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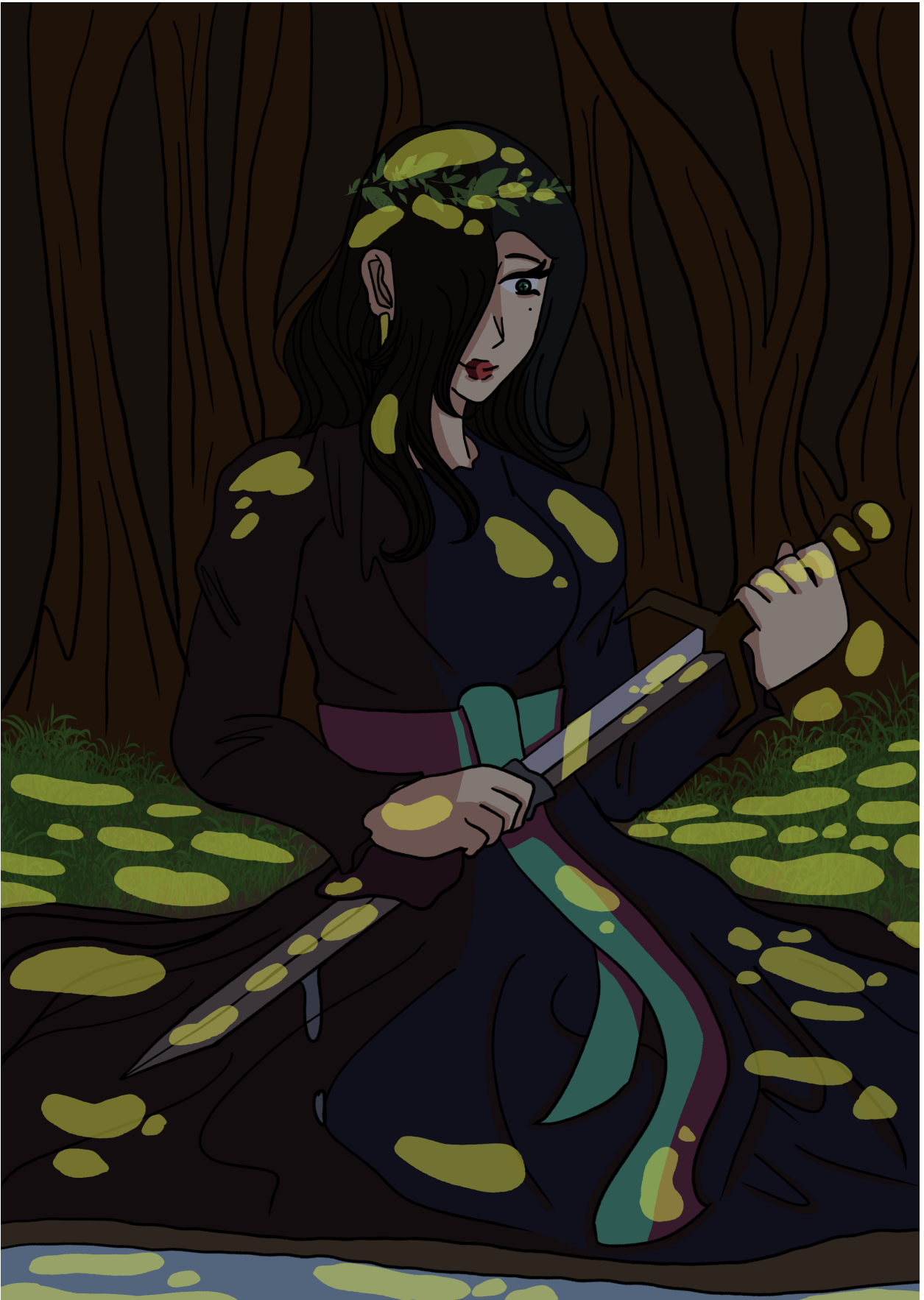
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Brood XIV

Cori Vought

When Juliette was seven years old, the cicadas came out. The memories are blurry now; glitched and unfocused like half-developed photos, but a few of them stand out. Piles of dead skin, shells clinging to the bark of trees and the side of her house, the slightly exciting smell of decay. The sickening crunch under her sandals as she walked to and from school, small hands clutching the straps of her backpack.

