

# The Rubicon

Troy University's  
Literary Journal



2017 - 2018

## **The Rubicon**

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**The Rubicon** is published annually by Troy University.

Cover by Ivey Vinson and Alaina Hornberger

Layout design by Alaina Hornberger

ISSN 2159 - 1733 (online)

ISSN 2153 - 6279 (print)

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# Professor's Pick



*I picked "Going Dutch" for several reasons. What impressed me first was the vivid imagery in the opening quatrain, especially the olfactory image of smeared graphite. The second quatrain, like the first, displays real skill in the handling of rhyme and meter; by now the reader feels the sonnet-ness of this sonnet and starts wondering how the complications will develop and find resolution. In the third quatrain we discover why the speaker is speaking: he or she is interested in more than a platonic relationship but is also reluctant to risk losing it: those "Spartan sheets" are intimidating. The old metaphor of love as a kind of game still has life in it when used in new and interesting ways, as is the case in "Going Dutch."*

## Going Dutch

**Madina Seytmuradova**

Perfectly square, crammed, and cushioned,  
With a neat stack of books and a single bed,  
Your room smelled like a left hand brushed  
    Against a page of notes in pencil lead.  
    I see your open laptop glowing green,  
The sound of water rushing from the tap,  
    Two sleek controllers by the TV screen,  
And sweaty hands I've folded on my lap.  
    A perfect division. Almost Dutch.  
    A click of latch bolt sliding in.  
You jump on Spartan sheets I've never touched  
    And grab controller with a grin.  
    Exactly one game we have finished;  
    Another never dared to begin.

## Blink

**Sidney Coker**

At twenty-three you lie awake at night  
    And wonder if someone will ever lie  
On the right side of that now chilly bed.  
    Maybe your soul was made to be alone.  
You blink and suddenly you're seventeen.

Your soulmate is the key to an old car.  
Sometimes you drive circles to get away;  
No one listens quite like that old white Jeep.  
You blink and then you're in the seventh grade.  
Your soulmate is a composition book  
Where all of your secrets mingle in ink,  
Not knowing what new secrets are to come.  
You blink, an infant, on your father's chest.  
Your soulmate is the heart that lies beneath.  
You blink, you're in the water of the womb;  
Your soulmate is the warmth, that tender voice.  
A day will come you've blinked a billion times  
And learned your soul was not, one day, alone.

## Bubbles

Georgia Blanchard

You're sitting next to me  
But I'm too afraid  
To speak my mind  
And burst this bubble  
But bubbles can't last  
And I'm scared we won't either

## Chainsmoker

Katelyn Smith

One for the money,  
Two for the show.  
Three because I'm bored.  
Another because its slow.

One when work is tough,  
Another because it's lit.  
Four to calm my nerves,  
Just one more and I'll quit.

Two so I can breathe,  
Three more because I can't.  
Five while I blow off steam,



And another to end that rant.

Two because it's my break,  
Six because I'm broke.  
Two to wean myself off,  
I swear I don't "chain smoke"

# I Don't Feel Pain

Christopher Anderson

I don't feel pain  
To feel pain is to acknowledge its arrival  
To know its point of inception  
its moment of arousal  
Oh the pleasure of only feeling pain

I don't feel pain  
I am pain  
It flows through my pores  
just as blood through yours  
Peel back my skin and you'll still see black  
black tissue black bone  
black heart stiff as stone  
The metamorphosis is complete  
concrete

The only thing I loved more than you  
were the visits with grief you'd pursue  
when I left  
It pleased my pride  
to see you barely alive  
without me  
But now the fruits of your joy harbor the seeds of my rage  
Anger and fear elevate me like pillars of smoke  
to the ceiling  
void of healing my soul is troubled  
perplexed by this unnatural affection for shame

Don't celebrate me  
you know what I breed  
the extinction of happiness

the onslaught of despair  
I lay my face against the water  
but soon develop gills  
as death cannot consume me  
But I see men as trees  
as columns as giants  
The thief of the night now sleeps with the bride  
of his most toilsome fight  
I am the groom

Man has conquered the sun  
the center of the universe is the moon  
I burn in the rain and hell is cold  
Woe! to the wretched creation which allowed  
iniquity to separate him from his Creator  
If piety devours me  
will it be the vindicator of my salvation  
no  
For who then can diminish my thirst for peace  
apart from pain  
that defines my mental state ...

I heard of a woman who met a man  
at Jacob's well  
born of a virgin is the story she tells  
The labors of transgression cease  
if one bows at his feet  
Alas when I call his name  
the substance of my soul is no longer pain  
Jesus the Christ  
the giver of life

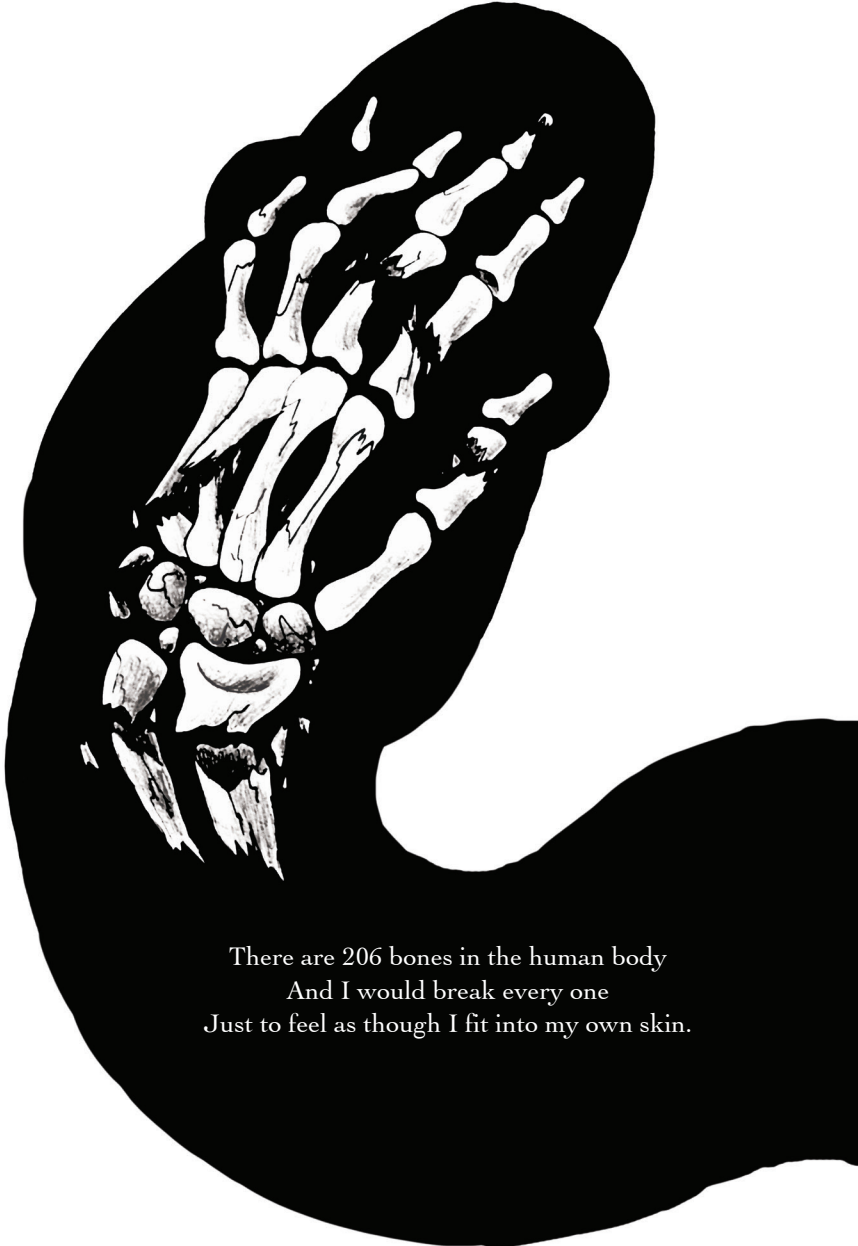
## David

Madina Seytmuradova

A marble statue  
Shivers in a cold museum;  
Gossamer hairs rise.

# *I Would Be a Lovely Snake*

Draven Jackson



There are 206 bones in the human body  
And I would break every one  
Just to feel as though I fit into my own skin.

Illustration by Jamie Lotierzo

# Iceberg

Caroline Hughes

Map my skin with your fingers,  
Navigate your hands through my hair,  
Ride the waves of my tears  
When the vodka hits too hard  
But you won't find more of my iceberg  
Than the tip  
Unless you'd like to freeze to death-  
No one who searches  
Here  
Resurfaces.

# Ketchup

Sidney Coker

My first memory of you is first grade.  
You burst a ketchup packet in my face.  
I got so angry we didn't speak for,  
What was it, maybe seven years or so?  
At fourteen, I thought I was immortal,  
Then you took my hand and we danced all night,  
At least, until nine, when the dance ended.  
I wore your guitar's broken string, until  
I saw that I was -in fact- mortal, when  
You broke my heart for the very first time.  
You were my very first everything.  
She'll wear your ring, but I still dream about that  
Guitar string, those memories, that very first day.  
But really, I've always hated ketchup.

# Microscope

Caroline Hughes

Bite into a peach while wearing lipstick  
And watch the red mix with the yellow juices.  
Pull your hair up  
And noticed how your earrings flash under fluorescents.  
Wear a shirt that shows off your lacy bra  
And follow their eyes as they trace the lines across your chest.

View your life  
Through a microscope  
And watch how the sun burns a hole.

## *My Heart*

**April Rusk**

Easily hurt but  
I try not to harm  
My heart is worn somewhere  
Upon my arm  
Maybe in hand  
Probably on sleeve  
And I fall as hard  
As the dead autumn leaves

## *One of the Guys*

**Caroline Hughes**

“You’re one of the guys”  
You say as if I should be pleased.  
Do you honestly believe  
That because I go with the flow  
I’m one of the “bros”?

It’s as if you expected  
A bitch because I wear a dress  
But I’m a woman of finesse.  
I cry, I smile, I scowl  
When I feel like it.

I will not hide behind  
Tightly wound grins  
And pretend I like you  
When I don’t.

Don’t confuse my strength  
With masculinity.  
I’m different from “my kind”  
Because I haven’t let  
“One of the guys”  
Break my “fragile” bones.

# Orpheus

Madina Seytmuradova

Treating lovers like material for the next book.  
Art as a cure for the Absurd.  
And so Euridice had to die  
For Orpheus to sing of love and life.

# Scruff

Rachel Ward

I love the scruff on your cheeks  
And the way it scratches mine  
Some nights, I imagine it's scratches in  
Secret places, like Indian burns

This love is my lips  
Molded by your sweet words  
Like gentle fingers  
Pressing them like Playdoh  
Left out and neglected for too long  
Crusted over and greying

Your love is the music  
You play  
On my body  
With your fingers.  
My flesh sings of  
Goosebumps and moans

I feel your love  
Become my love  
For myself  
As I buy new shorts.  
I've always hated  
My legs  
But your hands have turned  
My scars into strokes of  
Paint.

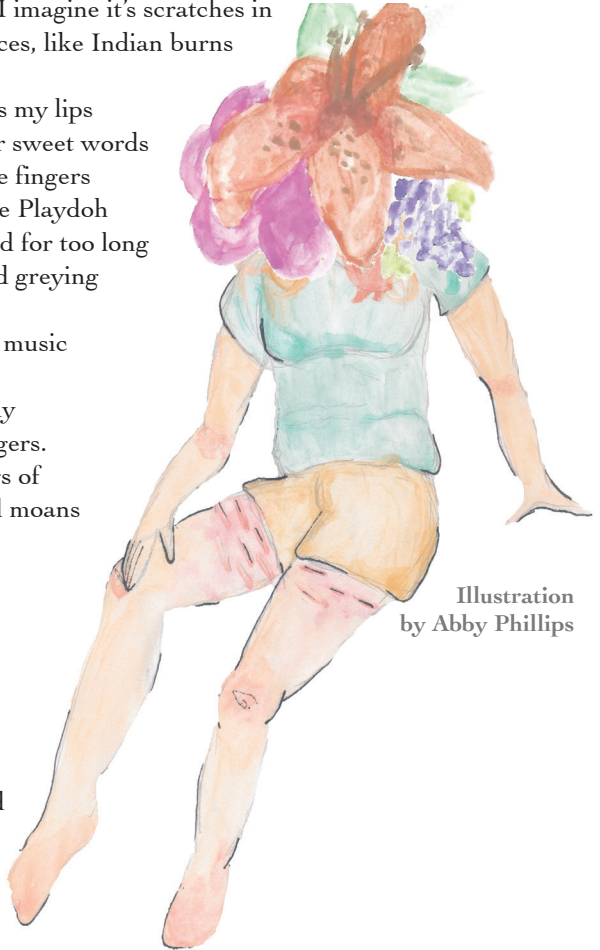


Illustration  
by Abby Phillips

# Secret Wars

April Rusk

I boxed up your clothes you'd given me and left them where you work  
But secretly I kept one; that Secret Wars shirt  
On nights when I'm in this bad place I wear it to sleep  
Even though it's, well, you're not mine to keep  
I wear it because it feels like your arms are wrapped around me  
Pulling me close, comforting the heart that you broke so easily  
I drank the first time in my life for fun, a week before we broke up  
I got drunk for the second time because I was so fed up  
I got drunk the third time because I had given up  
I really don't drink anymore, though  
I love you and you like her  
It's making me suffer  
I just want all the drama and the hurt to be over  
But it puts my mind in a place in which I can't hover  
It's a bad place, actually, it's the one I was talking about earlier  
Throwback to eighth grade when my mind and my hair were both curlier  
I was in that bad place  
I tried to run away  
My parents thought I was in that bad place for attention  
But they didn't feel what I felt and never wanted to mention  
That I was going crazy with hurt over this and over that  
Over my mom being gay and moving schools and feeling fat  
But now it feels worse  
It feels like a curse  
But my prince charming isn't going to wake me out of this one  
I've kissed so many lips since yours last June, hun  
Be those lips ones of bottles or boys  
It doesn't matter they were all just toys  
Have you seen the way my brother plays his Xbox games?  
He'll build a Minecraft mansion just to TNT it to flames  
Just to clarify, our eleven months was the mansion  
And I was the TNT explosion  
I loved you then and I love you still  
But it's not your shirt anymore  
These secret wars in my head need to be over  
Because I lose every battle I fight  
Even in that bad place, when I swing with all my might

# Sleeping Alone

Melanie McGilberry

A deep breath  
A dark room  
Reaching out  
Only to find  
Nothing

# Stray

Katelyn Smith

A single mother on the street  
No food, no shoes for children's feet.  
She drops the two off in my yard,  
For single mothers, life is hard.

The green-eyed girl, she is so sweet,  
I give her food that she may eat.  
Her brother on the other hand  
Watches- cautious of my plan.

His eyes so sizzling they could scorch,  
His sister sleeps upon the porch.  
I almost miss her sleeping there,  
Her brother runs back down the stairs.

Mother comes at the end of day,  
Her children to now take away.  
I ask if they might go inside,  
They take the food and don't reply.

I fear for them, they are so young,  
Life is short on the lowest rung.  
At night beneath my silky sheet,  
I hear them fighting in the street.

I want to give them more than food,  
A life of kindness, a better mood.  
Yet all I do is fill my cart,  
Cat food is, at least, a start.



