

High Grade



Colorado School of Mines Journal of the Arts



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CREW

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Tobin Houchin

CASTING DIRECTOR

Dhruva Sogal

PRODUCER

Toni Lefton

STAGE MANAGER

Weston Gary

COSTUME DESIGN

Justin Park
Grace Strongman

STAGE CREW

Wenli Dickinson
Quinn Hejmanowski
Braden Hines
Kayla Long
Kyle Markowski
Zach McLoughlin
Jade Njo
Mars Piazza

WEB MASTER

Rem Zhang

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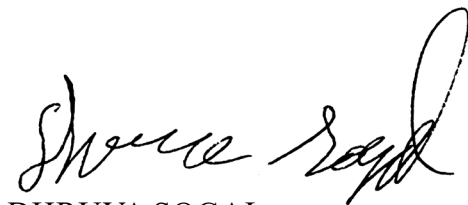
MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTORS

I

A bout of sneezes rocks the third floor of the library. Looking up from the sharp bend of his elbow, a student sees past the algebraic monster that has consumed the smudgy whiteboard in front of him, down a long shelf of outdated computing literature, and locks his bleary eyes with someone else.

They are looking at themselves in mirrors. Bags under the eyes, rumpled shirt, a patchy 10 o'clock shadow, and the unmistakable stain of expo marker on the fingertips. They dare not further violate the silence of their perch.

As they turn away, their peripheral visions catch each other's possessions. The black clip of a pocketknife against faded jeans, muddy trail shoes, lobster gloves hanging from an unzipped bag, and water bottles, laptops, and a lunch tin littered with stickers of mountain parks and surf shops. The air, for a moment is alive with the electricity of story, then is muted by the steady pulse of tube lights.



DHRUVA SOGAL

II



III

I have spent a long time here, watching art.

It is a fascinating place to be, smeared with coal and pennies and the numbers peeled off dice. The doors are never locked. The windows are broken from rocks thrown through in desperation anyway. Leaves escape and inspiration creeps in, and people create. You can spy art on their breath if you look close. You can borrow it from the library or get it served in takeout cups. If you aren't too queasy, you can even peel art from puddles of paint in dusty corners.

I frequent this place often because I feel some responsibility to its maintenance. Someone has to clean the window panes on Thursday mornings. But there are all sorts, here. People who make art and people who collect it, people who clean it, people who scoff at it, people who pay for it, people who encourage it, people who publish it, people who adapt it. People who brush their fingers and their gazes over the sharp edges of ideas and change them, just a little, just forever.

The extravagant production you are about to embark on was a delight to watch. The story stitched by these dozens of creators, in the breeze of broken windows, is yours to hold. Just a little, just forever.

This is a story about art and all the ways it couldn't be the same without you.


TOBIN HOUCHIN

SYNOPSIS

In an archive made of smooth silver stones and pink ribbon, a girl named Evelyn files memories. She's new. It's a dream come true, an exciting place to work—so exciting that she occasionally sneaks peeks at the memories when she's checking the names and decimal numbers of their shelving. One day, a moment of curiosity lasts just long enough that one of the memories escapes its file. Evelyn cannot appeal to it and fails to recapture it safely.

This memory is unfinished: an idea for a poem that refuses to be filed away before it is completed. Its name is Hugo. Taking flight on peacock's wings, Hugo leads Evelyn on a frantic chase through the library of memory. It steals a lantern from the shelves. Now, hallways that should be dark are illuminated, and Hugo can fully remember its past from before the library. Finally, Hugo escapes through a picture frame into the world outside the archive. Evelyn dives through the frame after it.

The librarian is unprepared for this new landscape. Confronted by memories in the making, overwhelmed by the chaos of trees and skies and streets, she loses Hugo in the crowded city. Hugo knows this place far better than her; after all, it was made here. Hugo searches out and finds the young man that thought it into being. Certain that it will soon be remembered as it had when it was young, it is content.

Meanwhile, Evelyn searches the landscape for the lost idea. She listens to grievances, encounters strangers in the dust, and uses her own lantern to keep herself warm at night. She hitchhikes across the city with a woman who gives her a camera. Skyscrapers pierce the clouds. Evelyn travels to their tips to search for a sign of the mistake she is determined to fix. Hugo is just as determined, and Evelyn finds no sign.

But things have changed since the idea was conceived. The man who thought Hugo into being has changed too, and is no longer inspired by the peacock lurking in the corners of his home with an obscured lantern and an idea from a childhood no longer needed. Hugo, betrayed and angry, lashes out. Its talons are sharp, but in its rage, it also forgets to continue hiding its lantern.

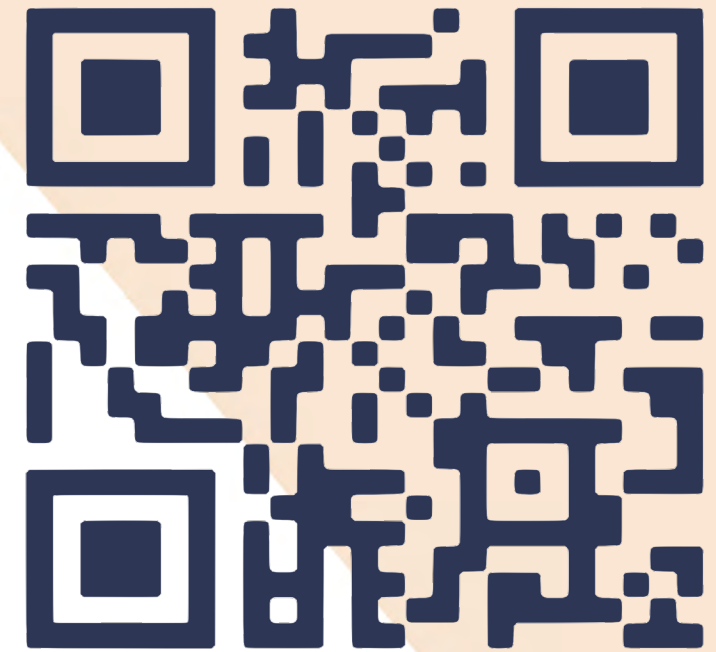
Evelyn spots the light and quickly tracks Hugo down. Dodging its claws, she listens to it, and begs it to listen in turn. Evelyn has lived a long time in the archive, and she understands how to convince an idea of what it is, what purpose it always has.

Hugo settles carefully in Evelyn's extended hands. They take a picture of the setting sun beyond the city rooftops. Through the photo frame, they travel onward to what comes next for both of them.

After all, nothing created is ever forgotten, and nothing dreamed is ever meaningless.

ONLINE CONTENT

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ACT I: ROOTS

THE ARCHIVE'S CABINETS - DAY

The Idea (a peacock on strings, controlled backstage). The lanterns, cardboard and glass. The picture frame, the size of a door to the world.

The Librarian loses the Idea amongst the shelves.



FROM THE COVE

Natalia McEvoy



STILL HERE

Arthur Sacks

Fat crows
In high winter grass
Take off again
Quickly,
Black feathers shimmering,
Black wings working
Effortlessly in sunlight
Against cold winds.
The perfect design perfected:
Millions of years for a bunch of feathers.
Birds dancing on frozen mountain soil,
Ancient steps meeting
The randomness of seeds and bugs.
Then big motion,
The powering of bodies
To treetops,
To rooftops,
And down again to my front yard.
Here and there
Patches of decaying snow,
White against the brown,
Black against the brown and white.
Birds and soil waiting indifferently.
For the turmoil of another spring.
Indifferent to time,
Embedding beauty and its decline
In the same moment,
Containing the sun's going

In its rising
Circling and circling
Without even the thup-thup of wings.
Are these the same crows
I saw yesterday?
Will they arrive again
Tomorrow
Looking to see
If I am still here
Wondering about
Their shining eyes
And the sun
That warms black feathers?



URANIA LEILUS

Marin Ward



MARY

Jade Njo



NOT YOUR GREAT GRANDMOTHER'S ELLIS ISLAND

Viktorija Wilson

I skip along a small path walked upon by many
Nothing but dirt and pebbles.
Chickens through fences, an out of tune choir.
Hair dripping river water, stained concrete
Faded mismatched couch and cabinets,
Dust and grime on every surface.
We would have a lucky year
if we happened to find a lick of ice cream.
Not quiet, but peaceful nonetheless

Only to be cut short.
We started gathering
around the TV tower.
Smoke and shouting filled the sky
“Hold!” they yelled, standing tall
“Hold!” unblinking toward the soldier

Skies clear over rubble

Voices, so many voices.
Labas? Nesupranti? Hello? Привет?
Crowded as we wait for the land of opportunity
Waiting room of clean floors, white walls
constricted throats, squinted eyes and furrowed brows.

Wide eyes and bright smiles bring
the tears that come with leaving familiar rubble.

The parents of the child
I care for as my own blood
hand me an envelope
“Go out and buy a T.V.”
Now? Here? How?
You forgot the savings, to ration the sugar,
selling clothes we could go without.
I suppose here no one blinks an eye.

Freedom teaches you a lot.
Such as I like seniors
more than third graders.
Organic tomatoes are worth it.
Running down the road, soles
pounding on concrete.
I make it hard to breathe
just for the fun of it.

My key slips into the lock,
wipe my feet on the mat I bought,
couch and coffee table I picked out,
little lights and candles I paid for.
Two little girls eating fresh bread and smoked fish
staring at the big screen we got last week.
Not quiet, but peaceful nonetheless.

JOURNEY

Ryder Fine



DAYBREAK

Annabel Lee



9

Wenli Dickinson

I am the Leaf,
the stem, the umbilical cord,
cradled by currents, preserved in the warmth of my eyelid:
groundbound to soil.

A hurricane lands home—
I drink it up,
expel it in clouds wrapped around the earth,
shielding the sun.

The Leaf bears a small seed,
which pierces the soil.
(my ribs encase the heart)
the blood returns—

a doe nibbles on the blade,
then a wren extracts a fine thread
to coil into its nest:
an egg, a stone, a warm shape—

I close my eyes
(helium and hydrogen fuse;
a thousand suns scar my belly;
then collapse): a new body.

feathers, wool, locks plucked by the wind,
shed and spun: soilborne,
a blanket that coils and uncoils—
and snags the new willow, stooping toward the riverbed.

I stretch on tiptoes—
I inter-rogate the mirror:
light pricks the surface
and passes through Your iris.

an elk's bugle carries this month into the next.
autumn Leaves envelop the forest floor,
keeping You safe.

some creek babbles from the next room.

HIGH DESERT TWILIGHT

Dhruva Sogal



HEAVENLY WAR

Mason Weems



THE HOMUNCULUS

Weston Gary

You wake up.

You do not know where you are. The light falling down the gray walls, the warmth of the bed covers, the clarion sound too loud to bear—They give no clue.

