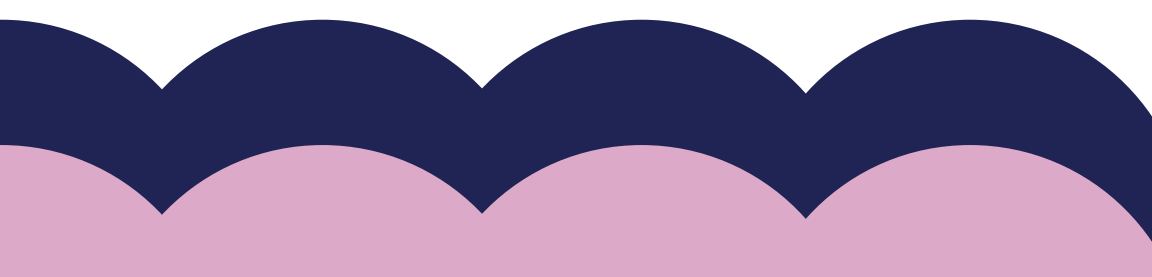
He's a proper birder now. His lifetime bird count is 279 species! When I tell him I'm impressed by how many birds he's seen, he argues that 279 is nothing compared to other birders who travel the world.

He brings up one birder, Noah Strycker. The consensus on Noah is that he's pretty much one of the best birdwatchers in the world. In 2015 he spent the whole year traveling around the world to see as many birds as he possibly could. Out of the 10,400 bird species in the world, Noah set the world record and saw 6,042 different bird species.

That's insane.

"It's all about where you go," my father points out. "Local people don't see as many species as people who go out of their way to travel; it's just a fact."

He's not too concerned with how his lifetime count stacks up against others.



He's more interested in the statistics of it: what he sees each year and how the numbers balance out. Each year, he sees eighty different types of birds in our backyard alone. He doesn't need to travel.

When I ask my father what bird he considers to be the best one he's ever seen, his answer is immediate.

"Snowy owl. Hands down."

Snowy owls aren't especially rare. But since they typically frequent the upper Arctic regions of North America, seeing one down in New Jersey is a pretty exciting experience.

My father was at Sandy Hook Beach, which is only about an hour and a half away from where we live. It's far enough, though, especially when you consider that because my father wants to get there around 6:00 in the morning, he has to wake up at 4:30 to get ready. This, however, doesn't seem to faze my father in the slightest.

He was by himself when he spotted it, a white blob against the sand dunes. "I thought it was a pail someone had left behind," he says, explaining that he was too far away to get a proper look at it. There was no one else on the beach around him, so he set up his spotting scope — a small, high-powered telescope that was made specifically to look at birds in places that binoculars couldn't reach — and peered

through.

And right there, perched primly on the sand dune, sat a snowy owl.

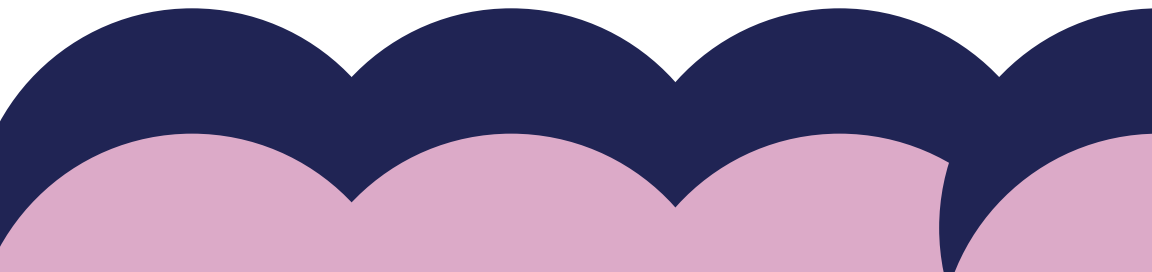
In the birding community, there's an unspoken rule that when someone spots a bird that could be considered rare, they take a picture to prove their claim. Otherwise, anyone could claim to see any type of exotic bird and get away with it.

So my father, in a moment of panic, fumbled around for his phone and took a picture.

"I can't tell you how many times I almost dropped my phone," he laughs. "I was shaking so hard! At any moment I expected it to fly off before I could get any proof."

He says seeing the owl was almost akin to a religious experience. It was just him and the bird, alone on a beach together. If he hadn't been there at that exact moment, he would have missed it.