# The Boxes of femininity

Draven Jackson

I am the saint:  
I am prayers over coffee cakes  
Innocent naivete  
Misunderstood interactions  
Kittens sleeping  
Tears for Dove commercials  
Sweet romances of words  
Long walks on foamy beaches  
Jellyfish gazing  
Wishing on stars  
Hours spent gift searching  
Books from my childhood  
Naming toys like friends

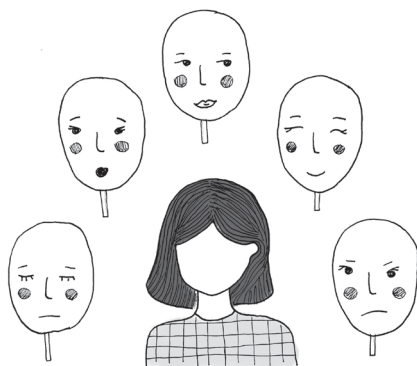


Illustration by Carolina Hechart

I am the whore:  
I am open legs  
Loud cursing  
Drinking on Tuesday  
Understood interactions  
Vulgar jokes  
Secret purchases  
Hateful words  
Impure thoughts  
Passing joints  
Shared showers  
Crowded beds

Short skirts and bare legs

I am an internal dichotomy  
An unapologetic complication  
To a two-part society

## The Boy Who Couldn't Handle No

Caroline Grace Hughes

You used to storm out  
of the room when they made rape jokes.  
You said that they weren't funny  
and you would "never" do that to somebody.

I started to believe less  
the words from your lips when  
Those same lips sealed mine shut at a party  
even after I begged "Enough."

To you, I was the dust cleaner  
You wiped your piano off with  
as your stubby fingers  
felt along my pants loop.

Three times you asked if I was sure.  
Three times I traced the words "yes"  
Because I didn't have the courage for a "No."  
Unlike my mouth, my eyes didn't lie  
Yet when your brown ones stared into mine,  
you didn't see the "Please don't do it"  
All you saw was the "Do it."

You said your love was the blood stain  
on my parent's ratty brown towel  
But all I could feel is the red that drip, drip, dripped  
and the ache between my legs.

It took two years later for me to admit  
that my virginity was a gift  
I wasn't ready to give  
and you took it.

# There's a Section of My Brain Devoted to You

**Draven Jackson**

I want to memorize  
The lines in your hands.  
Trace the crinkles  
In the corner of your eyes.  
Map the hills and valleys  
Of your chest.  
Bury my body  
In the thickets of your hair.  
Inhale the sound of your voice  
Until it fills my lungs  
And travels downwards  
To sit comfortably at the bottom  
Of my stomach.

I want to see the way the sun  
Shines through your curls  
While your eyelashes dance waltzes  
Over your restless, closed lids.

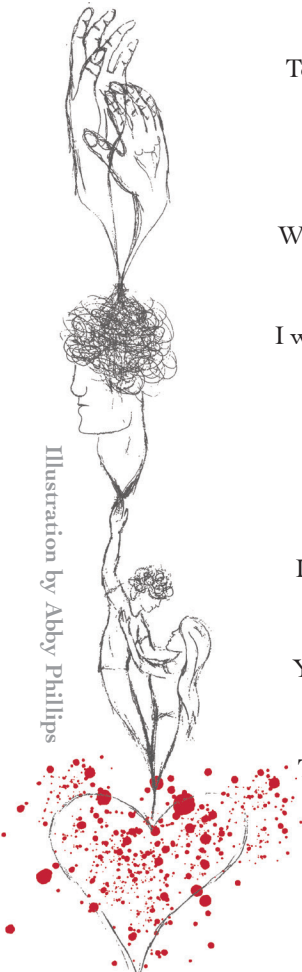
I want to know the curves and points  
Of your back.

I want to curl myself  
Into the cavities of your abdomen  
Until I can hear your heartbeat  
Even in my dreams.

I want to hold the parts of you  
That you can't reach  
And learn the secrets  
You've long since hidden away

I want my body  
To be so much a part of your body  
at we can no longer notice  
The difference.

Illustration by Abby Phillips



# Valentine's Day

Georgia Blanchard

Why celebrate a special day  
If it doesn't matter the rest of the year?  
You have a beautiful heart  
In February and July;  
No amount of appreciation will change that.  
I love you today  
And three months ago when you had the flu  
And last night when we stayed up until sunrise.  
Valentine's Day is so limiting  
For a love that lasts every day of the year.

# You'll Understand

Austin MacCraw

In Pre-K, I never understood  
Why everyone made such a big deal about cooties  
Why some kids made fun of me for watching "baby shows"  
Why we had a naptime every day  
Even though I never fell asleep  
"You'll understand" I thought  
"When you're older"  
In elementary school, I never understood  
Why pink and purple was for girls  
Why it wasn't "cool" for a boy to like *High School Musical*  
Why the divider between the sink and the urinal  
Was always missing at school  
Why TV show science fairs  
Always had baking soda volcanoes  
When they don't follow the scientific method  
"You'll understand" I figured  
"When you're older"  
In high school, I never understood  
Why she kissed me on the cheek  
Before running into her house  
Or why I didn't think anything of it  
Why I felt so lost and lonely

Even though nothing was wrong  
I never understood  
Why everyone was dating already  
And why I wasn't interested  
"You'll understand" I hoped  
"When you're older"  
Now, I'm in college  
The future has become the present  
Every question I answer creates more questions  
I understand things I never thought I'd know  
And some things I never knew existed  
Sometimes I find answers after days or months of searching  
Sometimes I find them on accident  
And sometimes I have to make my own  
Still, there's so much more to figure out  
So many questions waiting to be answered  
Someday, I'll understand  
When I'm older

10041

### **Madina Seytmuradova**

Were this a tree, it would have to be a pine –  
Everlasting, ethereal, sublime,  
Forever reaching the teal-blue sky, the kind  
Of tree that you can marvel at when looking  
From below, a strong and silent scribe.

And if it wasn't a tree but was a song,  
I have no doubt it would be a slender flute,  
A lovely melody of Irish highlands  
Where never-aging children run like the wind.

No. This is not a song or a fucking tree.  
Because you can't fall for a tree like I  
Have fallen for you. Cannot obsess over trees  
Like I've obsessed over you, and you...

The least you could do is leave my head alone,  
If in my heart you roots have grown  
And sing a lovely Irish song.

# Untitled

Austin McCraw

Scissors through paper  
Glass tickles my palm  
A Pollock where I stand  
My hand a Picasso  
There's calm with each plunk



Illustration by Hunter Irby

# Prose









# Professor's Pick



*“Sleeping God” is a good story. The author employs those elements of fiction that are so easy for me to talk about in a writing workshop, but are hard to create in prose. The most basic writing advice is “write about what you know.” “Sleeping God” is about a child’s relationship with her parents—it doesn’t get more fundamental or universal than that. Further, the writer uses scenes—at least four or five, and those scenes are mixtures of exposition and dialogue. The writer shows. We humans like to watch other humans . . . and dogs, and the moon, but we like to come to our own conclusions about what we observe. One of the hardest things for a young writer to master is developing the confidence to write a scene and allowing the reader to “get” or “not get” what seems to be going on. Another aspect of the story that I like is the use of dialogue. Dialogue shows personality. Although there are not many lines of dialogue here, the words of the characters tell the readers something about their personalities: the mother is harried but caring, the father wishes he could be in another place, the younger sister is a nudnik to her older sib. Maybe what I like best about the story is the imagery: it is fresh and approachable—when her father’s eyes are closed the narrator wonders what strange worlds he sees. Rex the family dog goes “borf-borf” in the night. When the narrator tries to get the inebriated father to come inside out of the cold and the dark, he sighs, “like a man on the last day of vacation.” “Sleeping God” is a story about a young woman’s love for her father who is mostly a mystery to her, but as compelling a mystery as the moon arching across the sky in all loveliness and distance.*

## Sleeping God

Madina Seytmuradova

*If you’re male and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or is never at home, what do you believe about God?*

*- Fight Club, Chuck Palahniuk*

The day I was born, my mother stole away from the ward and carried me to a mosque two streets down where mullah whispered “Name” into my ear 30 times. And so I was baptized.

Every morning we had a ritual. While my elder sister was still rolling in bed, I emerged from the bathroom and followed the smell of the frying oil to the kitchen. My mother looked down at me with pleasure then scrunched up her eyebrows and said: “Go put on your socks; floor’s cold.”

I took a lap around the living room and came back, still barefoot, and filled the kettle with water for tea, anticipating the special mission from mom: to wake up dad.

Even though I was my mother’s favorite, it was my father’s affection I longed

for. The clearest image I have of him from those days is that of his freckled back and big white arms, warm from sleep and hugging the pillow under him as he slept on his belly. I'd kneel by the bed and hug his back and call him.

He never responded on the first try.

When I was in primary school, my father was already in his 40's, a stocky man of a Hephaestian stature: about five feet and a half with broad shoulders and knobby fingers. I marveled at how adroit they could be with soldering iron as he hunched over a microcircuit, which looked like a layout of a tiny emerald city. When he looked up from it, you could see his olive-green eyes, regarding you over his spectacles.

From the kitchen, I saw him tussle-haired shuffle to the bathroom in his track pants.

"Dad's up."

Mom was at the door, holding commerce with a village woman, but she stopped to look back at me and held out a small twig full of grapes with a question in her almond eyes. I tried it and nodded solemnly. She began haggling in the native.

Since dad was awake, it was my cue to start his coffee, so it would be just right when he came out. Then, I went to the bedroom and had plush bears thrown at me for droning "Sis, get u-up...get u-up...Olya, get u-u-up..." as it was the only way to get my perfect sister out of her bed.

Finally, everyone congregated around the table. In silence, we poured tea and buttered toasts or helped ourselves to mom's savory vegetable omelets. There was no need for words in that hour before dawn before Olya and I would have to draw up our stockings and pull down our dresses to brave the frosty streets on the way to school.

"Madina, where are your socks? Go put them on. Quickly, quickly!"

And just like that the moment was ruined. The day had begun. The phone rang and it was, of course, for my mother, who began interrogating a crazy momma about the color of her child's poop. My sister started flipping through radio stations. Dad pulled out his phone and started reading something on it as he was accustomed to do.

In those days, he was always working from home on one project or another. But even though he was everpresent, his attention was hard to earn. I was jealous of his friends because on rare occasions when they came over his eyes lit up and stayed on them and he didn't even look like my father. But in the mornings, he was warm and real and there. And when his eyes were closed, I wondered what strange worlds they landed on.

Years later, I realized that my father was a man first. When my mother was on a night shift, he often went out drinking with friends and wasn't back before his absence made my sister cry. One of those nights, after she finally fell asleep on the couch, I covered her with a blanket and heard his heavy footfalls on the stairs.

I found my father sitting on the porch. It was a chilly night, and the full moon couldn't pull his grey figure into its light. I heard our dog Rex go borf-borf in the front yard, as if he was ready to join the man for a walk on the moon, so I decided to get dad inside before he got the idea.

Persuading a drunk person is like persuading a child: you have to entice them without showing you care. So I chatted with him for a minute and then said I was cold and would he maybe like to have some tea with me.

"Tea?" he exclaimed. "To hell with tea! E-e-eh! Don't you see what a night it is! What a moon!"

“It is beautiful, isn’t it... but I have school tomorrow, dad.”

He sighed an especially long sigh, like a man on the last day of a vacation. It was time to step into the dad shoes again. Reluctantly, he gave in.

Maybe Palahniuk was right when he said a father is our model for God. He is the first all-powerful, wrathful, benevolent, loving line of defense we get. But what if God does not want to be our protector? What if he was a man first? A man, for whom being our father is a cop-out that he settled for, a desk job, a failing marriage?

My father was a man first before he became my father. Men and women make mistakes. I was one. My father didn’t want a second child, but my mother had a happy “accident”. She says that when she woke up on that Saturday, she knew it was the day. She made herself some tea and eggs, gathered some clothes, and walked over to the clinic where I was born one hour later at 8 a.m. on the chilly morning of September the 30th of 1995.

My father was not there when I entered this world. He was asleep.

I still don’t know him, and I think I never will. He doesn’t like small talk, but he is there at the table for it, present physically while his restless mind is among the distant stars. But just knowing that he exists somewhere in this world when I haven’t seen him for years, perhaps sipping tea and reading with a book on one leg thrown over the other, — has become one of the most comforting things I have ever known.

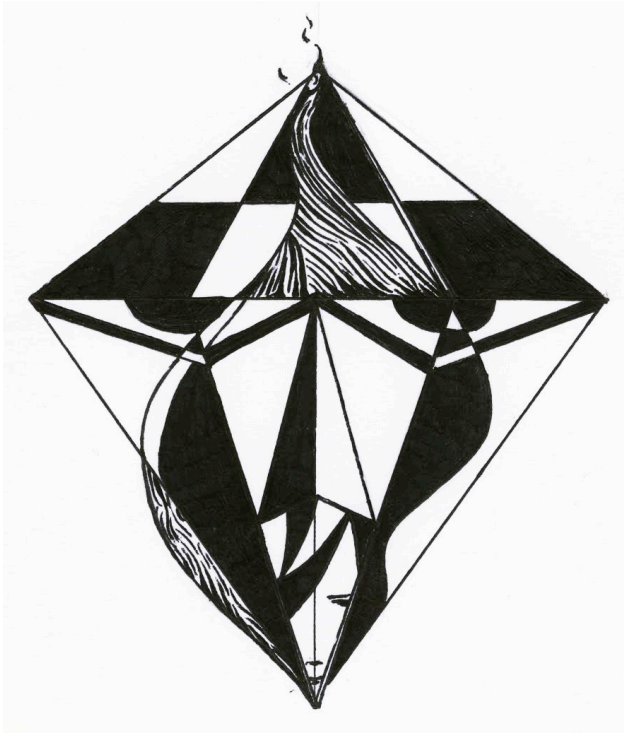


Illustration by Madina Seytmuradova

# A Place to Hide

Alaina Hornberger

Princes can be such creeps! They're so full of themselves and think princesses should just fall at their feet and worship them. Well I'm not going to. I refuse. I'm a strong, intelligent individual, and I will not accept some stupid prince who is full of nothing but hot air as my life partner.

Unfortunately they can usually back up their boasting with a physical show of strength. Like this freak who is currently chasing me. Okay, so maybe I shouldn't have called him an imbecile and told him his dragon hunting stories were physically impossible in front of the entire court, but I mean, he was asking for it. Everyone in my court knew he was a blustering idiot. But apparently his envoy didn't like me pointing out how stupid he is and decided to chase me down and gut me.

I've never been a particularly athletic person either, and have never really had a desire for a fast, strong horse. A beautiful, good hearted one was good enough for me. But my poor girl isn't built for hard chases, and I think she's almost to the end of her ability. That's very bad for me because I know that stupid prince and his retinue are close behind me. My best bet is probably to find somewhere to hide out for the night and hope they don't notice me. Like that will work. The biggest problem right now is that there is no sign of life, and I don't think I have the skills to survive a night alone in the woods, especially with an angry prince after me.

I am just beginning to panic for both myself and my poor horse when I come across a tower. I pull up abruptly and crane my neck to look at it. It's built very strangely. The bottom is the size of an ordinary tower, but at the top it expands into a large disk shape. The stones are also weird. This tower was probably made with magic and not by normal means.