She remembers being afraid more than anything, sequestering herself in her room and listening to loud music to drown out the chirping that leaked through her walls. One morning, when the newness of the daylight seemed to make her forget, she looked out her window. The family dog, Harriet, a small terrier with shaggy brown fur, was lying out on the front lawn, curled on her side with her black eyes wide open. At the time Juliette had thought it strange that she was sleeping outside. Later, the vet would tell them in a manufactured, sorrowful tone that she had gorged herself to death on the cicada corpses and shells. They had a small burial, a headstone that her father carved himself. The freshly turned dirt was littered with cicada bodies the next day, and Juliette fantasized about a world in which she was brave enough to go outside and kick them away.

Seventeen years later, Harriet's grave is still there. Juliette stares down at it, at the layer of clovers settled comfortably on top of the soil. She can count the number of funerals she's been to on one hand: the dog, her dad, and Carrie. Out of the three, she had only cried at the latter. With Harriet, she was too young to understand the concept of death, and with her father she just could not manage to make herself, although her mother shed enough tears for the both of them.

"Jules!" her mother yells from inside. "What are you doing out there?"

Juliette looks up from the clovers. "Nothing."

"Come back inside."

Juliette does. The porch stairs groaned, just like everything else in the house; the ancient couch, the creaky floorboards, the bedframes. Her mother, too. She's seated in front of the television, her bad leg propped up on an ottoman.

"Can you get me some strawberries, dear? There's some fresh ones in the fridge."

Juliette washes the strawberries and puts them in a bowl, setting them down next to her.

"Don't forget to take your meds," Juliette says, going over them in her head. Painkillers for the knee, another to combat the dementia, another for the arthritis.

"Yes, yes, I know," her mother says, waving her hand in the air. She looks more alert than she usually does, smiling kindly. She looks old. Juliette supposes she always looked somewhat old, having been adopted when her mother was almost in her fifties, but seventy had hit her hard. The ailments that she had steadfastly ignored until she no longer could are showing themselves on her face, in the lines of her face and the slight shaking of her hands.

A shadow passes over her face, and she sighs. "I'm sorry, dear," she says. "You're too young to be taking care of your mother like this."

"It's okay," Juliette begins to wash the dishes. "I'm glad to."

She wishes she felt bad lying to her mother about this, but it's almost second nature to her at this point. In her teenage years she'd gotten so good at bending the truth that she wasn't sure her mother even knew what a genuine smile looked like on her face.

"Remember we have church tomorrow morning," her mother goes on. "We need to be there early. Wear something nice."

"Of course." The water swirls down the drain.

That night she falls asleep to the white noise from her phone. As she drifts off, some kind of chirping sound pierces through the static and bleeds into her dreams.

The next morning, she gets into her church clothes. It's been three years since she's worn a dress, and the way the fabric falls briefly takes her back to

being sixteen. She had also brought her suit, the one she had specially fitted for the wedding, thinking that maybe she would be brave enough to wear that instead, but looking at it now makes her feel nauseous. It looks so utterly alien against the backdrop of the ancient house riddled with ancient memories.

Jesus, nailed to his cross, stares down at her disdainfully from where he lives on the wall of the guest room. Juliette braids her hair into two plaits facing away from the mirror.

Church is a five minute drive from the house, and to get to the car they have to walk across the overgrown front lawn. Something crunches under her foot and she looks down and sees, among the snarled blades of leaves, the mangled skin cast of a cicada.

Her mother yells at her to hurry up, so she does. The ground crunches a few more times, but she doesn't stop to look. When she gets into the car she wipes the bottom of her shoes on the mat.

The old, falling apart building that serves as the Church seems somehow smaller than in her memory. Wasps buzz around a nest under the roof. The inside is freezing with AC, and goosebumps raise on Juliette's arms.

"Juliette!" That's Tammy, blue eyes piercing and just as cold as the air around her. "It's so nice to have you back with us. Why, you've gotten so big!"

Juliette says something soft and neutral, and by then the rest of the congregation has noticed her and they swarm towards her, buzzing.