You realize you do not know who you are. The thought gives you pause just as you silence the wailing of your phone—hanging by its cord like a noose.

Who are you? You wonder.

Memories come to you like falling shards of glass. A name, an obscured half of a face—but no calming familiarity, no certainty that these are your memories, that they belong to you, that you are their creator and master and god.

Only memories, alien—and yet, they were here before you arrived. Waiting, perhaps.

For what, you cannot fathom.

You fall out of bed and move toward the bathroom. A mirror greets you. Its water is a malformed Narcissus, its features unlike those in your memory. It is better in some ways, worse in others.

You touch a face—your face. The apparition mimics your movement. The only thing you recognize is the confusion and terror in its eyes.

The day progresses with time. People speak to you. Your memories unfailingly pre-describe their faces and names and mannerisms. This one is nice. This one is loved. This one is detested—a sick loathing. The emotions are felt like a photograph seen through years of age. You know these things, but you do not believe them, not really. Your love is poor. Your hate is shallow. Your opinions are pen notes stuck to paper pages—but they are all you have. The only guide to this world. So you smile when they tell you to smile, and scowl, and laugh, and joke, drawing up words and phrases like dredging murky water.

You do not know why the charade works. Surely they can recognize the blankness underneath—the masks on masks on masks that disguise a true ambivalence born from strangeness?

They do not.

You do.

The memories are like maps of an unexplored land, you realize. They do not describe everything. They are incomplete in that sense. Without trying to, without ever thinking, you fill in those blank edges. You chart oceans and right geography. It

is something different from your memories that allows you to do this. Something—you feel relief—can be said to belong to you. A wit. A creativity. Something that feels free, unconstrained, shaping the landscape of your mind—fashioning new memories from a worldly clay—in a wild way.

You tell a joke. It is based on your memories, yes—but new. Distinct. Original. It is **yours**.

Finally. Something of yourself to own.

The sunlight falls no more. In the nighttime you feel free, formless, untethered from this homunculus which you inhabit. You see figures in the knife-edges between the electric lights and all-encompassing blackness. They beckon you to join them. To walk out into the great subsuming nothingness. To abandon this stageplay and to return what you stole. To return to what you are—a hollow, a void, an absence, a thing defined by everything it is not, a ring of ash.

But your memories, not the old, foreign ones but the new ones—a memory of the sunrise and the hanging phone. A memory of a joke conjured out from an ineffable creativity—unique and new. A memory of a stone falling down a staircase coming to rest in a crack. They are you and you cannot lose them. You are something now.

As moonlight falls down the gray walls and the warmth of your bedsheets smothers you—you know it was for nothing. You are nothing. Always, forever. It was your destiny to return.

To return to nonexistence.

You fade like mist. But not forgotten, you hope.

You cast your memories. **Your** memories. The ones that **you** created, the ones **you** master, the ones **you** are god of. They fall in line, more or less according to time, with the old ones. The alien ones. The ones you understood in detail, but did not recognize. Did not claim as your own.

At the end, you hope.

You hope the next one will value your memories.

That they will cherish them like you do.

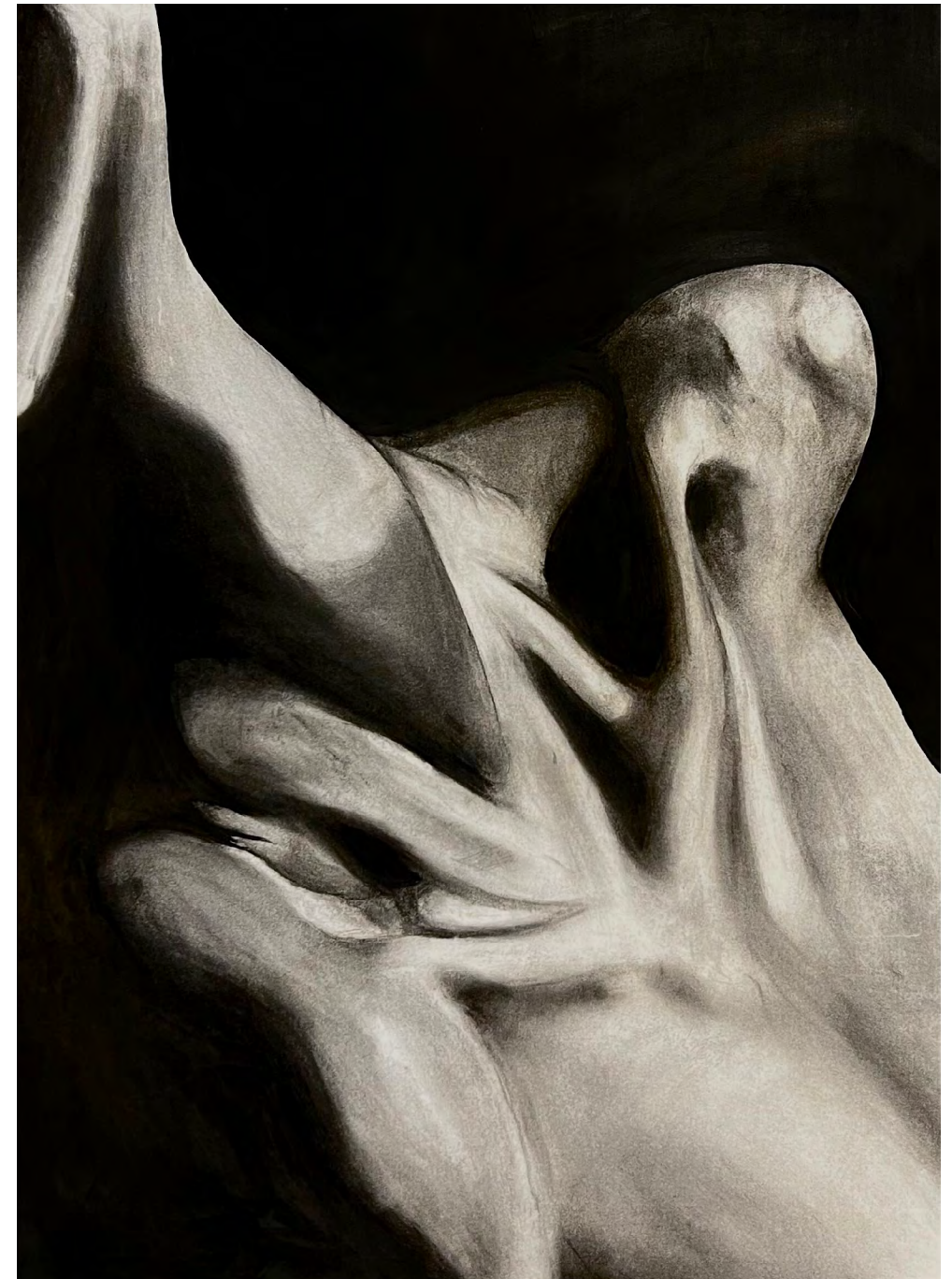
They will not, you know.

You do recognize what comes next. It is your first true memory. A thing forces its way into your self. It is ugly, cumbersome, dull, and stupid. It pushes you aside with ease.

Your memories survive you—unloved obelisks rooted in the earth. Silent gravemarkers in the killing field.

DISMAY

Reeve Nyland



HE'S JUST A LITTLE GUY

Spencer Walter



TEA CUP

Kayla Long

I move slowly
down the empty isle
shelves surround me
black floor, black distance

stacks of plain drinking glasses
some showing cracks and fractures
on the middle shelf
hidden among the mundane
a glimpse of color

Teacup of purple pottery
shaped like a flower
a leaf is the base
a place for your cakes

I take the flower tea cup
a treasure that I've found
and continue down
the endless isle



DAWN IN LOST CREEK

Patrick Barringer



BIRD BONES

Mason Weems

You know how it feels to drive your old car down the freeway, past the house of your kindergarten teacher whose name you don't remember, on your way home? It's something like that.

Except, in this case, your old car is actually that little paper sailboat you made when you were a child and let drift down the stream that ran by the park down the street, and it turned into a little heap of mushy soggy pulp that sank down to the creek bed, and probably rotted away, but for all you know it is still there, a little boat trapped against a rock under a stream that has since dried up but maybe is still running deeper and faster than it did back then. It's like that.

Except, in this case, you're not driving that boat so much as running in it, and not running *to* so much as running *from*, in much the same way as checking out of that cheap motel that wasn't even that far from your own house where you could've spent the night, and your key didn't even open the motel room but you woke up in there in the morning and checked out of the motel and now you're running because you can't crawl and you can't walk. Like that, in that little boat under the river.

Except, in this case, you're not on the freeway, you're not on a road or a trail or even a little path, you're blundering through the close and damp woods in the brambles after the rain and it's just a bit too cold for the sweater that you're wearing, and you're accidentally trampling some rare species of lichen on the rocks under your feet but to you it looks like any other lichen. Like that.

Except, in this case, the house of your kindergarten teacher whose name you don't remember isn't even a house, it's a little rock in your backyard, serving as a gravestone, I don't know if you remember it, I buried a little bird there years ago, it had died after flying into the glass of your bedroom window and spilled just one little drop of blood from its beak, that's the place that you're passing. Like that.

Except, in this case, you're not on your way home, you're being left alone, and not so much as you're being left but rather that you're the one leaving, because you're leaving first and they're leaving last. Like that.

Except, in this case, you are you are you are you, and have been you and will remain you, and you will always be running *from* in your boat under the current in the stream past the little gravestone that sits over the bird bones in your backyard.

My god, it's exactly like that.

PINKY PROMISE

Ashwini Shrestha



ACT II: CITIES

SKYLINE AGAINST THE NIGHT SKY

The sound of engines. The graveyard.

The camera in the woman's glove
compartment.

*The Idea finds its changed creator as the
Librarian becomes lost searching for it.*



AMERICAN GHAZAL

Kimberly O'Connor

I was walking the dog and I saw an eagle.
Then I saw what I saw was not an eagle,

staring at me from some underbrush
beneath a tree, but a drawing of an eagle.

It was a mask, hand drawn, such
as a child would make. An eagle

mask. I leaned down to touch
it (to put it on) (to become an eagle)

and saw that what I saw was just
a soiled paper napkin, not an eagle,

a greasy napkin blown and pushed
against the tree trunk in the form of an eagle,

or rather, the form of an eagle mask. Trash.
But it made me think about eagles:

my friend's t-shirt with a fish
held tight in the beak of an eagle

above the word "takeout." Is
what we see ever what is really there? Eagles:

America (freedom, destiny, gold rush)
(plantation, massacre, trail of tears). Fake eagle,

tell me, Kim, this is how to cross
a river without getting wet, like an eagle.