I'm just about to continue on my way and hope I find somewhere else when I hear the sound of hooves flying in my direction. No time!

I run towards the tower and look for the door. It isn't on this side, of course, so I start going around to the other side. A sudden downdraft of hot, sulfuric air and a loud snuffling sound make me freeze in my tracks. I look up.

And I find myself staring into an enormous, green, reptilian eye. A long, lithe dragon with thick red scales and eyes bigger than I am tall stares down at me, only a few feet up.

"You won't be able to get in that way," it said and flapped two large wings. "I don't really have any use for doors. Are you here to visit me? I hope so, I haven't had visitors in such a long time." It grimaced. "I don't really know what I could serve a human though..."

"Y-You're a dragon!" I manage.

"Why yes, last I checked anyway. If I had to guess I would say you are a princess?" It eyes me again. "A princess in great distress?"

"That's me," I say, nodding my head.

"Is a witch after you? Or perhaps an evil sorcerer?"

"Worse; a prince."

"Ah yes. I've had my fair share of trouble from those. But their weapons do work well as toothpicks."

"Um..." I decide to gamble a little. What have I got to lose anyway? "Would you mind letting me inside? My horse can't keep going, and the last thing I need is for him to catch me."

"Why of course!" It smiles (admittedly a terrifying sight), and lowers its... paw? Do dragons have paws? Or hands? Whatever it is. "Just step on here and I'll carry you up. You can stay with me until the morning and I'll take you home if you wish, or you can stay until you think it's safe."

"Um, thank you," I manage, tenderly stepping onto its offered appendage. The ride up is slightly terrifying but the dragon is gentle, and I reach the top safely. When I get inside I look around and am surprised by what I see.

Suspended from the ceiling is a chandelier that cast flickering light across something I never expected to see in a dragon's lair: books. Lots and lots of books, from all over the world. And unless it was on the binding of a book or on a candlestick or chandelier I didn't see any gold. In fact, aside from the gigantic, neatly kept library there didn't seem to be anything but a giant bed made of animal hides and fabric.

"Where's your treasure?" I ask before I can stop myself.

"Right here," my host says calmly, carefully removing a book from one of the shelves with two claws. It looks absurdly tiny, but when it hands it to me the book is actually fairly large. "Dragons are portrayed much more blood thirsty than most of us actually are. We all have our own treasures. Mine is books. A friend of mine likes green rocks and another likes shoes. Some of us like princesses and princes of course, but that's hardly normal."

"I apologize for making assumptions. As a princess I should know better than anyone not to do so."

"Oh? Do you have a fairy Godmother? Many princesses do in the books."

I wrinkle my nose. "Heavens no. My parents did everything they could to protect me from that. Fairy Godmothers aren't all they are made out to be."

"No?"

"No! Most of them actually curse you as well as bless you just so they can marry you to whatever guy they want! You know Briar Rose, aka Sleeping Beauty? Well I got the chance to meet Bee before she died and she told me what really happened. The 8th fairy wasn't invited to her birth because she had told Bee's parents years before that she would be their first daughter's Fairy Godmother. They didn't tell her about their daughter, hoping she would forget but she didn't of course. So she cursed Briar Rose and in the end got her way and Bee married her nephew. It's so annoying!"

"That does sound annoying." There is a loud noise outside and the dragon peeks out through the giant door down at the prince and his men, yelling up at us angrily. "Perhaps he will go away soon. What did you do to make him so angry?"

"Well," I shuffle from foot to foot, my face turning red. "I may have said that he couldn't match the intelligence of a crow, much less a whole pie full of them. And also that... he should go live in a tree with shoemaker dwarves so that if they run out of hammers they can use his head..."

To my surprise the dragon throws back its head and makes an awful noise. I

nearly have a heart attack before I recognize that it is laughing.

“I like you little princess. If you ever need to hide from an unruly prince again, feel free to come to me. I may be a bookworm at heart, but if there is a fight I can hold my own so you needn’t worry about that. Oh, I suppose I should introduce myself.” It bows its head down so that its nose is close to me. “My name is Penelope, the Great Reader of the Northern Kingdoms, and all the world. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Penelope,” I curtsy and introduce myself, smoothly covering up my surprise at her being a female. “Thank you very much for your generous hospitality.”

“Don’t mention it dear,” she smiles. “Feel free to make yourself at home. I don’t have any human furniture, but for now my bed is plenty big enough to share. You may also read any book you wish as long as you are here. I have quite an excellent and varied collection.”

“I don’t doubt that,” I say, looking around at her books once more. This is much better than any regular old dragon treasure made of gold. I look at the book in my hands that I had been given earlier and smile.

We settle into Penelope’s oversized dragon bed together, and I read aloud to her, both of us commenting on content and writing style occasionally. Penelope is an avid reader and takes a great interest in literary forms while I prefer focusing on the content and build of the story. We read together late into the night, the disgruntled prince eventually giving up on me and ceasing his screeching. As my eyes grow heavy and sleep overtakes me, I can’t help but smile to myself. This day may just be the start of a lifelong friendship.

Illustration by Ivey Vinson



# (In)Effective

Austin MacCraw

Jimmy's Ice Cream Parlor, known as The Parlor by locals, was the place to be on a Friday night. Ever since Resolution 7 passed last summer, the rundown parlor found itself in a fortunate position. In favor of the resolution passing, the York City Council ran a Think of the Children campaign through the spring in order to boost public support.

"Save the children of tomorrow from the sins of today!"

"A Christian community for Christian values!"

"One Lite can have Heavy consequences!"

The original goal was to prevent alcohol sales within 500 feet of schools and churches but was increased to 1000 feet at the urging of District 1 Councilwoman KaytlynAnne Forrest who, with calculations written on a whiteboard she brought from home, argued that 500 feet was too little as it was only a two-minute walking distance and "even the drunkest of drunks can walk for two minutes." The 1000 foot ordinance passed 4-0 with District 5 Councilman George Jackson abstaining, claiming the resolution was "a waste of time" and distracted from "the issue of a pool table in Robert E. Lee High School" which was "going to lead good, unsuspecting kids to gambling."

With the effort to pass the legislation in full swing, nobody remembered to check on what the effects of the extended distance would be. Turns out there are 69 churches and seven schools in York, and when District 4 Councilwoman CaitlinGrace Anderson took a compass to a map of the city, the circles arranged themselves with perfect overlap, leaving just two buildings downtown unscathed, Bones and Ash's Funeral Home and Jimmy's Ice Cream Parlor. Jimmy's was the only of the two to have a liquor license due to its annual Super Bowl Scoops event, and the 1960s soda-shop-style counter soon doubled as a bar.

While The Parlor was well known, the employees were not since they never seemed to stay for more than a month. All employees were part-time, and everyone knew it was to circumvent providing health insurance and paid vacation time, but that still didn't explain the revolving door of 20-somethings taking orders. The owner – nobody could seem to remember his name, but it wasn't Jimmy – never seemed to be around, but that didn't stop him from constantly handing out pink slips.

One such employee, sensing such a firing creeping up on him, decided to mess with the card reader so it would beep a specific tone for each of the numbered buttons, causing each customer to create a four-note song when entering their pin. Nobody knew how to fix the card reader, and nobody knew who did it either. The elderly Gloria Tubbs found the situation quite wonderful, however, stating that it was "a nice way to help us poor blind folks out," and that she'd bring up the idea of having it installed citywide at the next open forum.

On the wall behind the counter was a large menu board. The left side was ice cream flavors and the right side was the different liquors. In the middle were the boozed floats. Those were for the parents who didn't want their kid to know they were drinking, though most of the kids figured it out anyways. In the bottom left corner was a QR code with the question "What ice cream flavors should we add?" The code

usually worked correctly, but once in a while, it would send people to a Brazilian conspiracy theorist website which had a logo of the Christ the Redeemer statue riding a camel getting beamed up by a UFO.

On a chalkboard beneath the menu was “the ice cream of the day,” which was 25% off. There were twenty-eight flavors included in the main rotation, always in the same order, and the remaining days of that month were filled with seasonal ones. Superman ice cream was always on the twelfth, which went unnoticed until last August when the colors somehow managed to run together into a deformed rainbow. That led to the York University LGBT+ group meeting there the month after, and in backlash to that, a Facebook page was made to make the twelfth an unofficial “Straight Night” where nobody would buy the 25% off Superman ice cream in defiance and solidarity.

Not wanting to walk back on their campaign but realizing they needed to fix the situation, the York City Council planned to meet on January 3rd after Christmas Break (not Winter Break) to decrease the distance to the originally planned 500 feet. However, on the third, Councilwoman Forrest was in the hospital due to her dairy allergy. “Eggnog has milk in it?” District 2 Councilman David Stuart was stuck in a cabin in Montana after a snowstorm hit on New Year’s Eve. District 3 Councilman Nathan Pickett was arrested in the Wind Creek Casino after using Chuck E. Cheese coins on the slots. Councilwoman Anderson’s cow was giving birth so she was unable to come. And last was Councilman Jackson who made it to the building but couldn’t get in since Councilwoman Anderson had the keys. So, plans to improve the legislation have been pushed to the next meeting on January 8th.

## Like Father Like Son

Katelyn Smith

Eugene was soft like a pastel Easter egg; an egg whose dye had soaked through its pretty shell and stained the soft, white flesh below. His hair was never out of place and his dark eyes were a bit too big for his face. They were innocent eyes, melting and puddlely. My father never accepted the fact that he was my fiance, and he only walked me down the aisle after I told him that mom would not survive if I eloped — the shock would kill her.

Eugene didn’t want to make trouble. He loved me with all of his heart, but he shriveled like a week-old lily when he asked my father for my hand. I loved him because he was safe, he was grounded, and he was affectionate. He woke me up every morning with a kiss and held me close to his smooth chest every night.

We had been married for two months when my mother first asked about grandchildren. I was surprised she had waited that long. I laughed and told her Eugene and I did not want to have kids so soon, if at all. Mother did not talk to me for three days. Yet, Eugene was good to me. He kissed me on the top of my hair and told me that we would have a child whenever I wanted — or whenever nature decided. I kissed him and told him I loved him. And he said the same.

However, it was easier said than done to get Eugene to the bedroom. He was shy: so shy that on our wedding night he insisted that I keep my nightgown on and that the lights be turned off. We had made love spontaneously only once — all other



times he had to be coaxed into it.

I thought with his job he would be more interested in me sexually. It seemed to me that after a day of divorce counseling, all he would want to do would be come home to his loving wife. Our marriage was light, new, easy, and filled with happiness. Why wouldn't he want to take part in a right he had earned once he had said "I do"? I didn't really mind, but sooner than I thought, I was ready for a baby. Eugene was a hard worker. He spent long nights at the office and I grew lonely. "When nature decides" he had told me. So, I waited.

It was not something I worried about until he began taking calls at home. It was something plenty of counselors did, but not any divorce counselors I knew. He would often get a call, step out onto the porch, and then return a few minutes later, kissing me on the cheek and telling me he would be back in an hour. I immediately thought that he was seeing a woman: some busty, recently divorced blonde who would lust after his straight-laced demeanor and his young tight butt. He had always told me that should I have a problem, I should tell him immediately. I brought up my concern, but he wrapped me in a hug, kissed me passionately, and told me that I was the only woman he would ever love.

We made love that night, and I missed my next period. All my doubts were whisked away as I saw the joy in his eyes when I showed him the pregnancy test. And yet, as our child grew inside of me, so did Eugene's time away from home. He was changing, and it frightened me. He lusted after me, grew irritable, and even dominating in his behavior. I never knew this side of him, even though we had dated for three years. At this point, I knew he was having an affair. He would return home in different clothes, always having an excuse like he spilled his coffee, he had to change a tire and got streaks on his sweater vest, and the like. I understood I had to say something, but I did not know what to say. I did not have the heart to tell my father; he would never let me forget that he was right. My mother was too preoccupied by the idea of her first grandchild that she never wanted to talk about Eugene.

One night, Eugene removed his shirt and I saw scratches down his back. He asked why I was crying, and I told him it was my hormones. Pregnancy does strange things to a woman. He laughed and touched my stomach, smiling at the bump that made itself more evident every day. I had made up my mind that night as Eugene held me close to him, breathing slowly in my ear. I would confront him the next day. I would tell him everything that I thought was happening and patiently wait for his answer. If he was sleeping around, I would know, and we could work through it. If not, I would hear a very good explanation for the scratches and sudden jump in libido.

Yet, he did not come home that next night. He had never left me alone at night before, and I began to think a killer waited behind every closet door and a burglar was at every window. We were in a good neighborhood, but anything could happen. I tossed and turned, unable to sleep even after a text that said, "Sorry darling—there has been a terrible wreck on Saint Henry. I am stuck in traffic, so it will be a few hours before they can clear everything up. I love you. Tell Junior I said hello." I looked up the traffic report and he was correct. An oil tanker had tipped over, spilling oil on the road that caught on fire almost immediately. I tried to call him, but his phone had died. Or he had turned it off. Whoever she was must have begged him to stay longer. I cried more than I ever had before that night. The pregnancy had limited my sleeping positions to on my side where our son would not sit so heavily on my lungs or bladder.

Around four he arrived, his sweater vest discarded (probably on the floor of some floozy's bedroom) and his collar crooked. He smiled as I approached him, but his eyebrows drew into a look of concern when I straightened his collar, eyeing the reddish-brown streak that decorated the blue paisley pattern. I waited for him to say something, but he didn't.

"I love you. I think we should go to bed now"

I was too tired to fight tonight. He nodded at my suggestion and followed me to the bedroom.

I had decided once again how I would tell him I knew about his affair. Yet, this time, I would have proof. Anger had built and bubbled in my chest until it consumed me. I would follow him to work. I would see the woman. I would follow them to her apartment, his office, her car — wherever they did their dirty deeds, and I would catch them in the act. I would not scream or try to make a scene... I would just stand there, pretending to be in shock, grab my pregnant belly, and leave. His stuff would be on the porch when he got home — if he came home.

So, I followed him. Right after work, he quickly pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed a number. I watched him from the car as he laughed, nodded, and then put the phone back in his pocket. Five minutes passed before a bright red car pulled up and he got into the passenger seat. It was not hard to follow them, because he never took his eyes off of the driver's face: a tanned woman with shiny brown hair and red fingernails. They stopped at a park and he followed her to a bench near the lake. I could see them clearly from the parking lot; they were not far now. He put his arm around her and I watched her tilt her head into the crook of his neck. They looked like any normal couple and if it had not been my husband with her, I would have thought they looked so perfect. She looked up at him, and gently waited for a kiss. Now was the time. I opened the door, pulled myself out of the car, and began to walk towards them. Suddenly, he fished for something out of his jacket pocket. My stomach burned.

Something sparkled in the sunlight. Her mouth stretched wide in surprise.

I grabbed my stomach and took a step back. He was on top of her now, slamming the metal object into her abdomen over and over. Scarlet droplets splattered his innocent face. The woman didn't have time to scream before he drew the knife across her tan neck.

Something twisted in my own abdomen. I clenched my teeth and waddled back to the car. Water poured out on my shoe, and I hurriedly pushed the keys into ignition. A contraction racked my body and I cried out in pain. I saw him look up as I shoved the gearshift into reverse and peeled out of the parking lot.

The hospital was crowded, but they brought me right in. My body was freezing, but my legs burned with heat. I began to grow weak.