She greets the reverend last, who looks exactly the same and hugs her warmly. He tells her he will give an extra special service for her, and she says thank you. Thank you so much.

The service itself is a blur of grape juice and stained glass. Juliette, fitting so well into the mold of her teenage self, focuses on one of the flickering flames of the candles and accelerates it into such fine focus that everything else melts into each other.

When they finally begin to file out, she spots a familiar head of red hair across the room. Flora catches her eye and smiles and waves.

Everyone migrates to the even more frigid basement, where there is a veritable feast wrapped in tin-

foil. Juliette grabs a paper plate and begins to spoon on servings of mashed potatoes and something green and mushy.

"Hi," Flora says, appearing at her side. "Want to sit together?"

"Sure."

They sit at the end of one of the fold out tables, facing each other. She registers an approving glance from her mother and tries to ignore it.

Flora is talking about how great it is to see her again. "I was worried about you, you know," she says.

"I'm fine."

"I'm so sorry about your wedding." The words are shiny and plastic. "My condolences."

Juliette smiles thinly. "Thank you."

Flora nods; her freckles shake and swim like flies. "It's good that you've come back. God helped me a lot when my mother passed. I know He'll guide you through it."

Juliette shook her head. "I'm not sure He cares about me much anymore."

"Of course He does," she says, leaning forward. "He brought you back to us."

Carrie's casket, the smooth oak of it. The violets at the funeral service. Her mother's polite refusal. Her mother's voice, tinny over the phone: you know, this is His way of saving your soul.

When she leaves, the tires of the car create a symphony over the amber corpses it rolls over. Juliette makes it to her room and collapses on the mattress, curling onto her side. Her hands scramble through her pockets, trying to find her earbuds to drown out the chirping outside.

Pausing, she listens for a second, trying to isolate a sound from the white noise. It's something sharp and staccato, coming from the dresser. She sits up and slides off the bed, approaching it warily. She grasps the handle firmly and pulls it all the way open, the rust singing on the hinges.

A small avalanche of orange and yellow translucence cascades onto the ground and covers her shoes. Hundreds and hundreds of empty shells, cicada shaped absences. One that is barely alive and half-free of its skin is writhing on the wooden bottom of the dresser, making a quiet racket.

Juliette stands there, in her own shining ocean,
thinking that this is what it must have been like
inside Harriet, next to her small, still beating heart.
She leans over and lifts the struggling thing into the
palm of her hand and watches, slowly, as it crawls
out of itself.

Petrichor Willow Johnson



Untitled Julia Olsen



Orange

Aya Nishikawa

Tangy and sweet.
Licks of bleeding juice leave my
lips sticky and wet.
Fruit bowls of sunsets and autumn leave
tastebuds greedy for more.

Thursdays and Tuesdays in October.
Fives and sevens with a touch of
chopped carrots.
The soft touch of the sun on late summer days.
Goldfish swim near koi.

Bouts of laughter and
dancing a tango.
Scuffs of feet continue until the evening's end.

Cherry Blossoms Audrey Hayes



Asterisms

Cori Vought

The astronaut is three years into his ten-year mission when he starts to go insane. It surprises him a little bit, to be honest. He thought he would last longer; or, at least that's what the preliminary mental strength exams from pre-launch had told him. Candidates for the mission were chosen on account of many different factors—physical ability, lack of familial connections, etc— but psychiatric stability was one of the more important ones, given that the person would be alone in space for a sizable chunk of their life. He had a clean record and passed every test with flying colors.

In other words, he expected to last a little longer before waking up to a single green leaf gliding through the air in front of him as if lifted by some foreign Earth-bound breeze. It's big and pointed, nothing like the small, somewhat wilted things growing on the potato plants on the ship. He blinks hard a few times as if that will dislodge it from his vision, which it somehow doesn't. It travels all the way to the far wall, which it bumps against and then hovers, shivering in the cold. Unraveling himself from the bedding, the astronaut pushes himself off from the wall and goes floating towards it, arm outstretched. There are a few moments where he's sure his hands will pass right through but when his pointer finger gently nudges it there is no mistaking the solidness. Taking it gently between two fingers, he contemplates. He tries logic: perhaps it had gotten mixed up in his luggage from Earth and somehow survived for three years in space? It sounds doubtful even to him. He tucks it into his sleeping bag before going about the chores, and it's still there when he returns in the evening.