INTRO TO CIVIL

Seohyun Park



YOLCULUK

Sebnem Düzgün



I HATE THIS CITY

Michael Le



BUTTERFLY MAN

Sammy Pool



KILOS OF GHOSTS

Tobin Houchin

Someone sits next to Grayson on the rusty metal bench in the subway station, and the wind he was imagining ceases without much fanfare. His shirt sticks to his armpits in the boiling heat. The train is approaching. He'd been watching the headlights, deciding whether or not to step in front of them, and listening to that death-rattle screech of breaks echoing.

He's too tired to be frustrated that someone has filled one of the voids on either side of his bare shoulders. It feels wrong. He wipes the beads of gathering sweat off his face and glances to his left.

The woman fiddles with a subway pass, looking back at him with blue eyes behind dirty glasses. She's older than him, probably in college, and she determinedly wears long sleeves despite the heat. There's a backpack on her lap. It looks heavy—he can tell from the tattooed slump in her shoulders and the divots of her knees. She smiles.

"Hi," says Grayson. He smells something very cold and sharp, like mint and a childhood memory, and he wants to rub at the scars on his wrists.

"Hello, Grayson," says the woman.

Something screeches. The breaks of the train. Grayson looks down, and the heat is so awful. "Oh," he says. "What are you supposed to be, then?"

"I'm not sure exactly," the woman shrugs. "A secret-keeper, probably. I want to be a chemist, if I can make it through another two years of undergrad."

"Why are you here?"

"I have this thing," says the woman. "It's like, a gift. I can hear when people's ghosts are too heavy."

Grayson looks into the headlights. That sounds like a lie, but he doesn't really care. He's a hypocrite, thinking the woman is crazy, but it's just one of the many other things he wishes he wasn't, so what is there to do? "Gift? Sounds more like a curse to me."

"I mean, sometimes my shoulders do get pretty sore." The woman pushes down her hood and scratches the back of her neck.

A drop of sweat rolls down Grayson's ribs. He pulls one foot up and braces it on the bench beside him, and wonders why he can't stop thinking about mint. When he was a kid, he used to steal as many of the dentist's giveaway tubes of toothpaste as he could get his hands on without getting caught. He kept them in shoeboxes and hidden in rolls of socks. Where had they gone, after all these years?

"Do you wanna talk about it?" the woman asks. "Or would that be too overwhelming?"

Grayson's fingers link together. He hates talking, he hates everything, but his

chest feels so heavy and he'd been calling out, so loudly, for anyone at all.

"I can tell you," he says.

"I'll listen."

"Fought with my friends yesterday." Grayson leans back against the back of the bench. "Again. Tried to walk into traffic, so my parents sent me to the hospital. Got released in a few hours. Mom's still pissed though—she came in to my room to talk, and I don't think she can hear herself sometimes. All the things she says, you know."

The woman's blue eyes have turned vast and open and sad. "I'm sorry," she says, and she means it, somehow. "She should've been there to help you, not make things worse."

"I'm so tired." Grayson looks at the shadows on the station tiles.

"I hear you," says the woman. "You've been through so much. Do you want to tell me more about what she said?"

"Just that I'm acting like a such a child all the time," Grayson snaps, "and she's right. I do. Nothing's even wrong, and I'm so ungrateful anyways. So here I am, going to work like she wanted, even though I'm so—*tired*."

"You don't owe anyone gratefulness," the woman tells him.

But he does. He owes everyone for the space he takes up, owes the universe an apology for wasting the potential it crafted within him. Glancing over at the woman, he breathes. How could someone know his name without him telling them, when he doesn't even know it himself?

"Everything I do is the wrong thing," says Grayson. "Even if I... even if. You'd have to watch."

"I would." The woman's voice is very earnest, the vulnerability of hands in his throat, and Grayson feels peeled back. "I wouldn't look away. I'd be here with you, even if you didn't believe me."

"Why?" Grayson wonders.

The woman shrugs. The bag on her lap is cutting deep rents and folds into her skin, and she lays it down flat, unzipping the first pocket. Grayson sees a light from within. The face of a sobbing boy, clutching the inner fabric like its a sinking lifesaver, is etched in blue and silver. He's all but transparent, and through him, Grayson can see another face. This one's older and looks angry and empty-eyed, but they're holding tight to the backpack as well. "It's just who I am," says the woman.

Suddenly afraid, Grayson's throat bobs. "Are you—did you—"

The woman glances up at him. "What? Oh, no, these aren't—it's not like that," she explains hurriedly. "These are just ghosts of moments. I carry them so my friends don't have to carry them alone."

She passes Grayson a smartphone, and he jumps at the unexpected texture. When he glances down, he sees it's open to an empty contact. The cursor blinks at him.

"You can put your number in there," the woman tells him. "If you want."

Grayson looks up. The woman is re-zipping her bag, obscuring that blue and silver light as it leaks out across her lap. "Really?"

"Yeah," she says. "I won't be a creep or anything. Just—you can let me know when you make it to work safe."

Grayson flexes his hands. He raises his eyes, just for a moment, to see the headlights and the omnipresent sound and the haze of heat above the rails. "Everything I do is the wrong thing," he repeats quietly.

"You're not the wrong thing."

Grayson slides his fingers across the screen. His name blinks back at him, and it looks false, but the woman doesn't seem to mind. He bites his lip and finishes his number. The phone is slick in the heat when he hands it back, and the woman places it atop that boulder-filled backpack with light hands.

"Do they know?" he asks.

"Who?" The woman raises her eyebrows.

"The people in the bag. Do they know how heavy it is?"

For the first time, the woman averts her eyes. "I try not to make it a big deal," she says. "It's not like I want them to feel guilty, or like they owe me anything. I'm happy to do it."

Grayson feels a little lighter, with someone waiting to hear he's safe, with someone he doesn't need to trick into thinking he's not pathetic. Just for today. The backpack looks a little heavier.

"But I do get tired," the woman murmurs, "of loving all the parts that hate yourself enough for us both."

Grayson thinks about the wrong thing. The universe likes to laugh at people, he thinks—to give gifts to people that will turn them into curses and watch who takes ghosts from who. He'd laugh, if he were the universe. Maybe he should. Maybe that'd make the subway arrive faster, and maybe it would hurt, and maybe nothing would change at all.

The automated voice of the station announcer preludes the swish of opening doors. Grayson wonders if it's what told the woman his name.

"Would you really have done it?" she asks, jerking her chin toward the train. "If I wasn't here?"

"I don't know," Grayson admits. "Does that make me a liar?"

"Nah," says the woman. "It just makes you a moment in the universe."

Grayson offers her a hand to her feet. This is his train, but maybe he can make it hers too. "Would you really have cared if I did?"

The woman looks at him, eyes touched with something tired and soft and rueful. "I don't know," she replies, then smiles. She hefts her backpack over one shoulder, and it answers for them both.

"Does that make me a liar?"

AFTER THE SHOW

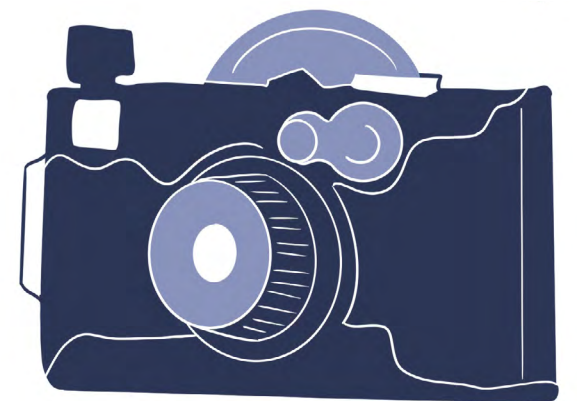
Adam Zeigler



WE LOVE THIS SPOT

Alex Jackson

Every Wednesday for the past fifteen years the guitarist from Guinea has driven from Connecticut to Brooklyn to play in a bar where they collect pay-what-you-want donations from patrons who delight in the lilting, swaying, delay-soaked patterns that materialize from the griot's mesh amplifier. The New-Yorkers take up folding chairs and tend to their drinks until a saxophonist's commitment to the small dark room with low red and blue lights draws them to their feet and they dance. During the break, the bar-hoppers finish their drinks and disappear back into the humid summer night. Inside, the music kicks up again into a heady warm rain of conga drums and guitar-like-kora reminding an overtasked bartender to politely wave a weightless silver bucket for the suggested cover. At the end of the night, when all the moving figures have gone home and the harsh white-yellow house lights reveal a number in the bucket, an outstretched arm with open palm accuses the bartender in French, as gravity pulls on the pressed vintage tiles that cling to the low ceiling of the bar.



TUESDAY IN PARIS

Natalia McEvoy



BEACON

Nicholas Beck



TOMORROW

Collin Murry

i

Please, tell me it was for me
& nobody else. For me is to accept
that I am alive. To allow

me & you. You're standing there
carefully wrapping hands
around my waist. The bus

waits.

i

*you asked me to come to your home. you asked if i could stay. i said yes. i could feel
the immediate horror grip you. the earth fell around me as the horror constricted my
throat. grandmother's alabaster walls fell inward. it was just us & yet we could not
feel alone*

I, falling
into your lips—
continue.

You, pressing your mouth
into the gash
left by
you
pressing further—
into my mouth.

ii

Horror—I couldn't stand to breathe within you. & I had to escape. I opened the man's
door. His face dripped with fatherhood and his mouth recoiled. In his eyes were his
children – reflections of me. I could see & feel & touch it all, but I couldn't pull
myself away. He ushered me in as the sky pulled away from sight. His walls captured
me. I took the place of his wife, her bedside, her bed life. I had hoped that, maybe,

being his wife he would love me for just a brief moment. Something to shield me from you. When I left, the sky was blood—the sun had just set. I knew you weren't in there & yet I could see your silhouette.

ii

I looked in the mirror, trying my hardest not to peel off my skin.

iii

The leaves were falling
it was autumn.

you had something to say, right /

He lifts his hand to catch me falling.
Why, he says.

I couldn't speak. For even though
much needed to be said
nothing would come out.

i'm sorry /

The knife kept turning in my shoulder.
Digging deeper
Ripping out flesh
Shredding viscera

what a horrible sentence /

When the pool of blood
filled the crevices of the concrete
he tried to pull me up

there isn't anything to apologize for /

He grabbed me, & held me in his arms
asking *Why*?
I looked but could not see blood on him.
He was clean.

and that is why i did it

NIGHTBLOOM

Kyle Markowski





ENCOUNTERS ALONG A DESERT ROAD

Henry Rothert

Author's Note: This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The following is a true story. Everything on the following pages actually happened, every person mentioned here exists, and every conversation is real.

Monday, March 14 - Somewhere in the northern Sonoran Desert

6:30

Wake up. Step out of my tent into the cool desert air. Climb up a nearby hill and watch the sun light up the mountains, then the hills, and finally across the plains.

6:45

Head back down to my camp, still cold in the shadow of the nearby hill. Boil water for oatmeal and tea. The oatmeal tastes bad, as it always does, but at least I'm not hungry afterwards.