That's why he gets up so early, he tells me. My father holds the firm belief that the best time to see birds is in the morning. His favorite time of day is when the sun comes up. I ask him if he ever just considered sleeping in, and he shakes his head. "If I don't go, I always end up wondering what I might have seen." Most of the places he frequents don't offer anything special. He mostly just sees what he calls "the usual suspects" — cardinals, wrens, etc. But he



argues that he never knows what he might have stumbled upon if he doesn't go.

"Part of the draw is the solitude as well," he admits after a pause. He laughs. "No talking." My father is a self-professed introvert, always pushing to leave parties early and going out of his way to avoid excess interactions with people he barely knows.

He can't avoid running into other birders, of course. And he goes out of his way to reassure me that he doesn't hate them. After all, they share the same interests. But if offered the chance to go on a birdwatching trip with someone else, he would point blank refuse.

"What draws me in about birdwatching," he says, choosing his words carefully, "is that I am the one who found the bird. Just me, and no one else. If someone points out a bird to me, it's as if I just went to a zoo."

The whole point of birdwatching to him is the search. It's like hunting, except at the end he doesn't come home with a bird carcass. Just a picture to hang up on the wall.

He mentions another bird he actively seeks out: a cerulean warbler. He usually finds them in Doodletown, a small little hiking trail by Bear Mountain. Its key features are its incredibly steep paths and the fact it has several old cemeteries with

graves that are crumbling apart — and yes, it's as creepy as it sounds.

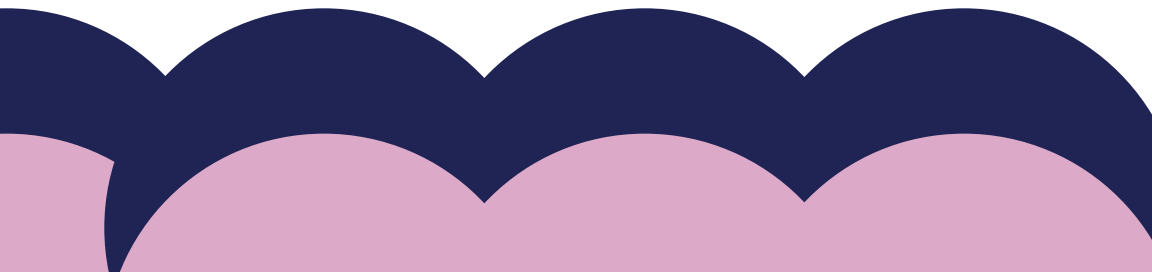
"It's not a particularly rare bird," he says with a shrug, "but I just want to see it every year. I go, I hunt for the bird, and then I get a sense of accomplishment. Sort of check it off my list, you know?" He pauses here and exaggeratedly pretends to cross something off a list. "There are birds you see every year and then there are birds you see rarely, and that's the draw. And I know nobody but me thinks that's exciting, but what can I say?"

I ask him if he ever just picks a spot in the woods and sits there, waiting for the birds to come to him. That seems to amuse him.

"For the most part, I just don't have the time. I'm what you could call" — he casts around for the perfect word — "a commando birdwatcher, because I have to get to work or get home before you guys wake up. It's like a commando raid — get in and get out."

But every now and then, he does get the time to wander in the woods for however long he pleases. "I once stood by a shrub for forty-five minutes," he informs me. "There was a bird zipping in and out, and I couldn't get a good look at it. This was back when I had my crappy binoculars, so now it wouldn't take me that long."

A lot of times, the cause of the wait



is due to the fact that a bird is just out of view. “A bird will be up in the tree, and all you can see is the back of it.” As my father talks, he stands up and grabs one of his many bird books, flipping to a section proudly called Underview Finder. The page is filled with pictures of birds from the back, all helpfully labeled for the convenience of the birdwatcher. I can’t help but notice that they all look the same.

Another problem comes when he can’t see the bird, but he can hear it singing. He has CDs in his car, all dedicated to each individual bird song. The CDs are his attempt to familiarize himself with the more common or distinctive bird calls. He knows a few, but for the most part he can’t distinguish them from one another. After all, with 10,400 species of birds on the planet, being able to confidently categorize each one is a Herculean task.

He’s familiar with enough calls to be able to make an educated guess which bird it belongs to when he hears it. But he relies on his CDs and his phone for the most part.