That night he makes dinner for himself, tearing open one of the plastic packets that he's learned to hate. When he reaches inside there isn't the familiar rough texture of dehydrated food

but instead something loose and dry. He watches, somewhat astounded, as a handful of soil rises into the air and separates into thousands of individual particles. They travel slowly, trying desperately to get away from one another and spreading out to form a sort of constellation. It smells like dirt and the familiarity of it shakes him a little. He would let them go forever if it wasn't a danger to the instruments on the ship that could be thrown into disorder by any small disruption. He reaches out to grab some but they slip through his fingers and dance away. He spends two hours trying to round it all up again and realizes before going to bed that he never ate.

When he becomes irredeemably bored and doesn't want to think any longer about his loose grip on reality he rewatches the most recent videos sent up to him of his best friend talking about current events on the ground. Something about the brewings of a war with Russia that should make him afraid but instead it feels thrilling, like watching the prologue section of an apocalypse movie before the title card comes on screen. He clicks on to the next video, which is mostly his friend talking about the weather. The astronaut misses having rain and clouds and sun. He can sometimes see the sun from the porthole on the ship but it looks glaringly bright and dominating and lonely and nothing like a summer day.

Even though it's a bad idea he digs through the back files to find an old recording sent to him ten months after takeoff. Lilah, black fur matted, lying on her side at the vet's office. Taken in an effort to let him say goodbye from dozens of millions of miles away. She breathes and her ear twitches. The camera dips and she goes out of frame for a second before the feed stops. He clicks replay.

When he looks up it's been half an hour or three, he's not sure. All he knows is at some point vines have started to crawl up the wall opposite of him, tendrils clawing their way up. They're budding with green and near the base leaves are already unfurling tentatively. He's floating in the middle of the room and when it rotates and he doesn't, everything goes upside down and the vines look like roots instead. He floats and watches the vines rather than his dying

dog and it's only a little bit easier.

The astronaut finds that he doesn't mind being insane. He likes waking up to an unfamiliar fragrance and finding gardenias sprouting at the seams of the walls. He doesn't mind looking up from taking notes on some of his tests to find the glass broken on a microscope and the leaves of a snake plant bursting out. One day he finds mint growing in a cabinet and wants to make tea but it's markedly difficult to boil water in space so he opts to just chew on the leaves instead. He thinks it's the freshest thing he's ever tasted.

Ground control radios in to check on him sometimes to ask how he's doing. He sometimes thinks they just do it to see if he's broken yet, so he doesn't give them the satisfaction. Tells them everything is going great and wow has it been three years already? The time goes so fast up here.

One evening, he should be strapped to the wall and sleeping but instead he's floating along in front of the window, hair that he hasn't cut in a year and a half floating in front of his eyes and partially obstructing his view into the void. In a few days he'll be able to see Neptune. He finds he doesn't really care.

When he rotates so he's looking at the floor (which might also be the ceiling, as far as he knows), he realizes that it's now entirely grass. He kicks off the ceiling (floor?) to touch it, and when he does, he digs his fingers in the soil underneath hard enough so that he doesn't float away. He pulls one hand out and it emerges clutching clay and dirt and he thinks maybe if he digs deep enough he'll come out the other side and the sky will be blue again.

Through the ripped-up bits of grass and dirt in the air he sees ivy fall from the ceiling in sheets, almost completely obscuring the view of the outside. Flowers burst out of the ground and open their faces, drinking in the artificial light. Every bit of machinery, every gunmetal gray surface and wire and screen is lost behind the vast greenness that comes from somewhere unseen.

Tendrils of ferns reach out and circle his wrists and ankles, tethering him in the air. For a moment he pretends that he isn't insane and that everything—the gardenias and the vines and the maple leaf— is

real. Somewhere one thousand and ninety-five days away from Earth the astronaut closes his eyes and lets himself be taken home.

The Sea of Rhaz-Korran

Aidan Horgan

There are many seas upon this earth.