7:00

Clean my bowl out with the fine sand from a nearby wash. I'm out of water, I'll need to find more soon.

I notice coyote tracks in the sand. I could hear them last night, prowling around my tent.

7:30

Finish packing up camp. Start walking the mile or so back to the road.

7:50

Reach the road. The sun is already high in the sky. Going to be another hot day. The road is empty. I start heading west.

9:00

Come across a fruit vendor on the side of the road. A man stands behind a metal cart, resting in the shade of a large rainbow umbrella.

"Hello," I murmur. I haven't spoken in days and I am unsure if I said the words loud enough for him to hear me, or if I even said them at all. The fruit vendor is short, Mexican, with a large mustache, well trimmed barring a few whiskers pointing out in random directions. He smokes a cigarette and wears a rain jacket, the hood resting lightly on his head, as if he's oblivious to the blistering desert heat.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to. The fruit does all the talking for him. Standing here in the hot sun, the fruit, sitting in ice behind the glass, adorned in beads of condensation, looks like the ambrosia of the gods.

"Only fruit you'll find for miles," he finally says.

I believe him. "I don't have any money." This is a lie. I do have money. I glance at the glass again. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head, trying to break the trance the fruit has on me. "Water?" the man asks, reaching into the ice and pulling out a rectangular bottle of water. The label depicts a snow capped mountain range, blanketed in glaciers and evergreens. I look at the dry, lifeless peaks to the south—not these mountains. The bottle is made with thick plastic—overkill for something designed to be so disposable. It's pretentious, the type of thing you would expect to see in celebrity dressing rooms or the minifridge of a luxury hotel suite.

"How much?"

"\$10. The bottle glistens, tempting me. I'm parched, but I'm not spending that much on water. I've got to have principles, even out here.

"I don't have any money," I say again.

"If you say so."

"Sorry to bother you," I mumble, and turn to continue walking.

I take a step, and then stop and turn back towards the man.

"What are you doing out here? I've been on this road for three days and I haven't seen anyone else."

He takes a long puff of his cigarette before gesturing down to the fruit, as if to offer it to me again.

“No,” I say. I’ve made up my mind.

He shrugs, blowing a large cloud of smoke into the air. “Your loss, brother”—Perhaps.

A minute later I glance back at the man and the cart. For the first time, I notice there’s no truck parked next to his cart. I want to go back and ask him how he got himself and his fruit out here, but my legs keep moving westward, uninterested in delaying forward progress any longer.

9:30

Thirsty. Still no water. Perhaps I should have bought some from the fruit seller. I look around, nothing but road and sand and sun and sky. No point in turning around, I’ll find water somewhere up ahead.

10:30

The desert is a cruel mistress. My heart skips a beat every time I see a shimmer on the road ahead that looks like water—a mirage. I realize a split second later that the desert is toying with me, preying on my mortal needs. I should know better, but I keep falling for it.

11:15

I need water. The thirst is making me crazy. The mirages are starting to get more sophisticated—I could swear I’ve seen cars approaching that never arrive, cows standing on the road, searching for food, even a man sitting on a sofa on the side of the road ahead of me.

Scratch that, that last one might be real.

11:30

I was right. The man sits on the side of the road, resting on a torn sofa seat in the meager shade of a creosote bush. He’s middle aged, with a long, wispy, graying beard and heavily tattooed arms. His hair is in a ponytail, and a pair of sunglasses hug his face. The brim of his hat is pierced with fishing flies—I don’t think he’s going to catch anything out here.

He calls out to me as I approach. “Howdy. Where you headed?”

“Just passing through. But I could use a break.”

“Feel free to rest here with me if you so desire. I would offer you this air mattress,” he says, gesturing to a deflated pile of soft black plastic next to his chair, “but unfortunately I popped it this morning during a little kerfuffle with a scorpion.”

Why not?

I walk over to the deflated mattress and fold one end over the other, to form some sort of a cushion to rest on. As I do, a pale white translucent scorpion crawls out from the creases, scuttling off into the brush. Kicking the pile reveals no further scorpions, and so I sit down next to the man.

“The name’s Joel. Want a beer?” he asks, pulling another bottle out of a six pack on the other side of him.

“Sure. Thanks.”

The beer is warm and doesn’t taste particularly good, but it’s my first booze in weeks, and I’m not in a position to complain.

“How’d you say you ended up out here?” I ask Joel.

He sighs, and takes another sip of his beer. “I was driving my truck along this road the other day. I had this here love seat hanging out the back of my tailgate, was moving across the country. The straps holding it in broke, and it fell out the back. I stopped to pick it up, but I forgot to take my truck out of drive when I stopped. By the time I got around to the back, it started moving on its own, and the damned sonofabitch didn’t slow down till it had rolled its way over the horizon.”

I laugh. He doesn’t look amused. I look down the road, towards the horizon. Perfectly straight. No truck in sight. Or any other vehicle.

“You couldn’t chase after it?” I ask.

“Not on this leg,” he sighs, rolling up the left sleeve of his khaki shorts. His knee’s got a nasty gash on it, with an appearance that suggests the visible affliction is far from the worst part. “I tried following it for a while, but once it started to pick up speed, I gave up.”

“And the beer?”

“That was here already.”

I pull the bottle from my lips and look at it. The label is sun faded and worn, but the text “Coyote Haze IPA” is barely legible. It depicts an animal carcass lying underneath a Joshua tree. Grim. I put the bottle down. I wish I had some water instead.

“So you’re just waiting out here?” I ask Joel.

“Someone will come by eventually.”

“You might be waiting here for a while.”

“Oh, I don’t mind waiting. I’m not going anywhere as long as there’s beer that needs drinking,” he says, grabbing another bottle from the pack. “It’s harder for them to find me out here anyway.”

I glance around, nervously, looking for signs this man is a dangerous fugitive—a weapon, a briefcase, perhaps even a large white canvas sack with “\$” embossed on the side.

“Who’s they?”

“Oh you know, the taxman, the IRS.”

“Of course.”

“It’s criminal what they’re doing, man. Don’t get me started.”

“You don’t have to, don’t worry.”

Ignoring me, he gets started on a rant about globalists controlling the Federal Reserve.

I try to tune him out. Unsuccessfully—there’s not much else around to distract me.

“Of course, when I say Freemasons, I’m not talking about your average shriner; What we’re dealing with here is an international cabal of satanic child sex-traffickers.”

I roll my eyes. He doesn’t seem to notice.

“Do you know what adrenochrome is?” he asks.

“Yeah man. I know what adrenochrome is.”

His eyes light up, much to my dismay. “Finally! Someone who gets it. All those woke city people claim to care about systemic injustice. If ritual sacrifice doesn’t count as a systemic injustice against the infants of our nation, then I don’t know what does.”

Not sure how to respond to that one.

He laughs, maniacally, in a way that feels as if he’s laughing at me, almost out of pity. I’m not sure if I want to like him.

“Maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t make it to LA.”

“Why’s that?” I ask, feigning interest, expecting some rant about progressives ruining California.

“Everything moves too fast out there. This is more my speed,” he says, taking another sip of his beer.

12:00

Lunchtime. Joel is still talking about conspiracies. This new theory seems to almost contradict his previous one.

I have a stick of salami I’d like to eat, but I don’t feel like sharing any with Joel, despite him giving me some of his beer. I feel a bit guilty about that but nonetheless say goodbye to Joel and keep moving along the road, where I can eat my food in peace.

1:30

The first car I’ve seen all day just passed. I hear it coming from a long way off, far behind me, V8 engine roaring and kicking up a tornado of dust behind it. I step out into the road and stick my thumb out, but the muscle car zips past me, the air it displaces nearly knocking me backwards and sending a barrage of dust into my eyes and lungs. I switch from sticking out my thumb to a different digit entirely, but the driver doesn’t appear to notice or care, and continues barreling down the road, towards the zenith of the horizon. The dust clears a few minutes later, and I carry on, now a little farther off onto the shoulder of the road.

1:45

A pillar of black smoke has appeared on the horizon, far ahead of me along the road.

2:00

The pillar is getting larger as I approach. Looks like someone might have crashed. I’ll find out, if I ever make it that far. I need water—Joel’s beer is just making me feel sick.

3:30

There’s skid marks on the road, traveling all the way to the source of smoke. The smoke billows out from the fiery remains of a large muscle car on the shoulder of the road, the same one that passed me earlier. Bits of tire and undercarriage litter the asphalt between me and the car. I look around for survivors. There’s a large man lying on the ground, downwind of the wreck. He doesn’t appear to be moving. I rush over to him. There’s a baseball cap covering his face, and his shirt is covered in blood.

“Are you okay?” I shout.

The man sits up and slowly smiles at me. “Hey. Just napping.” He’s a large guy, built like a powerlifter, with a thick, bushy beard covered in soot and ash. He’s got a friendly smile. I feel bad for flipping him off earlier. “What happened?”

“I crashed.”

Obviously.

“Are you hurt? You’re bleeding.”

“Not too bad,” he says, tugging at his shirt. “It seems to be clotting up anyway.”

“You sure you’re fine? This looks awful.”

“Oh you think this is bad? This is nothing. I’ve been in far worse.”

I look over at the burning wreck. “Worse than this?”

He rolls up his sleeve, revealing two purple scars on his arm, each about an inch wide and four or five inches long. They remind me of wounds I'd seen on the face of an Alaskan hunter I'd met years ago. He and his buddy had been attacked by a grizzly bear out in the Denali wilderness. The hunter had been scarred for life, physically and emotionally—and he'd been the lucky one.

"Got these a few years back. Hit a speed bump going 180."

I chuckle from the absurdity of it. He doesn't seem offended.

"My car ended up like a crushed beer can, part of the frame was buried three inches deep in my arm," he says, gesturing to the scars, "and my skull was fractured."

He rubs the back of his head, and continues.

"The cuts went down to the bone, but the paramedics weren't really concerned with that. I'd gotten what's called a basilar fracture—causes this massive bruising right below your ear." He waves his hand around the side of his neck, just below his earlobe. "I think the bruising is from brain fluid or spinal fluid or something leaking out into the rest of you. Apparently it's almost always fatal."

"What'd they do?"

"Discharged me from the hospital that evening. I got my stitches out the next week. I'd already gotten into another crash within a month."

I roll my eyes. "You'd think they'd take away your license at that point."

He chuckles, sheepishly. "Yeah." His laugh was a soft, quiet laugh, much like his voice. "I've had my fair share of accidents. Never been stranded out here like this though..."

The man reaches into the pocket of his jeans and pulls out a thick leather wallet, nearly bursting at the seams with cash. He flips it open, and pulls out an old, sun faded photo. The photo shows a young boy, grinning ear to ear, sitting on a park bench next to a burly middle-aged man, wearing a Black Sabbath shirt and a checkered flannel. A golden retriever sits on the grass between the two.