“Bird calls can be really helpful,” he says, bringing up a time he was at Celery Farm. It’s a park in New Jersey, and one of his more frequent haunts. He heard the call of what he thought was an eastern kingbird. To check himself, he pulled out his phone and played back a recording of a kingbird’s call. He was correct and, to his

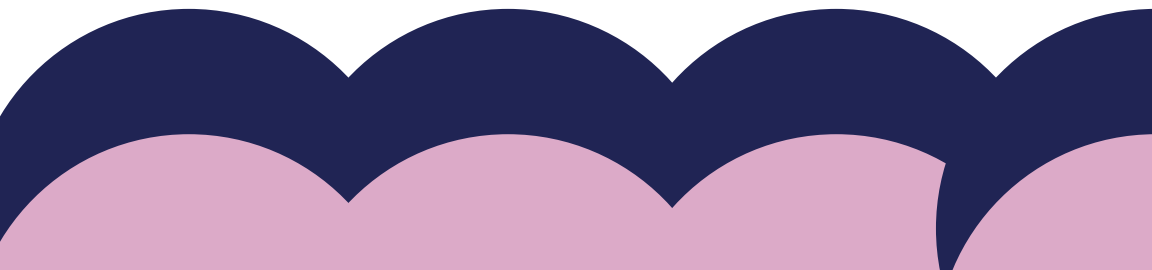
surprise, the kingbird popped out of the trees. It had heard the recorded call and responded back.

“That’s called playback,” he explains with a wince. “It’s pretty frowned upon by birders, because it artificially influences the bird and could stress it out. I didn’t mean to do it! But I guess it was closer than I realized.”

He finishes that story by pointing out a more knowledgeable birder could have figured out the bird call without resorting to a recorded playback. But memorizing the hundreds of calls doesn’t appeal to him. “I’m not good enough to do that, nor do I care to be.”

This is a common theme with him. Birding is a big part of his life; he has a whole section of our bookshelf dedicated to all the bird books he has, goes out of his way to fit in any amount of birdwatching into any free time he has, wakes up at ungodly hours just because he wants to go watch birds before anyone else gets the same idea. But at the same time he is not, to use his own words, a “hard core” birdwatcher. To him, birding is less of a lifestyle, and more of a healthy fascination.

When I asked what exactly a “hard core” birdwatcher was, he rolled his eyes and waved a hand. “You know, those people who go wandering off paths into swampy marshes. I’m perfectly fine staying



on the nice, dry path, thank you very much.”

A key example of the differences between him and the “hard core” bird-watchers, he insists, is his infamous visit to Jamaica Bay, a place in New York that is great for finding all types of shorebirds. He went in the summer, completely and totally unaware of what he was getting himself into. About twenty minutes in, he felt something on my legs. “I looked down, and my legs were completely covered in something black. And it wasn’t like I was wearing long pants; it was the middle of the summer! I was wearing shorts!”

His legs were actually covered in about a hundred mosquitos. So he did the only thing he could do: he got the hell out of there.

“I’ve never been back,” he said with a shake of his head. “I got eighty-five bites out of that experience. Did you know some people wear netting suits just to go there? Ridiculous.”

When it comes down to it, bird watching is his way of collecting things.

For the most part, my father prides himself on being neat. Everything he owns has a purpose. No use keeping objects that he doesn’t need lying around; all that does is bring clutter. But if you look at bird watching from a certain angle, you can begin to see that my father replaced some-

thing material with something far more intangible. There’s no physical evidence for the birds he finds, save for the pictures saved on his phone.

It’s all about the act of observing, in the end. My father could care less about being able to physically hold a bird in his hands. He doesn’t want to be like Noah Strycker, doesn’t want to worry about what others think about his bird count. Birding is something that’s just for him, and the memories of the birds are more than enough.

His yearly expedition to Sandy Hook is coming up again. My father is in search of a harlequin duck — one he’s taken to calling a “Darth Vader” duck whenever he talks about it to us, thanks to the coloring of its head resembling a helmet. He only sees it once a year. Long before the sun is even up, my father is leaving the house armed with his binoculars and spotting scope.

It’s easy to imagine him, coat collar pulled up high against the cold wind and crouching next to a sand dune with his spotting scope at the ready, waiting for the duck to appear over the swell of the waves. Waiting with his camera ready, pressed up against the lens of the spotting scope for the perfect picture.