"She's in shock."

"Get the blanket."

The nurses scrambled around, and the bright lights seemed to dim at a quickening pace. I couldn't see, but I could hear. It didn't take long for the baby to be born. I heard his strangled cry; the gurgling noise was the same as the woman from the park. There were tears in my eyes, but they weren't from the pain. They asked if I wanted to hold him, but I could not lift my arms.

Fading. I was fading. All I could think about in the end were pastel Easter eggs and how sons were so much like their fathers.

# The Breakthrough

Steven Fann

“Why don’t we start from the beginning?”

“As I’ve already told you doctor,” the words could barely escape her clenched teeth, “the beginning is not the reason I’m here.”

Doctor Silas had seen these patients hundreds of times before, so he knew how futile the effort to fight her wishes would be. “I see ma’am, please forgive me. Feel free to start wherever you wish.”

“Wow, you’re making ME decide? Some kind of doctor you are.”

One would be surprised at just how much patience is drilled into students obtaining a psychiatric degree. Silas knew that different patients reacted to stress in different ways, but he also knew that sometimes one just happened to pull a bad apple.

“All right then Miss Stroud, would you like to discuss the incident?”

“What good will that do? I didn’t even see it! All I had to deal with was the... mess”

“I know Miss Stroud, I know. However, seeing such images can have a profound impact on mental health, especially with things so close to home. Why don’t you tell me how you felt when you made the discovery?”

“Really? How did I feel? How do you think I felt? I was sick to my stomach; I was horrified!”

Yes, that seemed to confirm the doctor’s suspicions: Leslie had the acting skills of an off-Broadway ensemble member.

“I see, I see. Did he seem off-kilter in any in the days leading up to the event? Anything to hint that something might be wrong?”

“He was no worse than normal. Then again, that isn’t saying much.”

“What do you mean by his normal, Miss Stroud?”

“My father was a very... dramatic man. Everything that happened to him was somehow the end of the world. So naturally one could see how it began to be challenging to take him seriously, what with all of the belly-aching and moaning about every tiny thing.”

“Did this behavior ever get on your nerves?”

“Did it get on my nerves? He was insufferable! I honestly don’t think he ever said a single positive thing about my life, never congratulated me on any of my innumerable accomplishments. No, everything had to always be about himself. But do you think he ever stopped to ask himself how he thought that might make ME feel? Why wasn’t I ever in his thoughts? I should be the most important thing in his world!”

“Tell me Leslie: do you think that the two of you were very similar?”

“Are you kidding? Of course not! Just look at all that I have done for the community! I served at soup kitchens! I put up houses for the homeless! I helped run that canned food drive! I’ve helped out so many people, and no one ever talks about it!”

“What were they talking about instead?”

“It was always ‘Oh, how is your father?’ or ‘Hey, is your dad okay?’ People never see me and it drives me crazy. And now he’s gone to ensure that it stays that way.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“C’mon doctor, you’re not stupid. Just look at the situation. There are SO MANY ways to off yourself, ways a real depressed person would. He could have slit his wrists in the bathtub. He could have hung himself in the closet. He could’ve gassed himself in the car. But did he choose any of those? Of course not! No, he picked the most self-centered way in the world, and that’s why I had to come home to brains splattered all over our doorway. He wanted to make sure that everyone saw, that everyone knew what happened. That way he could be remembered, he could always be talked about. For the rest of my life it’s going to be ‘I’m so sorry about your dad’ and ‘Oh, she’s the girl...’ and I’ll never, ever be able to escape his shadow. I just feel... trapped.”

“You must know that you don’t have to feel that way, Miss Stroud. We can always outrun our demons, sometimes it just takes a little extra work. If you will allow me to ask, did your father ever abuse you?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. I mean, unless you count emotional abuse.”

“And just what do you categorize as emotional abuse?”

“Oh, that’s an easy one. My father was so incredibly dramatic that it made me want to kill myself.”



Illustration by Aysiah Stroud-Lucy



## Austin MacCraw

I stood to the right of the backdoor entrance, leaning against the wall and watching the cars carousel for an empty space. I held a lit cigarette in my right hand between my thumb and index finger, enjoying the cool fall breeze. Connor, one of my coworkers, stood to my left, taking a drag. He was a few years younger than myself, but we got along well, especially cause of these breaks. Unlike most of the new hires, he wasn't a complete idiot.

"You're awful quiet today," I said.

I wasn't looking for a conversation. In fact, the silence suited me fine. It was just very unlike him to stay quiet for this long.

"Yeah, well, something's been on my mind I guess."

"You always got something on your mind. Don't usually stay so quiet though."

He shrugged and took a drag. Whatever he was thinking, I could tell that he wanted to talk about it. He always made this face where his eyebrows would scrunch up whenever he was deciding whether to keep quiet or not. He seemed to have a lot of pent-up anxiety about sounding dumb, which I assume is what led to his smoking in the first place. A stress reliever of sorts.

"It's nothing," he said, letting out a puff of smoke. The statement was directed at me, but I suspected he was talking more to himself. "It wouldn't be fair to annoy you with my personal business anyways."

Now I was intrigued. Connor never talked about his home life, other than he had enough of one to not be able to go out drinking after work. I knew he had a wife, I knew he'd been married for only a few years, and I knew that he had a baby boy who was born a few months ago. I'd never seen them though.

"Hey man, if something's going on, you can talk about it. No use twiddling your thumbs over there doing nothing."

He looked at me kind of funny, and maybe it was because I wouldn't normally say something like that. Whatever the case, it broke past what was holding him up from talking.

"All right," he said in an "if you insist" kind of way. "So, you know I got red hair, right?"

"Uh, yeah. I've noticed." As if anyone could avoid noticing the orange mop on his head.

"And so does Jen."

I paused after that, mostly because I had to remember that Jen was his wife's name, but also because I saw where he was going with this. "What, and the kid don't?"

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"Nope, Jake's is dark brown," he said, taking another drag. "I mean, maybe it's some weird genetic thing; I don't know. All I know is that red's recessive, so red and red are always supposed to make red."

"And what, you're worried that the kid might not be yours then?"

"Well, no. I mean, he looks just like me. Well, he looks like my brother did in his baby photos, but I look like my uncle who was dead way before I was born, so

that's not concerning."

"So, no chance that..." I stopped, not wanting to say what I was thinking out loud.

"No, they wouldn't have," he said in a not-so-convincing way. "Anyways, my brother's got hair just like mine, so that wouldn't solve the problem."

"Huh." I took a drag, thinking it over. It was certainly interesting, and I'd never come across a situation like his before, but it didn't take long to realize something Connor might have overlooked. I asked him one more question, and after some mental calculation on his part, he let out a sort of chuckle.

"Of course! I can't believe I didn't think of that," he said, back to his more cheerful self. "I'll ask her tonight, but I'm betting your right. God, I'm an idiot."

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The next day was Saturday, so I didn't expect to hear back from Connor until after the weekend was over, but by some coincidence, I ran into him grocery shopping with his wife and kid. He introduced me to his wife and told her that I was the one responsible for her secret being discovered.

"It's all very embarrassing," Jen said, shaking her head. "I didn't think it would matter much when we first met, and after knowing him for a while, it never felt like the right time to tell him."

"At least you don't have to sneak out to the stylists' every month to get the roots touched up now," Connor quipped.

"Oh hush," she said, obviously embarrassed.

Before parting ways, I gave the baby, who was lying in a detachable car seat in the shopping cart, a good look-over. He stared up at the three of us, though I think he was mostly looking at me, trying to figure out with his baby brain if he knew me or not.

"He's got beautiful brown eyes," I said, smiling at the baby. There was an odd silence that followed.

"What?" Connor said, both he and his wife looking at each other with bright blue eyes.



Illustration by Lydia Welch

# A Megitsune's Wish

Alaina Hornberger

Blood bloomed across his chest and he stared at me, mouth agape. He gurgled and more blood dripped from his lips down the front of his Yukata – which was partially undone – before the life drained from his eyes, and he was left staring in disbelief for eternity. I pulled my wakizashi out of his chest, which resulted in an outpouring of blood that I ignored. I returned it to its sheath after slinging the excess blood off of it then turned my attention to the young girl squished onto the lounging couch next to him.

She stared up at me with wide terrified eyes. I knew I should kill her, but I didn't want to and it wasn't really necessary. She would have no desire to remember this night and could get no advantage from telling the world she was here. Besides, my clothes concealed most of my features, gender aside.

"I'm going to let you live for now, but if you speak to anyone about this night that will change." I picked up the scroll with the records of her family's debt to the now dead man and tossed it towards her. Her hands were shaking so bad she could barely catch it. "I suggest you leave. It would be bad for an unmarried girl to be caught in the room of a murdered Daimyo."

Without a word she squeezed herself out from between the dead man's body and the edge of the couch, quickly fixed her clothes, then ran from the room, gripping the scroll like a lifeline and tripping once before she disappeared. I picked up a piece of flint and walked to the rack of scrolls. No doubt records of all the people who owed him. How many innocent young girls had he blackmailed I wondered? Not that I really cared. I don't have the time or energy to care about every injustice in the world. I just do my job and live another day. With a quick strike of the flint the scrolls went up in flames, and I quietly left the room, shutting the screens behind me. I had only a short while to perform the second half of my job before the palace was up and running around because of the fire. Chaos was good for escaping, thievery, and sabotage, but not so much for killing an important target. They tend to be the best protected during events like that.

I walked out onto the porch, carefully sliding the door shut behind me. Men like that man deserve to die. I'll kill my target no matter whether they're good or evil, but I generally prefer killing the evil ones. I'll do any task that the Mother assigns me, and it isn't always assassination. Actually often times local farmers hire some of us to help with the harvest; a simple, low paying, but fairly pleasant job. The most amusing task I've ever received was when the son of a Daimyo inquired to the Mother for a female companion to a dinner party. His only requirement was for her to be pretty, and for some reason I was assigned. The job paid well and the man was nice enough, though he did try to go farther than allowed. I quickly informed him that if he wished to go that far with me there were fees to be paid, and as I was no prostitute those fees would be far higher than he is accustomed to. When he tried to continue on anyway saying he'd simply take what he wanted, I stopped him gently by throwing him in the river. He complained to the Mother about my behavior but she praised me. It is against our rules to give more than is paid for, and we always demand payment in advance.

I banished these thoughts from my mind and crept through the shadowed



porch, counting the doors and the steps so that I wouldn't run into any guards. When I got to the 16th door I paused for four seconds then jumped onto the rail and lifted myself to the next floor up. Right on schedule I saw the guard turn the corner. I continued ascending the building in this way until I reached the floor below my target floor. If the client did as he promised, there would be no guards on the next floor, but I never count on that. If I always believed my client would do as promised, I would have died a long time ago. I waited, crouched on the rail, and counted to 116 before leaping and pulling myself onto the highest floor. Two guards disappeared around the corner. That is why I always do more research than is necessary, and act in extreme caution. They weren't supposed to be here. I could have killed them easily enough, but that is very messy and the Mother would be unhappy with my results. I'm far too high a rank to be anything but clean in my mission executions. And if I couldn't kill them or they managed to alert the rest of the palace, I would be furious to have wasted a month of my short life posing as a servant girl, making plans and gathering information just to be caught and killed because some idiotic client didn't do his part.

I was also thankful this was a summer palace and the nation was at peace. Even with 20 extra guards patrolling the floor, it's much easier to infiltrate a palace with an open exterior than one that is closed in. I could go up the outside either way, but it was easier this way.

Had he done what he claimed he would I could have simply walked to my destination, silently slipped into the room and killed the sleeping target. But that was impossible, so I went to my first backup plan. Thankful once more for my (socially inappropriate) fitted black clothing, I jumped into the air and grabbed onto the beam. I lifted my legs and easily slid myself onto the top in less than half a second. As romanticized as assassinations may be, they're actually very simple and fast and much more boring than people make them out to be. They're almost entirely research and planning after all. As guards passed under me I silently leapt from beam to beam, keeping an eye on the doors. I wouldn't be able to go through any of them, but there was a screen window above one I could use to get inside. When I reached that door I cut a thin slit in the screen and slid through it, leaving it looking almost exactly as it had before.

I continued making my way down this inside hallway the same way I had on the outside porch: jumping from beam to beam until I reached what I knew was the prince's chambers. Inside my target would be sleeping peacefully. All I had to do was sneak past a few sets of guards and kill him, then run away. These doors had no windows above them though and guards in front of them, so I had to silently open them and slide through at just the right moment. It was nearly one in the morning, and I knew one of the guards on the other side of the door would be asleep at his post and the other would be diligently looking around. Every 10 seconds he would change the direction he was looking. I had to time my run through the door to his head motions. Simple enough.

I almost never use my shadow powers since they're very weak, especially compared to the others at the shrine who are full blooded ninja, but using them in conjunction with my skills makes certain things much easier. They make sneaking around inches behind guards possible and hiding from an active guard's swinging gaze easier.

Dropping to the ground without a sound, I slid the door open just a crack. The guard's eyes had just moved to one side of the room. I slid it open wide enough for me to squeeze through and did so, blending with the shadows as much as I could and

standing very still. His eyes didn't linger on me, and thanks to the relative darkness both in the outside and middle chambers, he didn't notice the door was cracked open either. After that it was simple enough to repeat my motions from the first room and then I was in my target's bedroom.

I stood silently in front of the door for a few moments. I wasn't sure why, but there was an uncomfortable tightness forming in my chest. I brushed it off, pulling one of my kunai and walking to his bedside. I had intended to immediately plunge the knife into his chest and flee but I found myself hesitating, watching him sleep. This prince looked calm and peaceful, framed in the gentle moonlight from the one round window high above his bed. He didn't realize his death stood next to him, seconds away.

But that tight feeling grew worse. I remembered all the times I watched him during my research. I remembered watching him walking down the side of a river and stopping his friends from teasing and hurting an innocent young woman. I thought of the time I saw him rescue a kitten from his dog, and that kitten now slept peacefully in the corner of the room. I remembered a time when he sat at his father's, the emperor's, side, and took all his insults and jeers without a word or the slightest trace of pain on his face. He controlled himself perfectly, though I heard him quietly crying over it when he thought no one would hear him in his inner chamber (and ordinary humans wouldn't). And yet I had seen him easily defeat many samurai, knocking down some of the finest of his father's men and still treating them with dignity and respect. And I suddenly realized that in my month of silent observation I had grown a respect for this man. I didn't want to kill him. But I lifted my kunai anyway, and plunged it into his heart.

Or I was going to, but for some reason I stopped right before it made contact with his skin. Try as I might, I just couldn't shove it in. What was wrong with me? I had killed many people I wanted to spare before and had barely given them a second thought when the deed was done. My existence was purely one of following orders. I didn't make judgement calls on other people or hope for the best in life for them. I couldn't spare a target any more than I could choose who my target was to be. And yet it seemed I physically could not kill this man. Somewhere underneath my hardened life of stoicism my heart was crying out. I hissed quietly, fighting my internal battle with all my might. Sure, he was kind and strong and handsome and unusual, but I had killed many men very similar to him. Why was it different with this man? Why was it so difficult to end his life?

Then the worst possible thing happened: his eyes opened. As he focused on me his expression was confused, then terrified, and then he settled somewhere between the two. We just stared at each other for a minute, me shocked that I hadn't managed to kill him before he woke up and him shocked at the sight of an assassin who held a kunai to his chest.