"When I was 9 years old, my father left my mother and me and went on a trip by himself to the Grand Canyon. This is the last photo I took with him before he left."

I nod, solemnly, but don't say anything. He hands me the photo. It feels delicate, fragile, like an ancient scroll or the wing of a moth. I hold it gingerly.

Silence. Except for the wind of the desert and the flames of the car, there is no noise. Neither of us say anything for a minute or so, just staring at the photo.

"He killed himself by riding his motorcycle right off the edge of the canyon. They found his body and his bike about 300 feet from the rim. He'd taken Charlie with him," he says, pointing to the dog in the middle of the photo. "They found her lost, wandering around the forest of the northern rim, looking for a way down into the canyon."

His voice trails off. I don't feel the need to fill the silence. Suddenly, the wind picks up, tugging on the photograph and pulling it out of my hands. It floats through the air, like a leaf, right towards the burning wreck of the car.

"Shit," I say, frozen in place.

The man echoes me, and sprints after the photo. I follow, although much slower due to the heavy pack on my back. He stops only when the hellish heat of the burning wreck becomes too much to bear. The photo floats on. It catches in the updraft of the flames, floating upwards with the smoke as it ignites, burns, and crumbles to ash, drifting away in a million pieces on a light breeze.

He steps away from the flames, and sits down on the side of the road, staring off towards the mountains in the horizon. We're both quiet for a while.

"I'm sorry about your photo."

"It's alright."

"And I'm sorry about your dad."

He grunts. "It was a long time ago."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Wait here for help to show up, I guess. I'm sure they'll find me sooner or later." He nods over towards the pillar of black smoke billowing out from the wreckage of his car.

"Got any water?" I ask him.

"No. You?"

"Not since this morning."

I'm not sure if I should tell him that he's the only driver I've seen in days.

"Well, I best get going. Best of luck." I give the man a two-finger salute.

"You as well."

I start walking west, towards the car and the afternoon sun, a dim orb through the thick haze of the smoke.

The man calls after me. "Hey man."

I turn. "What's up?"

"Do you think I'll die out here?" For the first time since I met him, he sounds genuinely nervous. I shouldn't have mentioned the water. I look back at the sun, then at my watch. I glance around at the empty landscape.

I shake my head. "Sounds like you've survived worse." He doesn't look convinced. I hope I do. "You'll be fine."

4:30

Still no water. I look back towards the east, from where I came. The pillar of black smoke has disappeared. There's a cross sticking out from a pile of stones on the side of the road. A name is chiseled into the wood, but it's too weathered—I can't make out the text. I lay down next to the grave in the warm sand. There's a nice view of the mountains to the south. Not a bad place to rest forever.

5:30

I must have dozed off. The back of my throat feels like I swallowed a spoonful of embers. The sun is low in the sky.

I come upon a small house, a derelict shack in the desert, with its walls and windows gone, roof held up by just a few two-by-fours. As I continue on I pass more of these shacks, spread out across the valley. I enter one, a red wooden hovel with a northward sloping roof. The door is off its hinges—I step right inside. There's a rusted teal fridge tipped over onto a matching stove. The stove has an empty bird nest on one burner. There's glasses on the counter and dishes in the sink. Everything is draped in a thick layer of dust. I turn the spigot—nothing. I should have bought some water from the Mexican when I had the chance. A calendar on the wall reads August '53. The floor of the cabin is covered in feathers and coyote dung.

6:00

The sun inches closer to the horizon. From a long way off I see another cabin, silhouetted in the evening sun. It is in far better condition than the others I had passed so far, with largely intact walls and a solid roof. A clothesline is attached to the side of the house, running from one corner to a metal stake driven into the ground a few meters away. Yellowed clothes hang from the line, waving in the soft wind. As I approach, the house remains as silent as the rest of the desert. Even the clothes on the line make no noise as they are rustled by the breeze. Upon closer inspection, the garments seem to be covered in some sort of reddish mold. They have clearly been out here a while. The door of the cabin is slightly ajar. I give it a knock, but am met with silence. Pushing the door open, I see three men sitting in a circle around a small, smokey fire burning on the concrete floor of the room. One is clearly just a boy. His two older companions appear to be in their mid-twenties. They are unshaven, with coarse beards spreading over their cheeks and chins and necks. One of the men is slender and tall, while is far shorter although just as gaunt. Both appear sickly, with sunken cheeks, dead eyes, and wrinkled, loose skin hanging from their withered frames. The boy, comparatively, seems to be in much better health, but shares the same lost, vacant eyes of the other men. They all stare intently, without blinking, into the thick smoke rising from the small fire. The fire gives off no heat, has no visible embers, and burns with only the occasional tiny flame. Nevertheless, the small pile of wood produces a swirling cloud of purple-red-bluish smoke that dances up from the fire, filling the room from floor to ceiling with a thick, caustic haze.

None of the three seem to notice me.

I shout out to them, asking if they have any water, but am again met with silence. They all continue staring at the smoke. I glance at it, trying to see what they are looking at. It stings my eyes, filling them with tears. The tears run down my face, but I don't feel compelled to wipe them away. The smoke is beautiful. It doesn't move like smoke normally does. It dances, moving smooth and elegant and wholly unnatural. The smoke twists and contorts and forms shapes and images that are almost recognizable. It looks like a stellar nebula, the celestial birthplace of stars and planets. It burns my eyes, but if I close them, I won't be able to see the smoke. So I stare, and see stars floating about. I see the birth of a star, and at that moment, the secrets of the universe begin to translate into a language I suddenly understand. I realize the nature of this planet, the secrets of the desert, the history of this house and the lives of everyone who had ever tried to live in it. The smoke changes its shape, the stars morphing into wispy planets, the planets into skulls, the skulls into the faces and bodies of women I have loved, each ethereal image melting into the next. The girls play with each other in a forest, or perhaps a meadow, or on a beach, it is impossible to tell. I hear a soft, playful feminine laughter echo from a space larger than the cramped confines of the cabin. I feel myself sitting down, joining the circle with the others.

The fire consumes the wood in the center of the floor, producing only ash and smoke. Eventually, as the wood diminishes, the smoke dies down, until it is only large enough to show one girl, one star, one skull at a time. I feel myself blink for what must have been the first time in hours. Across from me the tall man stands up, the first time I have seen any of them move since I entered. He bends over, and grabs an axe off the floor. I hadn't noticed it earlier. He raises the axe above his head, and swings it down into the wall of the cabin. The wood explodes under the force of the axe, sending splinters flying across the room. The man hacks at the wall, tearing out wood and insulation and tossing it all onto the fire. The axe quickly breaks through the thin walls of the cheaply constructed cabin, casting a solitary evening sunbeam through the smoke and dust. Once the fire rekindles and the smoke begins to thicken again, the man drops the axe and rejoins the circle. The insulation burns with an acrid smell, burning our eyes and our lungs with renewed vigor.

The sun sets, the sky grows dark, and the men speak, on occasion, but they never actually say anything.

Coyotes pass through the cabin, entering and exiting through the holes we have smashed in the walls, sniffing us as they stalk silently by. We ignore them. Over time they become more bold, poking our backs and pawing at our clothes. We hardly notice—we are too busy watching the smoke. Eventually they go after the boy. They grab at his clothes and his skin with their jaws. The boy is silent at first, but once they start to pull him away from the fire he screams, like a young child awoken from a nightmare. They pull him out through one of the holes we had cut in the side of the cabin. Splinters and nails tear at his clothes and his flesh.

“Something needs to be done about all the coyotes,” one of the men says.

“I agree,” says the other. None of us move. Every so often, the smoke dies down, and one of us gets up and grabs the axe off the floor. We hack away at the walls of the house, tearing out two by fours and insulation, throwing it all onto the fire.

After a while the coyotes come back. There are more of them this time. They fill the space between the walls and the circle that myself and the remaining two men form around the fire. They circle us and the smoke, sniffing at our backs, always moving in a clockwise direction. I lose sight of the other two men, just a cyclone of smoke and coyotes.

The smoke begins to die down again. I grab the axe and cut at the walls. Bits of blood and skin and flesh are stuck to the wood, glistening a deep crimson in the dim light of the embers. I toss the wood on the fire, and the smoke shows us the tall man, surrounded by a pack of coyotes. I look for him around the fire, but he is gone.

“Whatever happened to the others?” I ask.

“Others? What others?” replied the short man.

“Something needs to be done. We can’t keep letting this happen,” I say, grabbing the axe to cut some more wood from the frame of the house. The smoke changes, once again showing us visions of beautiful women. They are far easier on the eyes than the tall man or the coyotes.

Tuesday, March 15

8:00

The sun is bright, and burns my eyes. It shines clearly through what had once been the walls of the cabin. They are almost entirely gone now, a few studs are all that keep the roof up. The short man is gone. I don’t remember seeing him leave. Either I had dozed off and woken back up, or the smoke had gone completely out. I feel uneasy without the smoke. I try to find more wood to throw on the fire, get it smoking again, but the axe is gone. Upon closer inspection, I see the head of the axe in the ashes of the fire, blackened with soot and charred by flames. Disappointed, I stand up and leave the cabin. My head feels a lot better now that the smoke is gone, but my throat is burning again. Still no water. I trudge onwards.

8:30

I come across parts of a carcass—vultures scatter as I approach. Bones with bloody flesh and bits of dried skin and hair are strewn about across a wide area. I can’t tell if it’s a cow or antelope or a human or something else entirely.

10:00

I can’t go on any further without water. This might be the end. I’ve climbed on top of a jagged rock pile, the first in a series of ever increasing hills, a boneyard of dead rocks leading up to the mountains. I’m waiting here until I see something.

11:00

From up on top of the rock pile, I see a solitary white sedan, traveling swiftly along the road from the direction I came. I gather up my stuff and clamber down the rocks to the road. I reach the road a minute or so before the car does. It’s an electric car. I step out into the road and wave at the car with both hands over my head. The car slows to a halt in front of me, and I walk over to the driver’s side window. The driver, the car’s only occupant, rolls down the window as I approach. He’s a middle aged Asian man, with silver wire-framed glasses and a well trimmed goatee.

“Everything okay?” he asks, in heavily accented English.

“Was wondering if I could get some water. And maybe a ride,” I croak out. This is the first time I’ve spoken since last night, and I only now realize how much the smoke had hurt my throat.

He reaches around to the backseat, pulls out a bottle of water and hands it to me. It’s the same luxury brand as what the fruit vendor tried to sell me. He’s got half a dozen more in a soft sided cooler in the backseat. I crack it open. The water provides instant relief, soothing everything from my burning throat to my aching joints. Within seconds I’ve drained the bottle.

“Get in,” the man says. “I take you where you need to go.”

He unlocks the car doors, and I hop in the passenger seat. The car is very clean and I’m filthy, caked with dirt and sweat and ash. I drink another bottle of water.

“My name is Tony,” the man says. “Tony Wealth.”

“Wealth?” I’m not sure I heard him right.

“It’s my western name. I’m a businessman. It’s good fortune.”

“Maybe I need to change my last name to Wealth,” I say, jokingly.

“Are you not wealthy?” asks Tony.

“No,” I chuckle. “I’m not rich at all.”

“You Americans seem to have different meaning for wealth than we do in Taiwan. Wealthy and rich are not the same thing. Perhaps you are wealthier than you realize.” He doesn’t elaborate further.

“You’re from Taiwan?”

“Yes, I’m here in America on vacation.”

“First time in the county?” I ask.

“No, I have visited here before. I see all the big things, like the Statue of Liberty and the Capitol when I was here as a young man. But that’s not what America is about. This time I see the real America—the culture, you know? I’ve been traveling the country for the past three months, sleeping in my car. I have money for hotels, but this way I meet more people, understand the culture better. I make lot of friends this way. Like you. You are my friend now, no?”

“Of course I am, Tony.”

“Where are you going, my friend?”

“Towards Los Angeles.”

“So am I. I have a flight home tomorrow. I take you as far as you need to go.”

“Thank you, Tony.”

I pick up another bottle of water. By the fourth, my immediate thirst is quenched, and I’m not able to drink them as fast. I look at the bottles at my feet. It’s good water, but it’s not worth \$10. I crack open another one.

“I don’t understand all these houses.” Tony says, glancing out at the derelict shacks dotting the desert countryside, gradually increasing in frequency as we travel westward. “Back in my country, I’m very wealthy. If I wanted, I could move to America and buy this entire valley and all these houses. We could tear them down and build a city here.”

I look out the window at the creaking creosote, flowering cacti, and derelict shacks. The mountains reflected in the rearview mirror are jagged and sharp, aggressively so, like the teeth of a saw. “This is no land for people.”

“Why not?”

“People have tried. All these houses were built and lived in by people who thought they could make a life out here,” I tell Tony. “Eventually, the desert won.”

“It seems like in America you have a lot of wasted space.”

“I wouldn’t call this a waste.”

“What are you doing out here?” Tony asks.

“Just passing through.”

“Are you going home?”

“I’m not sure.”

Tony asks me more questions about life in America. We pass a sign on the road: Los Angeles 150 miles. The horizon ahead of us is hazy. I can’t tell if it’s smog—or smoke.

BLUSHING SYMPHONY

Tristasia Phan



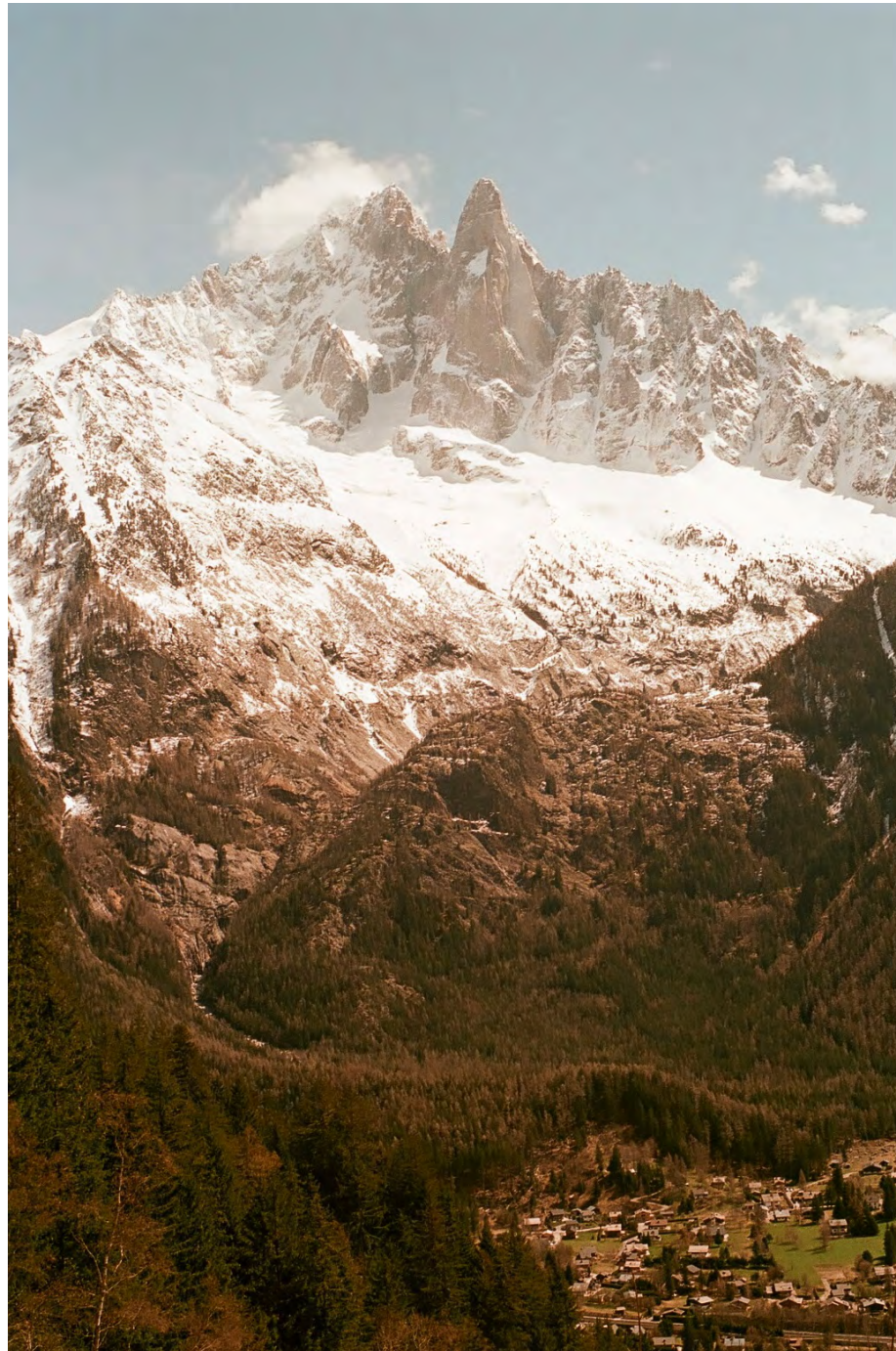
SCAVENGERS

Ryder Fine



CHAMONIX

Natalia McEvoy



THE HOLIDAY

Alex Jackson

A spring afternoon on
the coast. The sun
is nearly warm. The rocks
jut out over clear water.

The press is hot. On
the border, the first
tank's treads just crossed
into neighboring territory.

The Russian and the American
are on holiday. Students
with bright swim trunks
and fresh confidence.

Their handshake claps
like a stone cracking loose
from one of the immutable cliffs
that oppose each other across the inlet.

Hand over hand, the most
daring diver climbs the tallest
spire, lingers, drops
into the wide sea.

A spring afternoon on
the coast. The sun
is nearly warm. The rocks
jut out over clear water.



Act III: Storms

THE GRAVEYARD - NIGHT

The blood on the Idea's talons. The lanterns, cardboard and glass. The camera's photograph, the size of a door home.

Grieving, the Idea reveals itself. The faithful Librarian recovers its confidence, and the two continue their journey.



ALMOST HEAVEN

Spencer Walter



YOSEMITE

Kimberly O'Connor

I was miserable:
terrified of bears,
restless in the tent
night after endless night,
certain each leaf's rustle
was an animal intent
on eating me up
like a girl
in a fairy tale.
I so deeply longed
for a shower
I decided to walk
into the frigid,
bright, clear lake
that stretched for miles
between the park's
single road and
the lonely wilderness.
It was so cold
my body felt cold
only a moment:
then numbness.
I ducked my head
under once, then twice,
then waded, shivering,
to shore. I shone,
then, for awhile
there, clean, subdued,
finally silent,
like a pine,
or a cliff,
or a cloud,
or a star.

TREE 4

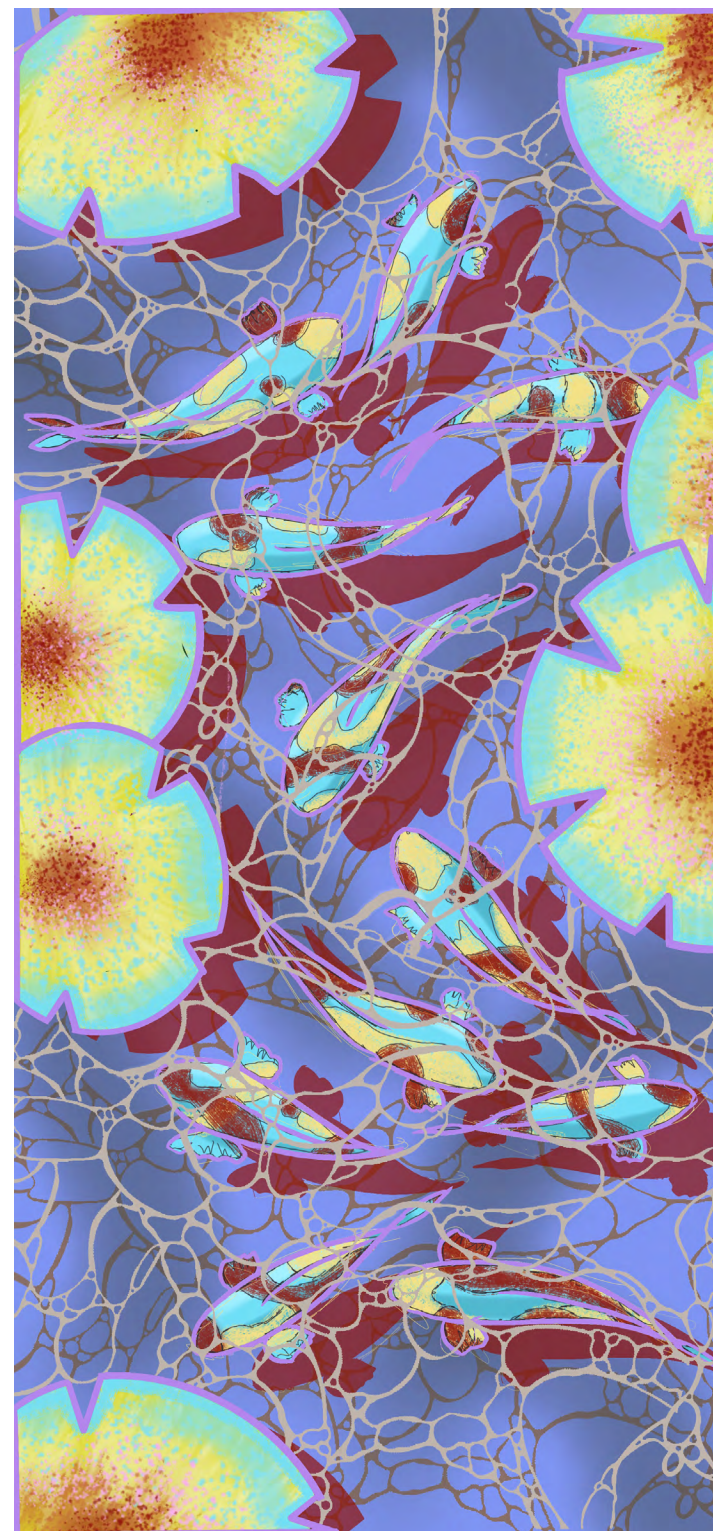
Connor Allen



Aluminum Wire and Quartz Aggregate Rock

CRAYOLA

Jessica Schmidt



Digital

SUNBATHING

Annabel Lee



TRUCKSTOP HANDSOAP

Kayla Long

the water is always a weird lukewarm feeling that's hard to separate from the AC
blowing from the corner
the buzz of the truck engine muting everything past the edge of your ear, filling your
head with a staticky, bone-tired ache
the soap comes out with a firm push and the smell that's been on your hands for two days
You smell it when you grab a chip from the bag tossed between the seats, where it
rattles against the empty soda cans