"You're a ninja," he finally breathed, his eyes wide. Then he looked down a little and his face seemed to grow slightly pink in the cool moonlight. "Or, um, a kunoichi. A female ninja."

My mouth twitched. After such a complete failure in my mission coupled with my impure heritage, I felt I no longer deserved to be called that. "No. I'm more of a... Megitsune."

"A vixen?" he sat up, gently pushing my blade aside, shocking me once more with the realization I couldn't even bring myself to stop him from doing that. And

worse than that, he realized it. Within seconds he'd recognized that I wasn't a threat. "You claim to be a vixen?"

I couldn't help but smile slightly myself. I liked that he now would know me by a name that distinguished me from me from other female ninja. Now I was no longer just a kunoichi, a woman of shadow. I was a vixen. I'd always wanted that, and now I had it. I was special, I was different.

I was weak.

Too weak to kill my target.

When I didn't answer him, he stared at me for a while longer. "Why didn't you kill me? That's why you're here, right?"

I decided to answer honestly. At this point I had nothing to lose and no reason not to tell him.

"I couldn't bring myself to kill you. I'm supposed to but I can't."

"Why not?"

I stare into his black eyes and don't answer. I can't. I don't know why.

But a sudden understanding comes into his eyes and he leans back on his pillows a bit. "I recognize you now. You're that servant girl, the one that only showed up last month. I've seen you often but I never would have guessed..."

Bad. Bad, bad, bad. Very bad. He could recognize my face, even despite the mask that covered the lower half of it. I absolutely had to kill him. But I still couldn't.

To my astonishment he smiled as realization came over his face. "I saw you watching me sometimes, but I thought it was just because of my status. All that time I was your target? I never would have thought you were anything but one of our many servants. You're very clever, and very good at infiltration."

At this point I wanted to slap my hand over his mouth but I restrained myself. Maybe I could use the panic to kill him. I tried to stab him again. It still didn't work. "Thank you I suppose," I sighed.

"This is exciting. I've never met a ninja before, and you being a kunoichi makes it even better. Oh, I mean, Megitsune." He smiled at me, eyes squinting, head tilted slightly, and it seemed so genuine. I'd seen him give this exact smile countless times over the past month, and I had come to believe that his heart really was in it. I noticed he'd given that smile to everyone except the people he should; he'd given it to servants, to random peasants on the road, to the families of Daimyo's with less than stellar relationships to the emperor, all sorts of strange people. He had never once given it to his father, his allies, his friends, none of them. And now he was giving it to me, an assassin hired to kill him. It made me want to run away, so I hated him for his stupid smile.

"I've met princes before," I said dumbly, not dropping my kunai or giving up on killing him yet. "I've killed some too."

"Have you? Are you going to kill me?" His face was deadly serious now.

"I'm supposed to, but I haven't decided yet," I answered honestly. Truthfully I didn't know if I even could but he didn't need to know that.

"I was always told that ninja don't have the ability to make decisions about things like that."

"That's true," I murmured.

"No, I don't think it is. Truthfully, this is the first time I've met a ninja of any sort so I am no expert but you are clearly the one making a decision here." He lifted his arms in a show of helplessness. "I am unarmed and stand no chance of stopping you. You're the one who is hesitating to kill me. You clearly can think and feel for yourself."

"That isn't true. I always follow orders perfectly."

"But you haven't killed me yet? Perhaps something about me has inspired you to become your own person then?" His eyes sparkled with humor before his smile dropped away. "Truthfully, if you wish to kill me I do not mind. In the end I doubt that it would truly bother anyone if you did."

"You want to die?" That was new. I had killed all kinds of targets up to that point; fat, thin, poor, rich, intelligent, foolish, kind or cruel, I'd killed them all. But I'd never killed someone who wished to die.

He hesitated in his answer and looked down at his bedsheets. "I... do not think it would be the worst thing to happen to me."

I stared at him long and hard. "I have made up my mind."

He looked up quickly, surprised.

"I'm not going to kill you." I should have killed him, but I already knew a perfect excuse for the Mother. The only real problem was how much I'd spoken to him, but I was willing to risk it. I wanted him to live even if he didn't want to himself, and I didn't think I could kill him anyway.

"An assassin who won't kill her target?" He seemed to have expected this meeting to end in death after all, no matter how calm or comfortable he had acted. "Maybe ninja can be people too, underneath it all." His eyes were playful, but there was a definite spark of genuine interest in them.

"Don't count on that."

He smiled despite my denial.

"Fire!" The voice was muffled but it shattered the peace of the moment. "Fire! There's a fire!" I could hear servants stirring and filling the halls, their bare feet pounding noisily on the wooden floor as they rushed to fight the fire.

I cursed under my breath. I'd stayed too long. I started to withdraw from the bed, preparing to make my escape.

"Oji-sama! My prince!" One of the guards called through the door. "Are you safe?"

"Wait," the prince cried in a whisper, grabbing my wrist and startling me into dropping my kunai. I easily twisted my wrist out of his grasp and jumped onto his bed instead of retreating to the wall as I'd originally planned. There was no more time. In less than three seconds I threw another kunai with a wire attached to it at the ceiling, where it embedded itself, and climbed up the wire. In another second I pulled the kunai and the wire up with me.

Pausing, I gave one last glance down into the prince's room. He was staring up at me, his face almost glowing in the pale moonlight, his dark eyes connected with mine. I noticed he had picked up the kunai I dropped and was holding it in much the same way the girl from earlier had held her scroll.

"Megitsune," he said quietly. I shouldn't have been able to hear it but I had

trained my ears well.

“Goodbye Tsuki-Oji.” Moon Prince. I thought the title suited him well. I turned from the window and began to make my escape, a simple task due to the confusion of the fire.

As I ran through the countryside I thought about the prince. It would be easy enough to excuse myself for letting him live. The client had promised he would take care of the guards on the prince’s floor in exchange for a lower rate. He had paid the lower rate but hadn’t come through on his part of the deal. Doing only half the job would be seen as fair trade in the Mother’s eyes.

I was more worried about the prince, and worried about my reaction to him. I had chosen to leave him alive and not as part of a business deal. As much as the thought frightened me. Maybe the prince had been right. Maybe something about him had sparked a change in me.

Maybe, despite being a ninja, I really was a person just like he was. I stopped and looked back at the palace, glowing with moonlight and dying flame. I wanted to see him again. Not as a ninja or kunoichi, not even as Megitsune. I wanted to see him as me. As the girl who didn’t really belong with either the ninja she lived with or the kitsune she was descended from.

I wanted to see him as Saiyuri.

I turned back to the woods and continued on my way. Wishes like that were dangerous for me, but I couldn’t bear to discard it. Instead I buried it deep inside my heart hoping that one day, maybe, just maybe, it would come true.

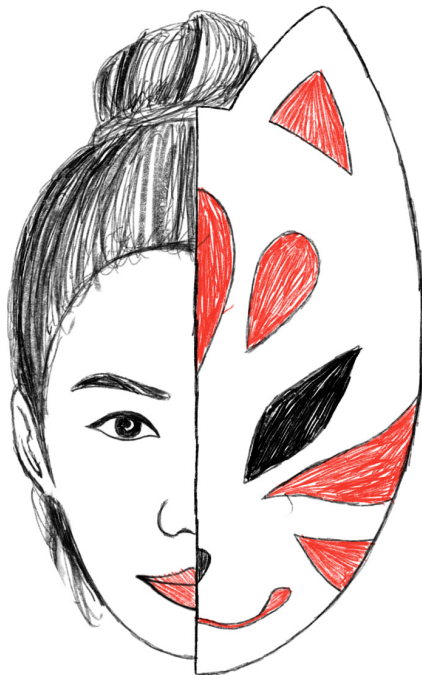


Illustration by Alaina Hornberger

# The Plague

Sidney Coker

The plague came like the sudden summer heat, but instead of hopscotch squares on scorching pavements, there was crayon graffiti on the walls of every elementary school. It was the children who had taken up and begun to mindlessly scrawl on their notebooks and every surface they could reach. The first several seasons that it happened, the janitors and parents alike scrambled to scrub the images the children ground into walls, floors, or anything with a surface that would allow the waxy pigment to take up residence. However, when the adults attempted to clear away the drawings, the children broke from their trance and began to throw vicious tantrums and injure themselves and others.

These tantrums would last for days, the children seemingly tireless in their rioting until they were allowed to resume their art. Attempts to bar the children from resisting the clean-up efforts included containing the children in locked classrooms and behind playground fences, all to no avail. Further attempts to subdue them took a more drastic turn, with tranquilizers and anesthetics, going so far as to put the particularly fervid children into medically induced comas. That was when the first deaths started.

Perfectly healthy groups of people began to die, all adults who had attempted to obstruct the compulsive coloring. The dead were examined thoroughly, but no evidence was found as to why they died. No autopsy could determine why their hearts simply stopped. Doctors, parents, schoolteachers, all dead. The survivors were those who let the children carry on. After so many years of incomprehensible death, it became apparent that permitting the children's coloring staved off the effects of the plague. When the attempts to stop the children ceased, so did the deaths.

The plague would end as suddenly as it began. Crayons would fall to the floor in a cacophony, and children would be pulled from their trances as if nothing happened. The children never acknowledged or explained their manic drawing, and after the deaths caused by interference, no one wanted to press them for information. The adults simply began to clean the world again. If only they knew why the children were drawing their own demise.

ooo

Sophia was among the first children in her town who aged out of the trance of the plague. The year she turned thirteen was the first plague that she could remember seeing through conscious eyes. One morning she awoke to her kid sister drawing on their bedroom wall. At first she was confused, but when she saw that Amelia was drawing a bloody self-portrait she started to scream. Her mother appeared in the doorway, and when she saw that her elder daughter was alert, she motioned for her to come downstairs. Sophia sat crying at the dinner table as her mother told her about the plague, how for six years Sophia herself had slipped into a trance and drew macabre renderings of her own death, along with every other child in the world.

"You were six and Amelia was three," Emily said as she slid the mug across the table.

Sophia looked between the steaming black liquid and her mother's face. She sniffled and lifted the warm mug to her lips, took a sip, then grimaced at the acrid

taste. "What happened? What started it?"

"No one is quite sure," her mother replied. "There's not much known, the studies on the children have come up lacking, and anyone who participated in stopping them died."

"Is that what..." Sophia couldn't finish her sentence. It was too awful, it couldn't be.

Emily was quiet for a moment, trying to will away the tears that had begun to shine in her eyes. "He was angry and confused, and he just wanted you to stop. He couldn't bear to see those pictures... After a week he threw away all of the crayons in the house, anything you could write or draw with."

"But it didn't work?" Sophia whispers.

"When you started screaming he tried to restrain you himself. He held you until you knocked yourself unconscious, then slept with his arms around you. The next morning he was dead and you were drawing with a pen you found in his front pocket."

Tears streamed down both women's faces; they couldn't bring their gazes to meet. After a solid moment of silence, Sophia lifted the mug to her lips again, took a long drink, and shuddered.

Emily snorted, then cleared her throat. "You don't have to keep drinking it, sweetheart. It's not wise to start without milk or sugar."

Sophia sat up straight, then reached for the creamer and sugar shaker. She poured both into her mug until it was a soft brown, then tried another sip. "Oh, that's good," she mused.

Twenty years later, Sophia stood at the kitchen window and watched her sons playing in the yard. The adults were anticipating the plague which, due to the now familiar signs, was expected to start in the coming days. Sophia and her husband had bought fresh crayons nearly a year ago, when they were on clearance following that year's plague. Now the crayons were out of storage.

Jeffrey, her oldest, was quickly approaching fourteen. This year could be his last plague — or perhaps the next, but she could always hope. Over time it became apparent that the plague afflicted boys over girls, the affects discontinuing at thirteen or fourteen, usually the former for girls and the latter for boys. Sophia could only hope for the plague to become more and more predictable with time for the sake of her younger child. She shifted her gaze to the mug she had been drying for several moments, and she remembered that first cup of coffee.

In a three drawer file cabinet in the attic, Sophia kept all of the pictures her children had ever drawn for her and her husband Alex. The top drawer was Jeffrey's and labeled as such, the middle was Justin's, and the bottom —the fullest by far— was unmarked. It was the only of the three drawers that was locked, hiding away the creations brought on by the plague. To her husband's knowledge it was only opened once a year, to file away the paper drawings and photographs of the wall drawings. Sophia obsessively stored, dated, and preserved these creations, insistent that she nor Alex would meet the end her father had met when she was so young.

Sophia didn't want Alex to know how often she stole away to the attic to study the drawings or how she wished she could remember her own. She had begun to preserve Amelia's the first year she was not affected by the plague. Against her mother's warnings she spent hours trying to make sense of the drawings. It was a morbid curiosity that she never lost, conducting her own sociological experiments on her sister

and her children. For years she had looked upon the drawings with a kind of fondness.

She found herself studying the drawings early the next morning, before her sons would need to wake for school. Her fingers trembled as she thumbed through last year's works and drowned in anticipation. She listened intently to her house as she put away the drawings and locked the drawer, then she climbed down the ladder and walked towards the kitchen to start her boys' breakfast.

When she rounded the corner down the hallway she was only slightly surprised to see Justin sitting in the floor, drawing on the cream colored wall. The surprise came when Jeffrey walked out of his bedroom and saw what Justin was doing.

"Stop it! Justin, what are you doing?" He yanked at the arms of the entranced child.

Sophia's first instinct made her forcibly grab Jeffrey. "Calm down, you can't stop him."

Jeffrey turned his head to look at his mother as he tried to fight his way out of her grasp. "Mom, what is he doing, why don't you stop him?"

"Because if we stop him we will die," she insisted. She was thankful she was strong enough to subdue him.

"But he's— Mom look what he's doing."

"You can't stop him."

"But why?"

Sophia kept her arms locked around her son. "If you promise you won't touch him, I'll let you go. I can explain if you just calm down."

Jeffrey stilled after a moment of consideration. He turned and looked at his mother, face set. "Everything?"

"Everything I can," she said.

"Okay," he whispered.

When she was sure he wouldn't try to touch Justin, Sophia let Jeffrey go and led him to the kitchen. He sat at the table and watched as she took the carafe and two mugs from the counter then sat across from him. She poured the steaming coffee into both and nudged one across the table to him. Jeffrey looked skeptically into the mug, took a tentative sip, and then made a face.

"Try it with milk and sugar, sweetheart."

## *The Monsters in the Woods*

**Alaina Hornberger**

Mother says that there are monsters in the woods. She said they take various forms; some fly, some walk normally like we do, and some walk on two legs.

"Two legs? That's impossible!" I was far more interested in mother's lesson at the time than any of my siblings, who instead preferred to pounce on her beautiful red tail. Her ears twitched in annoyance but her voice remained gentle.

"It isn't I assure you. The two legged humans are far more dangerous than many of the other monsters that roam the forest. When you are old enough to venture outside on your own you must quickly flee if you ever see one."



“But why are they so dangerous?”

“They kill us because we eat their prey and they like our coats.”

I looked at my own dark brown coat and then at my mother’s rusty red one. “I don’t think they’d want mine.”

She laughed and nuzzled me. “Not yet, but one day they will. Remember what I said. Monsters are dangerous. If you see any type of monster, two legged or not, you must run away. Don’t let your curiosity get the better of you. It may cost you your life one day.”

I remembered what she said and yet still I find myself standing here, weeks later, watching a two legged monster and making no attempt to leave. My coat still has some brown in it but it is much more red than it used to be, and I can venture around outside the den on my own now. But even though I am older, smarter, and more capable, I still find myself unable to resist my curiosity.

I follow the human, hiding behind trees and bushes. I believe it’s a young female, and she doesn’t seem to be doing anything monstrous at all. She’s just walking back and forth, swinging a stick around and making all sorts of chattering noises at nothing. Mother said humans are dangerous but she seems harmless to me. Still I remain cautious.

Her eyes sweep over where I am crouched and she freezes, focusing on me. I’m pinned to the spot, unable to make a move. Maybe if I stay extremely still she will think she was just seeing things and leave me alone. Or that was the thought anyway. Unfortunately she takes one tentative step towards me.

“Hello there,” she speaks to me, her voice soft and gentle. “You don’t have to be afraid.”

I can’t understand her, but I feel like she’s greeting me based on her body language. I crouch back, flattening my ears, my muscles tensed and ready to take off. I know I should really just go ahead and run and hope that I escape, but she really doesn’t seem dangerous. I want to know why mother said they’re so bad when this one doesn’t seem threatening at all.

She reaches out towards me and I back away instinctively, but my nose twitches in an attempt to understand this creature better through her scent. Her smell is unlike anything I’ve sniffed before, and she doesn’t seem to have fur but an oddly shaped multi-colored skin that is even brighter than my own newly grown coat. I wonder if this is an indication that she’s so powerful she doesn’t even need to camouflage herself. If she does that skin would certainly make it difficult.

Suddenly I hear a crack and skitter back a few steps. Another human enters my vision. This one is considerably larger and more threatening and has skin that blends into the environment well. The young female moves away from me and towards him as I stare. This one is far more terrifying both in size and body language, and I wonder if maybe this human really is a monster. He points a long black stick at me. I know I should run but I’m curious. Is this one dangerous? Is this one of the monsters my mother warned me about? If it is I definitely should run, but how am I supposed to know unless he does something clearly dangerous?

“Daddy no!” the young female yells and shoves his arms just before a horrifyingly loud noise erupts from the stick. The bark of the tree beside me cracks and breaks with a terrifying force and I flee, my heart beating so fast it feels as if my chest will break. I stop running after I’m nearly back to my den and sit to think over what just happened. One of those humans was dangerous, just as my mother had described,

but the other one seems to have saved my life. They were both humans, a creature my mother calls a monster, and yet one of them had been just the opposite.

The next day I venture back to the area I saw the humans and sure enough, there she is again. She sees me creep out of the bushes and smiles. "You came back!"

I stare at her, standing very still, my muscles taut and ready to spring into action as soon as necessary. There is something white, square, and flat held in her hands and she seems to be eating it. The smell drifts on the gentle breeze and I sniff the air eagerly. Inside the white square there seems to be a variety of meats with other delicious smells mixed in, and my mouth begins to water.

The human notices my interest and rips a piece off, holding it towards me. "Are you hungry? Would you like a bite of my sandwich?"

I don't have the courage to come near her, but I keep my eyes fixed on the food. She sighs at my reluctance, but then gives the food a toss and it lands on the ground in front of me, and I take a few steps back.

"It's all right, it's good! It won't hurt you, I promise." She shows her teeth to me and I am uncertain what she means by this. It doesn't seem like she's trying to intimidate me, and her teeth are rather unimpressive if that's what she meant to do anyway.

For a few seconds I resist the temptation of the food, but my willpower quickly wears down. I creep forward and pick it up tenderly in my mouth, then back away a few steps and sit down to eat it. She watches happily as I quickly devour it. After taking another bite herself, she rips off another piece and throws it to me as well. This time I dispense with all the caution and just swallow it down. Maybe all humans aren't really monsters after all.

Illustration by Katie Winters



# The Bringer of Death

Austin MacCraw

Before finding salvation, I was drowning in evil. I didn't know at the time that the Bringer of Death had his hold on me. No, I was too young and blind to realize what great darkness flowed through my body and mind. How was I to know that the fiends that masqueraded as my friends and allies were leading me to my demise? The shows we watched and the jokes we told seemed harmless at the time, though now I know making a spectacle of death insults the life we are granted. Worshiping fantasy and fiction only blasphemes the world created for us. And the witches at school wearing their tight clothing were all temptresses, pressuring me into wicked thoughts and dreams.

I knew none of this until I met Teacher Xavier, the holy man who led me to my faith. In this small town of Yohl, I had never learned of the creator of the universe, nor had I known what inheritance I was predestined to receive. Before I met Teacher Xavier, I was in the darkness, confined by the evils of this world. Through his teaching, I was able to cleanse my spirit and turn from sin. Because of him, I now worship the almighty Hajohev who rescues us from death and grants us eternal life.

Today, I walked to his house right after breakfast, just as I've done every day this summer. He lived alone in a humble two-story house passed down from his father. It wasn't old by any standards, instead having a welcoming, lived-in quality. Upstairs, in a special room devoted to Hajohev, Teacher Xavier passed on to me, his only follower, the sacred knowledge. It was also where we performed the holy rituals, including The Ritual of Cleansing. We've done that one many times, at least once or twice a week, due to my constant sinfulness.

There's so many things I never knew were evil or temptations until Teacher Xavier told me. I felt bad for him, us always having to go through the ritual to cleanse me even though he had nothing to do with my errors. I always tried to do better, to not fall for the tricks of the Bringer of Death, but there's always something I forgot or didn't know, and so the ritual was performed. We'd go up to the sacred room and I'd take off my clothes, and he his, so that no earthly fabric could hide my wrongs. Only naked could we be truly honest, and only with true honesty could the evils be purged. Then, I would lay down on the floor, and the ritual would begin.

Yesterday was one of those days. I didn't know that when weathermen predict the future, they falsely claim divine power. Nobody can know what the future holds, and to declare any different is blasphemy. And everyone knows that weathermen are never always right, so much like a palm-reader or fortune-teller, they must be making calculated guesses to produce convincing lies to trick us into believing them. I brought my umbrella yesterday because of one such weatherman, and Teacher Xavier explained how I had been deceived, leading to my cleansing. However, before we started the ritual, as I was taking off my t-shirt and jeans, Teacher Xavier told me that a new follower would be joining us soon. I didn't say anything, as I didn't want to disrupt the sacredness of my cleansing, but I was very glad to hear of this new follower. Soon I would have someone to talk to other than Teacher Xavier about Hajohev. Another follower I could learn with. There was so much I wanted to say and discuss, but all of what I knew came from Teacher Xavier, so talking to him would have no purpose.

After walking up to the front door, I knocked once. Repetitive knocking showed impatience. The door then opened, but Teacher Xavier wasn't standing in

front of me. In fact, the entryway was completely empty. Unsure of what to do, I stepped inside, leaving the door open behind me.

I stayed where I was in the entryway, not wanting to roam through Teacher Xavier's house without first being welcomed. By the door, I noticed my umbrella, left there from yesterday's visit. I hadn't needed it after all, as Teacher Xavier had assured me.

In the kitchen, the room in front of me, was a bucket on the table catching whatever was leaking from the ceiling. That same leak had been there before, on the day of my first visit months earlier, though it hadn't turned up again since.

Teacher Xavier then came down the stairs, pausing after seeing the door wide open. I wanted to apologize, but I didn't know what to say. He then closed the door, looked around his house, and headed back upstairs, too deep in thought to acknowledge me. He was like that sometimes. Too lost in the holy teachings to be disrupted. However, without instruction, I continued to stay where I was.

He then came down again, this time carrying a large, heavy-looking black garbage bag. He hurried past me, almost running into me, as he headed into the garage, grabbing his keys on the way out. Not wanting to be left alone in his house, I followed. He placed the bag in the trunk of his car, and not having received any objection so far, I opened the passenger side and got in. He looked at me in a dazed kind of way, but said nothing before clicking the garage door opener and backing out onto the street.

It was then that I wondered if the new follower was from another town and that we would have to pick them up. It made sense, but didn't much explain what the garbage bag was for. After a few minutes, I noticed a putrid smell invading the air. I couldn't tell what kind of smell it was, but I didn't like it at all.

Before I could work up the courage to ask what it was, the car stopped on the bridge over Demerfo River. Teacher Xavier got out and opened the trunk, struggling to lift the garbage bag. He then set it against the guardrail and headed back to the trunk. I then got out as well, approaching the garbage bag. I wanted to open it. I needed to open it. I needed to know what was inside. Fortunately, I spotted a rip near the bottom of the bag. I pulled on the plastic, widening the rip just enough for the head to fall out and onto the pavement. My head.

Xavier returned to the bag with a round metal weight, no doubt to weigh the body down, and a second bag. "Aw shit," he muttered, scooping the head back into the bag and then putting that bag into the other one. He then tied the bag through the weight and lifted the whole thing onto the guardrail. There was nobody to stop him, nobody to see, and nobody to realize what he was doing. I wanted to scream, but what was the point? I was already dead. He then pushed the bag, and my body fell into Demerfo River, likely never to be seen again by anyone who could do anything about it. Unfazed by what he'd done, Xavier got back into his car and drove away, leaving me alone on the bridge, looking down at the water which would be my grave.

That's when it dawned on me. I had been rescued from death and granted eternal life. Xavier may have been a liar, but I still received my inheritance, and I wouldn't waste such a gift.

Soon after, I forced open Xavier's front door. He was in the kitchen, exactly where I wanted him to be. He couldn't see me, as no one can see their reaper when their time is up. I grabbed his head and shoved it into the bucket on the table filled with blood. My blood, dripping from the sacred room. I held him down until his flailing ceased, finishing what I needed to do. I am now the Bringer of Death, and I will make the sinners of the world pay for their evils.



Illustration by Brandon Rice

# Precocious

Christian Catrett

Kiana was the most badass five year old this playground had ever seen. She swaggered onto the battle-field she was about to lay waste to, shredded chunks of rubber crunching underfoot, newly found sword, Sticcalibur, thirsting for blood in her hand. Scowling fiercely, she whirled around to face her conscripts. Three pairs of saucer like eyes greeted her. Their names had already escaped her, but only their roles mattered to Kiana now. Her Tank, some new fat kid, held a toy shovel in one fist, and loosely grasped his bark sheet shield in the other. Her Healer, a timid thing, clutched a box of Incredibles II themed band aids close to her chest. Finally, Archer (he complained DPS sounded stupid), somewhat resolutely held his bucket of makeshift dirt missiles at the ready.

Time to rouse the troops.

“All right men! The Third Graders have held us under thumb for too long! Never a turn on the seesaw, pushing us out of swings, making fun of Tank’s heft!”

“I told you, my name is Lucas—”

“But I say no more! With our combined might, we shall take back the castle!”

Kiana arced her branch blade with laser precision, pointing at the sunshine-yellow jungle gym.

“On this day we take back our freedom. On this day, we take back our liberty. On this day, we take back OUR RECESS!”

After the pause of a heart beat, her whole army screamed their war cries, and maybe Healer was screaming for real, but it didn’t matter. They charged the third graders.

Kiana led the band, feet kicking up storms of tire chunks as she met the first opponent, completely off guard. The taller boy had slackened his guard to check his phone, the fool. With a swift crack, his precious little light box spun to the ground.

“Hey no fair Kiana, I wasn’t ready yet—”

“NO ONE’S READY FOR WAR.” Kiana whipped her head around. “ARCHER!”

She had scarce said the word when a clod of dirt exploded on the shocked boys face. The fierce din of war must have alerted those inside the castle, because two more gargantuan children, a boy and a girl, lumbered out to assist their fallen comrade. Kiana felt no panic as Tank moved in beside her, waving bark sheet and shovel wildly. The distraction was enough for Archer to dispatch them, with a complication. The girl started shrieking, a speck of mud in her eye. Healer did the best ministrations she could, but Frozone proved no aid. The teachers would soon be on their way if nothing was done. Kiana turned to see Archer staring resolutely at her.

“It was my fault, the teachers will come for me. Go to the monkey bars, move!”

Kiana nodded solemnly, then pulled Tank and Healer away. The last thing she saw when she looked back was Archer sitting down on the ground, arms folded defiantly. They just moved past the perimeter of the jungle gym when the heavy footfalls of concerned adults crunched through the air. Oh god, was that Mrs. Lassiter? Archer was doomed. Kiana shoved down her grief and marched on to the monkey bars.

When she finally stood before the firetruck-red monkey bars, impossibly long and tall, she turned to face her harried comrades.

"Tank, Healer, we've almost made it. One last push, then we'll have reached the enemy leader. Are you with me?"

They looked at each other, then back at Kiana, both nodding. Satisfied, Kiana gripped her weapon in her teeth and scrambled quick as you'd like across. She landed with a cocky smile, her arms only a little tired. Tank, having abandoned his weaponry, was next. To his credit, he made it three rungs before his arms started quivering wildly. Kiana could only look on in horror as he lost his grip and plummeted to the ground below.

"LUCAAAAS!" She screamed, though to be fair the two foot drop seemed to mostly daze him. Still, Healer elected to remain behind and see to him, already covering him in three separate band aids before Kiana left.

Fatigued and shaken, Kiana steeled herself as she deliberately approached the throne of the third graders' king. The swing set stood like the fangs of a great beast jutting towards the heavens, unpainted the teeth were the color of a naked steel blade. Sitting surreally on top was her sworn enemy.

Her older brother, Lars.

Grinning like the bastard he was, Lars arced his own stronger and straighter tree branch effortlessly.

"You've done well to get this far, but it's over Kiana, I have the high ground!"

"We're playing Dungeons and Dragons, not Star Wars, stupid!"

He frowned. "Well Dungeons and Dragons is boring. Star Wars is way cooler."

Kiana grinned. "You're right. Especially *The Last Jedi*."

She never saw Lars jump down but was already prepared to take his savage blow. As their blades crossed, he leaned in through the X they made in the air, practically growling.

"Take. That. Back."

Arms quaking under the pressure, Kiana never stopped grinning.

"Never."

The whipped apart their arboreal arms, then dashed them together once more. Blows were traded in their deadly dance, moving like sewing needles stitching across the battle field. Where Lars was strong, Kiana was quick. Her stamina began to flag, but she could feel his breath growing labored. She could do this; she could win. Just a little more, wait for the opening... there! He raised his guard too high! She was striking with enough force to do a viper proud, aiming to break his stupid nose, when her sword went wildly off course. Gripping her and Lars's branches in hand, the scariest teacher in the whole school, Mrs. Lassiter, towered over them, her face a bank of raging storm clouds.

"And what, pray tell, is going on here?"

Lars immediately stepped aside and pointed at her. "She started it! I was just defending myself and my kingdom." Bastard.

"That's not true ma'am, I was usurping his power was all! He's a tyrant anyways."

Tossing the branches aside, Mrs. Lassiter sighed heavily.

“Well, the coup will have to wait children. Recess is over.”

“But Mrs. Lassiter, how will we define who’s in charge if no one wins?”

“Well, I suppose I can just remain in charge,” Lars offered, in a bastard like tone.

“No way!”

Mrs. Lassiter eyed the two as they began to duel once again, this time verbally. Suddenly she spread her arms wide and tall, roaring loud and long with her head thrown back.