It smells like the empty space in your mind when the engine is off for the night
the familiar mattress under you and the same moon, but the light is different
the bugs sound different
the air is heavier and you're so exhausted but can't get to sleep
knowing the alarm will go off when it's still dark and it will be movement again

It smells like the first night in that new apartment away from home
and the empty sidewalk as you walk home alone wishing you had someone to call just
to hear a friendly voice
shutting the blinds on city lights and tears on your pillow when the empty space in
your heart feels like it's going to swallow you whole
locking the door behind you because there's no one to come in after you
putting on a show because the silence takes up too much space

PANTOUM: SHOOTING

Kimberly O'Connor

You look at your phone: there's been a shooting.
A school, this time, 14 children dead.
An 18-year-old kid entered the building
with a gun he shouldn't have had and opened fire.

A school, again, now 19 children dead.
First he shot his grandmother, then went to the school
with a gun he shouldn't have had and opened fire.
The parents wait in anguish for the news.

First he shot his grandmother, then went to the school,
and bullets fell in the hallway like spring rain.
The parents wait in anguish for the news.
The scene replays and replays itself.

Bullets shower victims like spring rain
and five or ten or twenty people die.
The story replays and replays itself:
moments of silence, a vigil, piles of flowers

for five or ten or twenty people dead.
We cry, feel shock, feel rage, go numb. We plan
moments of silence, vigils, pile flowers on sidewalks.
A scene American as apple pie.

We cry, feel shock, feel rage, go numb. We plan
nothing, in the end, to make them stop,
these scenes American as apple pie.
You look at your phone: there's been a shooting.

FOREST FIRE

Dhruva Sogal



FRACTURED

Lily Abourezk



AETHER

Vanessa Watson



MAIN CHARACTER SYNDROME

Tobin Houchin

The internet, as usual, understands things better than I do. *4 signs you have main character syndrome.* They say, you identify as the protagonist of your own story. You want your life to be your own. I think maybe it's meant to be a bad thing. After all, what are we if not team players?

'*Main character syndrome* ❤️,' says a 16-year-old I talk to on the internet sometimes. They are captioning an image of themselves gazing from the open window of a car into a sunset, their eyes squeezed shut against the wind, their smile brilliant. They are so happy. Main character syndrome.

I think they understand better than I do.

The frigid air of the high plains works its way through the window glass and into my temple after only half an hour. I imagine the frost crackling on the ends of my hair. The bus is high, and it glides across a road that winds through a canyon with a name I don't know like a rattlesnake unwanted in the dust. I feel every crack in the asphalt. My phone is going to die before the ride does. But it's alive now, and I check it as the whole world shakes. I'm kneeling at an altar, my thumb on the notifications bar a prayer, begging the love of the place I've left to reach me until the place I am going.

On the rocks outside, a mountain goat loses its footing. I wonder if it still would've broken its leg on the icy crags if no one had been watching.

In 7th grade, I trained myself out of getting carsick. Those hours in the morning and evening were gold. My handwriting grew loopy, so it looked as messy out of motion as it did within.

I wrote about main characters. Dragons and wizards, superheroes, phoenixes.

Who wouldn't want to join them, in the pages of an adventure? The car window reflects my glasses, and the lenses reflect the window. Outside, broken glass litters the side of the highway. It glitters as the car blurs past, giving the illusion of stars.

Who is getting on the bus at this broken-down stop in the worst part of Denver? The air smells like cannabis and the seats like mold. She has a skull earring and a mohawk dyed green. The blouse she wears is satin and carefully ironed, and she checks her makeup in the rearview mirror.

She looks nervous. I watch, the silent audience of the spotlight, and I never learn why.

I hope she got the job. It makes my failures that day feel quieter, somehow.

I was on an airplane once, tarmac in Denver International Airport. The window seat next to me was open. I was excited to slip over once we reached cruising height, to watch the lights from above. Two minutes before takeoff, they filled the seat with another unaccompanied minor, a boy with straw hair and a beat up Iphone. Thirteen, he was, maybe fourteen.

I was exhausted. Flying to meet my parents, I'd been couch surfing for two weeks, and I had only my diploma to show for it. I held my favorite pen so tightly, that flight, that it snapped clean in half.

We were delayed in Phoenix. I watched from the corner of my eye as the boy clicked his phone off airplane mode. I watched him struggle for four long minutes to text a nameless number *'landed in Phoenix'*, trying and trying to spell the last word. Fenicks. Feenex. Fenix. There were no notifications on the bar above.

I think he cried. I'd cried that flight too, but I deserved it less.

"Looks like we'll be delayed a while," I said.

He looked at me. "Want to play Uno?"

I let him win, and he smiled. I remember thinking, *'at my funeral tomorrow, this is all I want them to talk about.'*

Biking downhill is my falling action. My throat burns, leftover from the climb, and my hands are frozen on the breaks. I could shatter my neck striking a pothole now. The front wheel would slip out of my control so easily, sending me beneath the tires of the truck that's ignoring the speed limit nearby, my journey over. But it doesn't feel like it matters. I've already won, and I'm rewarded with the downhill.

Main character syndrome. The selfish, desperate desire for your suffering to make sense.

Did I still win, if no one saw? Look at me. Please, please, watch me, I'll do anything. Anything you want. I clutch my pages while they burn, and I beg someone, anyone, to read them.

When I was a child, the school bus ride was never long enough. Maybe if the rocket ship we built in the back yard had worked, and the stars had stretched to lightyears in our burning footprints, I'd finally be ready to disembark when we reached Andromeda.

One day, I'll be like the ones on the screens.





FIREFLIES ON A TIGHTROPE

Zach McLoughlin



JUST RECYCLED

Allison Sobers

Sunday, March 2022

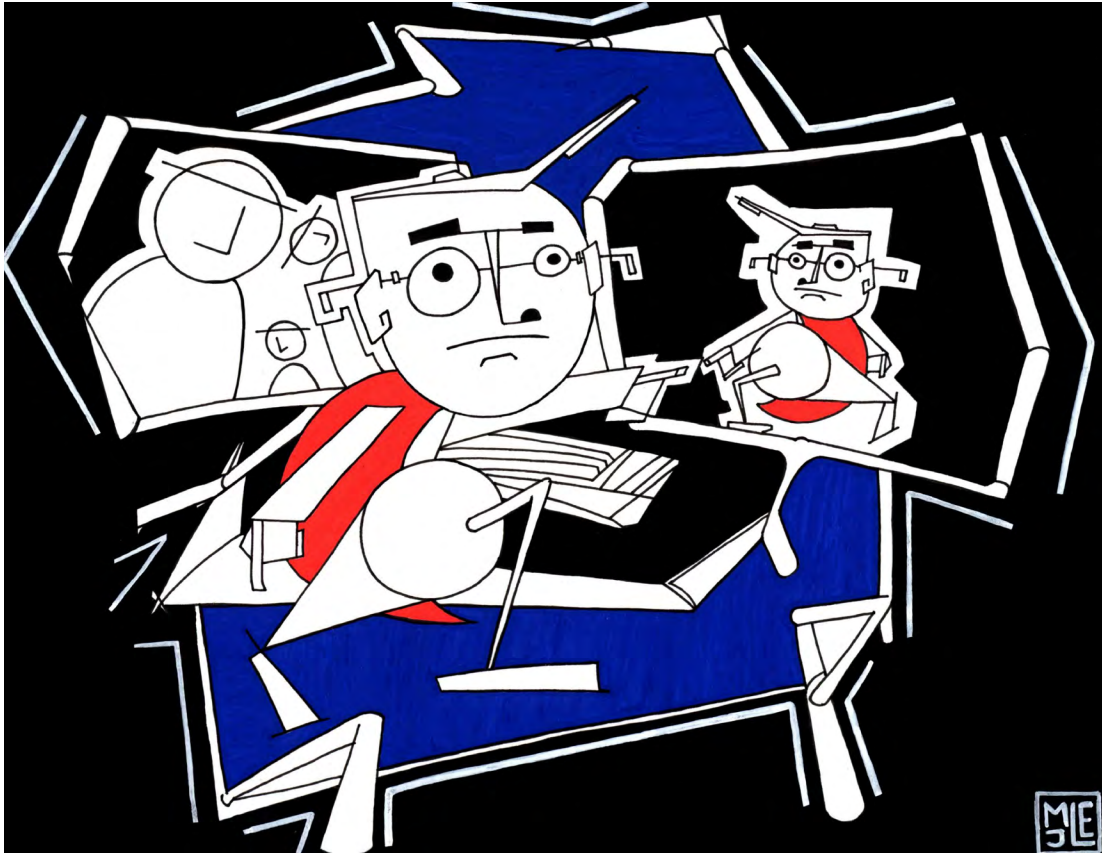
I remember first learning in middle school
That energy is never lost, just recycled
I remember first realizing that my water was transferred into the air when I spoke,
that my very breath was the result of the turning of many cells in my body,
that moving objects gave off energy through imperceptible heat
And I remember when you told me you didn't know what love was
and I noticed the tear on my face and thought, numbly, that it was a stupid waste of
water.
I remember how exhausted I was
after staying up with you late into the night
and how useless it felt to exist those days.
I remember the pain of running into that wall you put up
and rebounding into the other people on my side of that wall
and oh, we must have expended gallons mourning you,
but I remember their tears of laughter long after you had left us
and I remember the grief of letting go, but not as vividly as the bittersweet goodbyes
they gave me when we all parted ways in the end
and I remember
Energy is never lost, just recycled
Love is never lost.