“FOOLISH MORTALS! YOUR PETTY SQUABBLES MEAN NOTHING TO ME! I, THE ELDER DRAGON QUEEN LASSITER, COMMAND YOU TO PARLEY FOR NOW. THE BATTLE MUST WAIT FOR ANOTHER DAY! HEAD BACK TO YOUR HAVENS NOW BEFORE I BURN THE FLESH FROM YOUR BONES!”

There was a long, awkward silence as Mrs. Lassiter held her pose. Lars and Kiana exchanged a look, then both burst out laughing, running screaming back to their classrooms. Mrs. Lassiter watched them go, and only when they were gone did she let her arms fall, giggling.

## The Most Beautiful Lily

Alaina Hornberger

“Monster!” They laughed cruelly at her. “It’s the monster!”

“Run away! She’ll eat you if she catches you!” They laughed and threw rocks and sticks, pointing and shrieking and running around. Unable to do anything, she curled into a ball, drawing her cloak tightly around herself. She didn’t even cry anymore. It was well deserved after all. She was a monster. For the most part she managed to think of this as part of her daily routine. Something like this would happen regularly, and she couldn’t afford to cry and feel terrible all of the time. She accepted their words as mostly true and chose to pretend it didn’t bother her.

If she allowed herself to think about how much it hurt it would crush her.

Suddenly her cloak was ripped away and she yelped, trying to cover her face with her bone thin arms, changing her position so her back faced upwards, her thick blonde hair falling like a curtain around her. It was the position she was least hideous in.

“Look at this rag! It’s as filthy as its owner!” The first boy laughed, waving her cloak in the air.

“If you throw it in dog crap it won’t be any worse!” another boy yelled, snatching it and throwing it, not in dog feces, but in the mud.

The third boy gasped. “If your mother heard you say that word you’d be in so much trouble!”

“Who cares?” the second boy replied. “It’s true right? I mean, look at that nasty thing. Now it’s just right for the ugly demon girl!” He picked it up by a corner and waved it.

The girl couldn’t help it. She started to cry. That cloak was the only thing she could use to hide from the world. She needed it. “Please stop,” she managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Eeeew, it talked!” the first boy yelled, and the others burst into laughter.



“Excuse me, but I don’t think that is yours.” Another boy, tall, extremely thin and very dirty, stepped in front of her and snatched her cloak out of his hands. “Out of all the disgusting creatures in this village, you three are definitely among the worst.”

Her head jerked up, and she stared at the back of the boy who had come to her defense. He was nearly as thin as her but what she could see of him looked fairly muscular. His clothes were extremely filthy and ragged, much worse than hers. But what really made him look poor was his hair. It was dirty, shaggy, and nearly reached his shoulders. It was also cut to various lengths, like someone had grabbed his hair in handfuls and put a knife to it to cut it.

“What did you say?! It’s not like you could tell anyway!”

“I may not be the best judge of your looks, but I can tell someone who has a rotten inside better than most people. I can tell just how disgusting you really are!”

“Says the gutter rat!” The cruel boy advanced towards her defender, and before he could do anything the bully hit the dirty boy in his jaw hard enough to send him sprawling.

Instead of fighting back the boy lay on the broken cobblestone alley holding his arms over his head protectively.

“Tch.” One of the first three boys snorted. “Let’s leave these two rats. They’re perfect for each other.” They sauntered out of the alley, giving the boy on the ground one last kick before they vanished into the street.

The boy who remained took a deep breath, then relaxed and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth before turning to face the girl.

For a moment she was panicked, not wanting him to see her face, but before she managed to hide her features their eyes met. Or they would have. She stared up into his face, a face that was wrapped in dirty bandages from the middle of his nose to his forehead. And with a start she recognized him.

Liam. The blind boy. The governor’s disowned child. She had never spoken to him and had always tried to avoid him. If anyone in the village had a worse situation than she did it was him. The last thing she wanted was to make his situation worse by having him associated with a monster like her.

“Are you all right?” Liam asked, his voice gentle, as if he was afraid she would run from him.

She considered doing just that. If she ran away he probably couldn’t keep up. But then he slid closer, and his face was barely two inches away. She froze. No one outside her parents had ever been that close to her. What was she supposed to do? There was blood smeared from his mouth to his jaw from when the bully punched him, and her gut wrenched with guilt. Then his hands starting groping around the ground until they hit her soiled cloak and he smiled.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stop them in time to keep your cloak clean.” He held it out, facing her general direction. She just stared at him, her too big eyes wide with shock.

I wonder if he can hear me breathing she thought.

His smile faltered a bit at her lack of response but he pressed onwards. “I’m sorry but I’ve never heard you called by your name. Can I ask what it is?”

“...Lily,” she whispered.

“That’s a lovely name,” he smiled. His teeth were surprisingly straight and

clean. They were also the right size for his mouth, unlike hers. "I'm Liam. It's lovely to make your acquaintance Lily."

She wasn't going to bother telling him that she'd already known his name and his whole life story. Her father liked to talk about him occasionally because it reminded her that she wasn't alone. Other people had bodies that weren't normal or functioning like they should be. Her mother said that his situation was far worse than hers. She had loving parents and, though she got sick easily and was hideous to look at, her body functioned as it should. Liam had been thrown away when he was four years old, and it was a miracle he had survived. It was only due to the generosity of his mother's brother – who fed him once a week – that he hadn't starved to death. But now she felt guilty, introducing herself to someone who was a regular topic of gossip in her home.

Liam offered her the cloak once more, and this time she took it. "Thank you," she said quietly. She wouldn't be able to hide this from her mother, and it hurt her heart to know that night would be another night of listening to her mother sobbing to her father in their room. They worked so hard and had been ostracized from society on her account, and still they cried for her and felt the pain of her rejection. Just one more reason to hate herself.

"If you would like to clean it, I know somewhere we could go."

She stared at him and thought *What?*

"Um, t-that would be very nice." After thinking of her mother's tears again, she couldn't refuse.

Liam smiled and stood, offering his hand to her. "Then come with me." She hesitated a long time but finally took his hand and allowed him to pull her up.

"You're very light." His mouth creased with concern and his eyebrows knit under his bandages. "I hope you get enough to eat."

For a moment Lily considered just staying silent, but she felt it was unfair that she knew so much about him and he knew almost nothing about her. "I... I think I do. I can't gain weight. It... It's part of my... My... condition."

"Oh, I'm sorry to bring it up then. But don't worry, you can't possibly be skinnier than I am." He laughed, but she knew he wasn't wrong. He was taller than her so he definitely weighed more, but for his height he was every bit as emaciated as she was, though he definitely had more muscle while she had more fat. "I'm also sorry I couldn't do more to stop those guys. I could have tried to fight them, but most of my attacks don't connect, so I've learned it's better not to put up a fight. They lose interest faster."

She nodded then remembered that was no good with him. "Yeah," she whispered.

She turned to leave the alleyway but froze. There was a woman pressed against the wall, silently gawking at them. The second their eyes connected she darted away, but not fast enough. Lily recognized her immediately. The governor's wife. Liam's mother.

"Come," Liam's voice startled her. "I'll show you a place to clean that."

They walked together to the edge of town, Liam walking with practiced confidence. "I grew up on these streets," he answered her silent question. "I've memorized the general pattern of life, and navigation is simple enough."

Every now and then as they walked Lily would catch a glimpse of his mother. There she was pretending to look at fruit. There she was standing nonchalantly beside a wagon. There she was petting a woman's dog. Lily could tell she was following them. Everywhere they went she was there, all the way until they stepped from the border of

the town into the woods.

“Where are we going?” Lily questioned, terror creeping up her spine.

“Don’t worry, I promise it’ll be fine.”

He was right too. A short ways into the woods, he stopped next to a creek filled with clean water. There was a large oak tree next to it with a pile of old rags and other discarded objects underneath. The sunlight filtered through the trees leaving the ground dappled with light. Wind rushed through the leaves, and the creek gurgled peacefully by. It was a beautiful spot.

“This place is beautiful,” she breathed.

“Is it? Thank you.” He smiled in her direction. “I try to visualize everything I touch and hear, but it’s been years since I could see. It’s... really hard to remember what sight is like.”

“Have you been living here for the past twelve years?” she asked before she could stop herself.

“How did you know that?” he turned his face in her general direction.

“U-uh, oh, well, I... um...” she stammered, her face turning red.

He smiled a rueful smile. “Oh. It’s fine. I know. Gossip. Everyone knows I was discarded when I was four I guess. If you can do arithmetic you can figure out how long I’ve been here.” He sighed heavily. “But since you know how old I am, why don’t you tell me how old you are?”

“I’m fourteen,” she murmured, still ashamed he caught her. She knew what it was like to be talked about and hated that she reminded him that he was the subject of malicious gossip.

He nodded. “Not much younger than me then. Anyway, there’s the creek. I don’t know if it’ll work to your standards but it’s at least good for getting mud and dirt off.”

She went down to the creek and began washing her cloak out, and he sat on the bed of rags.

“I... I think your mother was following us, L-Liam.” It took her a bit to work up the courage, but she thought this may be her only chance at having an ordinary conversation with anyone other than her parents or the one priest who didn’t hate her.

“Was she?” Liam seemed somewhat unsurprised but not happy to hear it.

“She was.”

They returned to silence and Lily internally cursed herself for not being able to think of anything to say.

“She... She isn’t as bad as everyone thinks,” he finally said. “It was her husband that abandoned me, not her. She can’t stand up to the governor of the village, but she does what she can for me.”

Lily listened carefully as he told her a little about his life. When he’d been thrown out, his mother had made it her secret mission to train him, and to make sure he survived. She taught him language, social graces, arithmetic, science, everything she could. She also taught him about nature and the world around him. But she always had to be careful. If her husband caught her he would beat her. In town she never interacted with her son, and she tried to stay away from him.

"It's thanks to her and my uncle that I've survived as long as I have," Liam said, and it was clear he was finished talking about himself. "I'm thankful to them for helping me, but sometimes I can't help but feel a little bitter. But that's enough about me. If you don't mind, why don't you tell me about your family?"

And she did. She told him how her father had been a successful doctor in the capital city and had even had clients come from other kingdoms, and how her mother had been the daughter of a merchant. But after she had been born they had left, coming to this peaceful little village hoping it would be better for their little girl, but it was only worse for everyone. Her father couldn't practice because his daughter was a monster. Both her parents had to work long and hard every day to afford a place to live, clothes to wear and food to eat, and they were not accepted by the other families. People were afraid of them because they thought whatever was wrong with Lily might spread to their children, too. But her parents loved their little girl and never complained. Even after everything they had sacrificed they thought only of her.

By the time she had finished talking, her cloak was nearly dry and the light had almost disappeared. She couldn't remember the last time she had talked so much. It felt good. He could relate to her story, and he didn't care what she looked like.

"I'll walk you back to your house," Liam offered.

"Thank you," Lily said shyly. No one had ever cared if she made it back safely or not.

As he stood he picked something up. "Lily?"

"Yes?"

"Ah." He repositioned himself to face her. "I have very few material goods to offer, but what I have I give with my whole heart." He held up a single, large, white lily. "I don't know what color it is, but it feels like it's in full bloom, and I believe it's a lily."

She stared at him, gawking, happy he couldn't see the tears welling up in her eyes.

"Thank you Lily, for spending this day with me. You are truly the most beautiful person I have ever met."

That night Lily couldn't sleep much. She stared at the flower and thought of Liam. To her surprise she found herself seeking him out the next day. And the next. And the next. Before she knew it, she was spending all of her time with him, enjoying the company of the one person who, despite his blindness, truly saw her.

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Lily hid herself in her room and refused to leave. She stared at the white lily that her mother had pressed for her over a year ago and cried. The whole town was talking about it: the governor's son's miraculous healing. Or not so miraculous.

All these years that his uncle had been "helping" him, he was actually poisoning his nephew. Apparently the man's hatred for his brother-in-law ran so deep he had decided to destroy his son. The discovery was good for everyone except for Lily and of course Liam's uncle. Liam got his sight back. The governor and his wife got to have a son again. Lily's father – who was the one who discovered that Liam was being poisoned and helped him recover from said poisoning – gained respect and would likely be able to practice as a doctor again. He might even be as successful as he was before.

All of that was great, really it was, but it threw Lily's world into a downward spiral. Liam could see. Liam, her only friend. Liam, the only person who didn't know

how utterly hideous she was. Now he would actually see her, and no one could really love someone as ugly as she. Not even someone as good as him.

Her mother had been trying to get her to come out all week, but she refused. She stayed in her room, candles snuffed out, curtains drawn. She didn't want to see. She didn't want to think about sight. She wanted to disappear.

"Get out. It's been a week. I won't let you stay in here like this any longer."

Lily turned and stared at her father who stood in her now open doorway. "I don't want to."

"You can't hide from life Lily," he said softly, sitting on her bed next to her. She didn't respond.

He sighed. "Lily I know you're afraid, but he's worried. No matter what you think you're the only friend he's ever had, and he's the only friend you've got as well. Unless all of that was nothing but a lie, you need to go out there and talk to him."

He was right of course. Her father was always right. But that didn't change anything. She was still way too scared to leave her room.

Standing up, he crossed his arms. "Lily, sit up." Slowly, she complied. "Look at me." Again, she did as she was told. "If you don't go outside yourself, I will pick you up and put you out there. I'll give you a few minutes to decide, but you're going to get out of this house either way."

With that he left her alone. She sat silently for a while, attempting to build up the courage to do as she was told. There was no question she would end up outside – her father always followed through on his threats – and it would be much better to walk herself than to be forced. With effort she stood and snuck out her back door, carefully checking to make sure Liam wasn't anywhere near. Then she ran. She couldn't run particularly fast or long, but it would still be hard to catch her.

She didn't know how long she ran or where she was going, but she knew she was afraid of staying still. If she did he was more likely to find her. When her body finally forced her to stop, she collapsed onto her knees, gasping for air. As she wheezed and regained her ability to breathe she realized she was sitting on leaves and dirt and moss. Dread squeezed her stomach and she quickly looked around. Unconsciously she had run to a place she had come to love; Liam's oak tree home.

At least he wouldn't be here. The gossip about his uncle poisoning him and his healing had prompted the governor to bring his abandoned son back into his home. Liam had absolutely no reason to come back here.

"You're here," Liam's voice sounded to her left and her head turned towards him in shock.

To her horror her eyes connected with his. They were gray and somehow still seemed unseeing. It was the first time she had seen them. Then her mind caught up with her and she ducked her head, hoping to hide her hideousness.

"I was hoping you'd come here," he said gently. She heard his footsteps come in her direction, then saw his knees on the ground in front of her. He stayed silent for a while, hoping she would say something but she didn't. "Do you... Do you hate me now?"

She shook her head. "No, no I could never," she whispered.

"Then please," he replied, his voice cracking slightly. "Please look at me."

"I can't. I'm too ugly. I c-can't let you see me."

"But Lily, you're the only thing I want to see."

At that she almost looked up but couldn't quite manage it. "... I'm sorry."

He remained silent for a while, but she could feel him. "If it makes you feel better, the rumors of my healing are exaggerated. I can see, but my sight isn't perfect. I can see shapes and some color, but not much else. Your father thinks my eyes were damaged either by the constant poison or the disuse. So even with my sight I won't be able to see you well. Please look at me."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I just can't."

"Lily," his voice cracked. "Lily please. I need you. Everything has changed. I don't know what to do anymore. I need you to be here with me, here for me. Please."

She couldn't resist any more. She looked up at him. He was crying. His gray eyes tried to focus on her but he seemed to be having a hard time with his new sight – however limited it was – and they kept twitching back and forth. Looking at him now she realized a few things. First the governor had given him new clothes. Not fine clothes, but clothes that fit him well, were clean, and were not falling apart. Second his hair had been cut by a barber and was clean as well. Her mother had taken over cutting his hair after she found out he had been trying to do it himself, but her haircuts had a distinct carefree look to them that this shorter, cleaner cut lacked. But he was still her Liam.

"So, you... you can't really see me?" she finally worked up the courage to say.

"Not really," he managed, ignoring the tear tracks on his face and knitting his brows together in concentration. "I can see the shape of your head, and I can tell where your hair ends and your face begins and I can see some shadows but not much else..." He lifted his hand hesitantly, lowered it, then raised it again.

"Lily." He let out a breath. "For the past year you have put light into my dark lonely world, but for all of that time I only knew you as a voice. I heard you speak and move and breathe, but you almost never let me touch you and even when you did it was only your hands. I'm begging you now. Please let me see you." He lifted his hands. "I want to know what you look like better than my eyes can show. I want to feel you there, and know that you're here, anchored to the same earth I am. Please Lily. If I mean anything to you at all, please let me do this."

Somewhere during his speech Lily had begun trembling. The relief she had felt when she knew he couldn't really see much of her was enormous, but now he wanted to touch her, to feel her face, to get a real understanding of what she looked like. But sitting here, staring into his tear-filled gray eyes, she couldn't deny him.

Gently she took his hand in hers and drew it towards her face. She hesitated then, but only for a moment. The notion terrified her, but she needed this as much as he did. She needed him to know how ugly she was. Only then would she ever feel confident in her love for him. Though she couldn't imagine him rejecting her, she couldn't imagine anyone aside from her parents not being repulsed by her either.

He closed his eyes, his eyebrows knit in concentration, and carefully, gently, almost tenderly ran his fingers over her face. She closed her eyes as well, trembling with apprehension and waiting. His fingers traced over her features; over her too high cheekbones, her long, thin, awful nose, over her hollow cheeks, then over her eyes which were large but too far apart to be pretty, and finally over her mouth that

struggled to contain her too big teeth. He stopped after her mouth, his hands on her jaw, and opened his eyes again, smiling.

She opened her eyes too but couldn't bring herself to look at him. The tears that had been carefully held back in his presence fell now.

"Why are you crying?" he breathed as her tears touched his hands.

"B-Because," she stammered. "Because now you know how ugly I really am." Her voice cracked, her body shook and her tears fell faster.

"Lily," Liam whispered. "My sweet, delicate Lily." He released a shaky breath as his own tears began to fall again. "The first day we met I told you that you were the most beautiful person I've ever met. That is more true now than it ever was before. I wish you could see yourself the way I do. Lily you are so beautiful. I love you Lily, just the way you are."

She stared at him now, her heart pounding in her ears, her emotions suddenly calming. "You... love me?"

"I do. I love you, my beautiful, perfect Lily." Slowly, carefully, he kissed her, and for the first time in her life Lily didn't hate her appearance. For the first time ever she felt complete joy, and it was all because of this blind boy who really, truly saw her.

## Riptide

Katelyn Smith

Sophia stood at the water's edge, her white shorts riding up on her tan thighs. I lifted my camera and snapped a shot of her as she bent to pick up a seashell. The sun highlighted the gold in her hair. The two strings of her swim top brushed against her smooth skin. Her mouth was curved into a gentle smile.

Jameson. Let's go swimming."

She shimmied out of her shorts, revealing her matching swim bottoms. I put down the camera beside me on the hood of the rental convertible and pulled my knees to my chest.

"Not now,"

She giggled and reached out for my hand.

"I won't let you drown. I promise."

"I don't have my trunks on."

"Change behind the car. I won't look."

I chuckled and rolled my eyes.

"All right, fine."

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The water was cold — it lapped at my knees, then my thighs, and then my chest. I winced as she dove in, spraying me with the cold surf. I waded out a little further and just as a wave came, I felt her grab my foot and yank me under.

The world was green, and the salt burned my open eyes. I felt the wave subside and the next one pull at my body as I kicked upward. I rooted my feet firmly in the sand.

"Sophia!"

I spat out salt water along with her name, but she only cackled in return. My red curls lay limply on my dripping forehead. She paddled along beside me, and I was transfixed by the color of her skin under the emerald water. She moved like water. She was water.

“Was that my phone?”

She swam to the shallows and walked up on the beach, her bottoms sagging with water so that I could see the top of her rounded butt. She picked it up, pulling her wet hair into her other hand so that she could see.

“Bobby is here! He wants to meet us for drinks later tonight!”

She frantically texted him back, her wet fingers flying over the screen. I sighed and went under, almost hoping I’d drown. Fuck Bobby. Then again, she probably would. When I resurfaced, she was standing in the shallows, a hand propped on her soft, fleshy hip.

“Are you ready to go, Jameson? I want to have time to dry my hair and do my makeup.”

“Yeah.”

I waded to her, the seconds ticking by slowly, awkwardly, as the water pushed against my legs.

At the hotel, Sophia came out of her room with two dresses in her hands. One was black with bright yellow sunflowers and the other was blue. Both had cutouts in the front and back.

“Which one, Jamie?”

I opted for the sunflowers. It had more cutouts.

“Thanks! You really are the best friend a girl could have.”

“Best” was like a dagger to the heart, and “friend” was a dagger to the crotch.

“No problem”

I had to force the words out while I pulled a polo over my sunburnt skin, and my jacket over that. I looked in the mirror— my freckled face was a light pink and my hair was still dark with water. The hell with Bobby. The hell with Sophia.

“Jameson. Will you bring me my phone? I want to see if Bobby—”

I closed the door and stood on the balcony. Fishing a cigarette from my jacket pocket, I lit it and blew out a steady stream of silver smoke. This was cool. This was what Bobby would do. The ash glowed red and the sound of the ocean below flooded my ears. The wind blew gently, endlessly. I looked out at the water and wondered how many people died out there. I thought about the water and how it was the same water that filled sailors’ lungs and the same water that sucked down the Titanic. I flicked my ashes and took another drag. That sand was the same sand that shark-bite victims had been pulled up on, their blood staining the white sand red.

The glass door slid open.

“There you are. Are you ready?”

“Let me finish this first.”

“All right. Hey, I wanted to thank you for driving me down here. I really needed it after fighting with Bobby and all. But now, I have this crazy feeling that everything is going to be all right between us, you know?”

“Yeah.”



She eyed me in the lowlight, but I knew she wasn't thinking about me.

"You almost done?"

I thumped the butt over the balcony, watching its red light sail down to the sidewalk below.

"Yeah. I'm done."

## Watch out for Cats

Alaina Hornberger

Watch out for cats! Watch out cats! That's what everyone always told her. They're dangerous! Dens wasn't sure if it was true or not, since she hadn't even seen a cat yet, but she supposed one could never be too careful. Her mother in particular had warned her as she left for her third night of active duty. "Watch out for any cats! Remember what happened to your aunt Tonn!" Then the woman promptly broke down in tears.

Dens was a Tooth Fairy. She was a Private, just a grunt, but she was proud of herself for making it through training. She laughed at the so-called dangers as she flew through the dark city, easily ducking any obstacles and preventing herself from being seen, watching out for cats all the way. No matter what anyone said, she thought being a Tooth Fairy was the best thing ever, and she didn't see what was so dangerous about it either, cats aside. She'd never been allowed to leave the hollow until her training was almost complete, so getting to fly about in the world of humans with no one to prevent her from enjoying herself was a pleasure beyond description.

She had just placed the last quarter and taken her last tooth for the evening, but when she turned to leave she found herself face to face with the most terrifying, most dangerous creature she had ever seen. Probably the most dangerous creature to ever exist. Looming in the darkness before her, three times her height, was a giant orange and white cat. His green eyes glared unblinking down at her, and her fairy shine made her image reflect perfectly in them. Even though she was terrified, she couldn't help but admire her natural glow (which she insisted was NOT a result of that Gl'Oreal stuff, it was COMPLETELY natural) and her pretty face in the mirror of his eyes. But then he licked his lips, and she was snapped back to reality.

"Y-You wouldn't eat a pretty girl like me, would you?" She simpered a bit, shaking with terror and backing away. She was careful not to make any fast moves and was ready to escape when the first opportunity presented itself. The cat made no response at first, but then he opened its giant maw and Dens screamed a tiny fairy scream (which sounds a lot like a dog whistle, too high for humans to hear thankfully but quite irritating for animals and other magical creatures). The cat finished his yawn and glared imperiously at the tiny fairy, flicking his ears and then leaping off the bed to find somewhere more peaceful to sleep.

*I did it!* Dens thought, watching the cat go and doing a happy prance on the pillow. *I met a cat and I lived!*

"I'm SO awesome!" she crowed, flying towards the window she had entered through. "Just wait until I tell my mother how I conquered a ca-"

Dens's body shattered into a thousand pieces, and the big black lab landed

back on the ground, shaking his head and gagging. He'd heard the whistle and came to investigate, and thought God had smiled on him, showing him this giant shiny bug flying across the room. Now he realized it was probably one of the cat's tricks, revenge for sitting on his head that morning for sure. He ran out of the bedroom and drank water from the giant porcelain bowl in the bathroom until that nasty tasting glowing powder was completely washed away.

ooo

The next morning the little girl, excited over the quarter in her pocket, had forgotten her homework in her bedroom. As her father ran in to retrieve it, his bare foot landed on something hard and pointy. He yelped and looked down, expecting a Lego block, but instead saw a tiny wand. "What's this?" he wondered, picking it up. He shrugged and sat it with his daughter's Barbie Dolls before running back to the front door with the missing homework.

The cat sat lazily, his tail swishing back and forth as he watched the dog in the yard, snapping at birds and running around like a maniac. "It wasn't me you should have watched out for," he purred, looking at the wand, which now lay forlorn beside the dolls. "I'm not the one stupid enough to eat a fairy."



Illustration by Alaina Hornberger

# Untitled

Christian Beason

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP \*click\*

The alarm again. It was morning. Tuesday, the 17th. Just like yesterday. And the day before that. And before that. As it could be tomorrow, and the next day. And just like every Tuesday the 17th, someone will try to kill me tonight. A man, dressed in black. Face hidden, always telling me the same thing. "This is for your own good. You don't want to see tomorrow." His voice was eerily familiar. Tonight will be different. I have an idea.

I got up and made a small breakfast. Not what you would think I should do if I know someone's trying to murder me tonight, right? But it always happens, no matter what I change. So I might as well live the day how I want. Especially this time, because this time I want to see the man who would kill me again. Today I will live as if I didn't know what would happen.

Finishing my breakfast, I went out to the car and got in. The engine roared to life, and I pulled out past another car and drove off. I knew this route well, every street, every house. Every person walking a dog, every couple out on their walk. Even if it wasn't Tuesday again, I knew every twist and turn. Soon I arrived at the hospital.

I checked in to the hospital. They knew me well already. Everyone looked at me with weak smiles and sad eyes. They knew exactly why I was here, and they knew none of them could help me. I no longer needed an escort, but I had one anyways. Just like every day.

"Are you doing all right today?" Always the same question, no matter who the escort was. It was always the same response that I gave them. "I'm doing the best I can." They would try to make some small talk, smile at me. I appreciated it. But it only ever helped a bit. Then we were there. Room 217. I opened the door.

There she was, sleeping. As she had been for the past few days. And every Tuesday the 17th, for that matter. And I knew by now that she wasn't waking up again, but I'll come see her every time regardless. My escort left me with her, alone. I sat by her side and pulled her favorite book out of my jacket. I started reading to her, all the while taking in her features. Like I always do. Like I always have. And like I could never get to again. She was perfect to me. I remembered the way she smiled and lit up every room, every dark situation. She brought hope to every crisis I'd ever gone through. I remembered the sound of her laugh, filling me with joy. Her brilliant eyes, which I would never tire of looking into.

And I remembered all the bad too. The day her parents died in a car accident. The feeling of her tears on my neck. The day we lost our daughter. My voice started to shake, and a tear fell down my cheek. I was there for her through everything, just as she was always there for me. I read to her all the way through to evening, when a nurse would come and demand I eat dinner. Even if I wasn't hungry, she would want me to at least try. So I always would. Today was harder than it ever was.

It was getting very late. It had been dark outside for a while. He'd be coming soon. I took a long look at my wife and felt myself begin to cry again, and I went back

down to the cafeteria for some coffee. He was there waiting for me. Dressed entirely in black, face hidden. He held an odd looking gun, intended for me. "This is for your own good; you don't want to see tomorrow." I walked up to him and pulled off his hood. He was me.

"She wouldn't want this," I told him. "We have to let her go." We talked. He insisted that everything would only get worse. Nothing would ever get better. But she wouldn't want us to be stuck like this because of her for the rest of our lives. She would want us to find happiness. She would always be with us. We sat in silence for a while. He agreed. The clock on the wall ticked faintly. He faded away just at midnight. A nurse came to find me. It was Wednesday, the 18th. She was gone. It turns out that I died again tonight anyways. But at least now I can try to find new life.



## Special thanks

We would like to thank Professor Thompson and Professor Orlofsky for choosing the professors' picks this volume. We would also like to thank Professor Leach and Professor Dismukes for their critiques of the layout for the 2017-2018 publication.

**William Thompson** is an associate professor in Troy University's English department. He is also the editor of the *Alabama Literary Review*.

**Professor Michael Orlofsky** has been a fixture in the English Department for 29 years. He is six items shy of completing his "100 Orlofsky's Laws" for young writers—the most important of which is "writers know everything." He has been at work on a manuscript titled *Michelangelo in Rome*, set during the Florentine Renaissance.

**Beverly West Leach**, MFA – lecturer in Art and Design, has been teaching at Troy University since 2008. In 2016 She was awarded the Faculty Senate Excellence Award for outstanding teaching and service to Troy University. Beverly's course work is in the foundation studies of art and design where the focus is on the elements and principles that make up works of art along with various approaches and techniques necessary for young artists to be successful. Before coming to Troy, she and her husband lived in Baltimore, MD where she worked for 20 years in the field of Graphic Design. Currently Beverly teaches EDrawing, Digital Tools and Principles of Digital Design within the Art and Design program. When not teaching or making her own personal artworks in her studio she tends four honeybee hives as a beekeeper in Ozark, AL.

**Sara Dismukes** has been a member of the Troy Art and Design faculty since 2006. Her specialty is book publishing and she has a growing interest in motion graphics.

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## Letter from the Editors:

We would first like to thank the student writers, editors, and artists who put in the time and effort to help us make this publication. We also want to thank the numerous members of the faculty at the university for their efforts to make this year's *Rubicon* better than ever, especially Dr. Ben Robertson, our faculty advisor, who has mentored and guided us this semester, allowing us to grow and improve as a publication. All of our published pieces are chosen based purely on their content and structure, and we pride ourselves in being completely anonymous and honest when going over the works submitted.

Finally, we thank you, the reader, for showing support for *The Rubicon*. We hope you enjoy reading our publication as much as we enjoyed putting it together, and we hope to continue to grow as a literary journal and to be able to publish even more wonderful pieces written by the students at Troy University in the future.