Sunday, October 2023

And I have learned
that even in the face of the Black Hole—
the gravitational pull of that gaping, greedy maw
that steals love from your lungs and whirlpools around you,
drowning out all direction—
Even after, when pouring from an exhausted, now-empty heart,
the laws of physics are bested by those of conservation
for although the void is merciless, an ocean does not mourn:
what is taken from it can only return, one way or another.
It knows, and it waits—sometimes with serene, still waters,
others with storm-riddled agony and icy rage—
yet still it knows what is to be rightfully returned,
what the sky will gladly give back, if it will only wait.
The sea cannot count every drop that leaves it, for its depths are unreachable,
its tears replenished often.
Never wasted, never drained,
Never lost.

WHO ARE YOU, ME?

Michael Le



ASK A FOOLISH QUESTION

Arthur Sacks

art's in the bones, he said
in the lick of the eye, he said
a motion of the blood
dimming, rising
stirring
in seasons
blossoming
with superb attention
to the particulars
of eye and hand,
a tension of moments
strung like lights
on the cable of a bridge
illuminating darkly
waters
in motion always
without sound
always clear, strident,
thin on the ache of muscle
and the snarl
of lip and tooth.

nothing comprehended, he said
without the blood's knowledge,
without the weather of personal history
commingling with the brine of impulse
transformed
chemically, magically
working in frequencies
rolling back to our birth,
the ineffable
acknowledged,
overwhelmingly there
and somehow
beautiful.



THE END

*Stage lights down, house lights up. A watcher
sees the smile of another. Onward, to what
comes next, for all of them.*

CREDITS

Lily Abourezk

Lily is currently an undergraduate student at Mines and has led the Creative Arts Club for 3 years. She is passionate about the value of art within a STEM education, and has pursued this intersection through much of her education. Lily is a senior in the Design Engineering program with a focus in Biomimicry and is planning to pursue a masters in Science Communication. She travels whenever she can and enjoys learning about places around the world, typically through their foods. Beyond that she is an avid home chef, aspiring writer, friend, amateur photographer, lover of miniature things, middle child, and frequent-thrifter.

Connor Allen

Connor Allen is a second year student majoring in Chemistry with a focus in Energy Studies. His wire bonsai trees are works inspired by the idealist notion that nature should be preserved, hence the permanent wire, as well as by the fact that he doesn't know how to take care of actual plants, so he makes replicas that require no maintenance.

Patrick Barringer

Patrick is a (hopefully) graduating master's student; assuming his thesis gets finished. When he's procrastinating working on said thesis he enjoys hiking particularly at dawn or dusk, because A: excellent pictures, and B: no sunscreen required.

Nicholas Beck

Nicholas started as a post-doctoral researcher at Mines last year. He has always had a passion for art of any kind whether it be drawing, painting, music, or photography. As someone who likes to explore the world around him, photography is a particular favorite, as it forces you to look at things with a careful eye and see places you would have otherwise walked by.

Wenli Dickinson

Well, Everything & Nothing Localizes Infinity.

Sebnem Düzgün

Sebnem Düzgün is honored to serve as a professor and associate head of the Mining Engineering Department at the Colorado School of Mines. Additionally, she is an entrepreneur, a musician, and the happy mother of two sons. Discovering patterns and shapes that reflect the dynamic earth and the complex systems created by humans is something she's passionate about. In Germany and Turkey, she exhibited her ceramics and collaborated with renowned artists. Several juried shows in 2023 will include her artwork, and she couldn't be more thrilled about it. Some of these events include the Curtis Center for Art's highly regarded 40th Annual All Colorado Art Show 2023, the Lone Tree Arts Center's much-anticipated Lone Tree Fine Art Expo, and the Life in the West Art Gallery's captivating Lands & Lifestyles: Art of the West Special Event. Her artwork is now on display at Idaho Springs' Majestic Art Gallery. Find more details at <http://www.themajesticgallery.com/sebnem-duzgun.html>. Her sculpture took second place at the Lone Tree Fine Art Expo recently.

Sebnem's artistic endeavors have been a driving factor behind many of the innovations she's made in her professional career.

Ryder Fine

Ryder is at Mines studying Design Engineering. He enjoys being in nature, working on his 3D printer, and playing board games with his friends. If you want to understand what he likes about photography, watch *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (10/10 movie).

Tobin Houchin

1, a swapped feather, lying alone in the gutter of its own making. 3, the crack in the side of a lightbulb—do not touch it, for it lies in wait to bite. 6, the splatter of mud and ice on the underside of their fingernails, tattooed by untied boots. 10, the canyon. 13, the smile on their face when they once again forget that it wasn't a mistake to leave the doors of their mind open to creation.

Michael Le

Michael “Mike” Le is a first year PhD student in Electrical Engineering. Most of his works are inspired by living in a continuous (and integrable) state of minor existential crisis. His piece “I Hate This City” is dedicated to the city of Denver’s robust public transit system.

He attributes his passion for graphic design to his son, Fry. Fry is a dog with a keen eye sense of composition and spatial harmony.

Kayla Long

Kayla is a poet, equestrian, dancer, and kayaker. She appreciates the beauty in the complexity of all facets of life and tries to live everyday.

Kyle Markowski

Requiem for a diptych, a dream of death. Requiem for the ear, fine tooling of flesh: folded off into earth and aether.

Surface tension, need for an edge: fold off.

"...peregrine bones of a prophet." Portal forming five feet off the concrete: window or door? Fold off.

Ceded time, sewn soil. "...pick up every stitch." Portal as posture: patterned movement, exegesis waltz.

Gather fabric—fold it off.

Natalia McEvoy

Natalia is a senior in Chemical Engineering and the McBride honors program. In her free time, she enjoys taking pictures of her travels, reading an obscene amount, theorizing about when Taylor Swift will release Reputation (TV), and knitting sweaters.

Collin Murry

Collin is a second year computer science student. He is intrested in poetry, art, music, and literature—especially the avant garde and post-modern.

Jade Njo

Jade is casually writing this contributor bio in the comfort of the Honors House, in good company speaking about vignettes and *Bird Grade*, while snow falls gently outside. She is happy to be in town visiting from Dallas on a business trip, and is grateful to be included in the *High Grade* community.

Reeve Nyland

Reeve Nyland is a first-year Design Engineering student from Baltimore, Maryland. She enjoys working in all mediums but particularly enjoys graphite and oil painting. She has always been surrounded by art and artists. Through her art, she hopes to showcase all the influence from the artists that shaped her style, form, and skill. She expresses particular gratitude to her dad for staying up late with her as she learned to draw.

Kimberly O'Connor

Kimberly O’Connor is a North Carolina native who lives in Golden. Here at Mines, she teaches NHV; she also teaches for Community College of Denver, Lighthouse Writers Workshop, and Denver Public Library. Kim’s poetry has been published in B O D Y, Copper Nickel, Colorado Review, Harvard Review, Mid-American Review, Slice, storySouth, THRUSH, and elsewhere. Her poetry collection White Lung was a finalist for the 2021 Colorado Book Award.

Seohyun Park

Seohyun Park is a sophomore studying Civil Engineering. She found reservoirs very interesting in her 'Intro to Civil' class. She created an imaginary reservoir piece using her challenging art material, chalk. It's realistically impossible, but she believes it will be possible in the future. The buildings shaped like globes were built one by one in each compartment of the reservoir, creating a thrilling scene about to fall.

Sammy Pool

Sammy is a second year MechE with a passion for art! Her favorite medium is collage, but she also enjoys painting and graphic design. She is honored to have her work in *High Grade* again, and looks forward to making more!

Jesica Schmidt

Jesica is a Junior studying Materials and Metallurgical engineering. Every winter, when the cold, short days are feeling particularly uninviting, she tries to make something colorful. Rather than allow the "gloom and doom" of the season to invade her life, she tries to create moments of joy. For her, there's an art to infusing a bit of light into both her own life and the lives of others.

Ashwini Shrestha

Ashwini Shrestha is a junior studying Civil Engineering with a minor in Public Affairs at Colorado School of Mines. She was born and raised in Longmont, Colorado with her loving parents and a younger brother. While at Mines, she has been in several organizations, such as the Mines Activities Council, Multicultural Engineering Program, Kickstart, McBride, Mines without Borders, and Environmental Scholars Program. She also founded the Nepalese Student Association. Her passions include sustainable infrastructure, community outreach, and DEIA work. In her free time, she enjoys crafting, being active and outdoors, watching movies and TV, board games, trying out new vegan recipes, and hanging out with her friends. This is her first publication within *High Grade*, and she is excited to continue exploring her role within the art world.

Allison Sobers

Allison is a second year Mechanical Engineering student and is thrilled to be a part of the *High Grade* community after admiring the past publications. She is endlessly inspired by the mountains of the two places she calls home, both Golden and Monument, as well as all of God's nature. When not dabbling in poetry, she can be found playing oboe in the Mines orchestra and sketching or reading in what little free time an engineering student can find. She would like to remind readers to cherish the deep, dark paths of life, as these are proof of light to come, and can bear the truest art if one lets them.

Dhruva Sogal

Some weekends Dhruva takes his camera on adventures. Other times he spends all weekend coding. After three years as co editor-in-chief he gives *High Grade* a high grade.

Grace Strongman

Grace's favorite thing is a good laugh. She is honored to serve as the layout and design editor for *High Grade* and thankful for the laughs included along the way.

Spencer Walter

Spencer is a senior studying Chemical Engineering. To take photographs up close he often lays face down in the dirt.

Marin Ward

Marin enjoys wandering through nature and going on hikes through the wilderness. During this time she loves photographing nature and capturing the vibrancy of life.

Vanessa Watson

Vanessa is a freshman interested in experiencing everything. She's tried her hand at mediums from photomanipulation to forging. Helio, her pet gecko, will often sit on her shoulder as she works on her latest project.

Mason Weems

Mason Weems is a first year PhD student in Metallurgical Engineering. He has been running the school's smithy since his undergrad days, and has taught more than 150 students the art. When Mason isn't teaching or swinging the hammer himself, you can find him climbing or skiing. There's even a chance he might be doing his homework, but that's less likely.

Viktorija Wilson

Viktorija Wilson graduated Mines December 2023 and is working as a Software Engineer in Aurora. Much of her writing is inspired by her faith, her life as a student and her Lithuanian heritage.

Adam Zeigler

Adam works in the Mines EHS office and is a graduate student in Environmental Engineering Science. In his photography, he enjoys capturing the silence behind the noise.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The call for submissions is open to the entire Colorado School of Mines community. Only original works are accepted. Submissions are rolling and are considered for acceptance in the Fall semester. All literary submissions must be in a Microsoft Word document. Limit one submission per document. Art submissions should be in .jpg or .png format. Music submissions should be in .mp3 or .wav format. Please submit through our website, highgrade.mines.edu. Limit five submissions per contributor per genre.

High Grade
1704 Illinois St
Colorado School of Mines
Golden, CO 80401
highgrade@mines.edu