Perhaps known to you are the seas of Colara and Nih, where the waters are blue and the sea-birds fly. If that is the case, then I need not tell you how the tides wash back and forth across the beaches, carrying with them detritus once thought lost to the ages, and how the vessels of mighty princes and poor fishermen alike alight on these shores, seeking the grand cities of Talal, and Nimeh, and their markets.

Further still from these cradles of culture and society is the great Eastern Sea, the sea where men and women worship their strange gods upon the surf. There is the Berenil Sea, where the waters are red with spilled blood. There is the Sea of Sages, where one can float upon the water for days on end. The Sea of Rene, high-waved; the Deepest Sea, strong-currented; the Sea of Kirin, shipless.

And then there is the Sea of Rhaz-Korran.

Farther than the farthest outpost of mankind, the Sea of Rhaz-Korran lies to the far north, out of sight and out of mind of the blissfully ignorant masses of humanity. It lies beyond the great tundras of the north, and uncounted vast mountain-ranges.

You may have heard tales of this sea, and how it stretches, boundless, past the horizon. Perhaps you have heard how it lies still, and how no ships can be seen upon its waters.

Let me corroborate these rumors.

I came to the Sea of Rhaz-Korran much by accident, and through a combination of bad luck and ill judgment which I shall not reveal in these pages.

It was last year when I first came to stand upon the rocky shores of this terrible sea, and when I first beheld the black waters that would consume me. Let me attempt, as far as words allow, to describe the sea to you.

If you have ever glanced upon one of the fairer seas that I have mentioned, you will know how the tides wash back and forth, and how, on clearer days, you may look beneath the waters and watch the scurrings of little sea-creatures and the wash of plants and algae.

It is not so in the Sea of Rhaz-Korran, however. The waters lay still and black, and if you venture to toss a flat stone over the water it shall sink without disturbing the water. If you stand with your bare feet in the waters, which are surprisingly warm despite their far northern climate, you shall still feel the wash of stray plant-strands around your legs, but whereas in other seas the plants cling to your feet like shipwrecked sailors returning to land at last, in Rhaz-Korran their thorny stems bite at you; tiny arms attempting to pull you into the depths of the sea.

And at night, when you lay beneath the shelter of your tent and hear the waves crashing against the rocks, you may hear a peculiar sound as the unnatural things that lurk beneath the waves keen in the darkness.

But perhaps I have gone on long enough describing the strangeness of this place. I shall begin my tale.

Who I was before coming to the Sea of Rhaz-Korran is immaterial, but let it be known I was a prosperous trader of furs in the northland. When I found myself at the banks of the sea, with my long caravan of horses and donkeys, I built a lodge by its shores, where in the daytime I would sit upon my rocking-chair, beholding the endless sea, with my clay pipe to my lips and half a pound of shag tobacco.

Once or twice I attempted sailing out upon the waters of Rhaz-Korran, but any attempt that I made was doomed to failure. The first vessel I made caught fire in the nighttime, while the second noiselessly sank beneath the waves on its first voyage.

After that I never tried to go out upon the sea again, and though I sometimes took my gelding along the edge of the sea to try to find its end, I was rebuffed by the mountains that guard its flanks.

All in all my life upon the banks of Rhaz-Korran was one of mystery and fruitless inquiry, and though

in the far south my fur-trade prospered, I was still raptly fascinated with the depths of that terrible sea. I had come by the habit of, every morning, coming to stand with my toes in the sand, letting the waters of Rhaz-Korran lap over my bare feet.

Though everyday I came to stand in the water, never did I go further, or peer beneath the thin surface of the waves. For those black waters brought with them a promise of terrible secrets that I dared not yearn for.

Though for a long time I remained adamant in my resolve, I could not last. Each day I spent longer and longer with my toes in the sea of Rhaz-Korran, and I took a step forward every day, until before long the water went up to my ankles, then to my thighs, and finally to my knees.

And it was then when I finally abandoned the frail promises of the sun and the surface-world, and walked into the depths of Rhaz-Korran. I do not remember much about those first days in the blackness, only that I stepped beneath the waves and did not seem to drown. The analytical part of my mind that remained scoffed at this, but the rest of me continued onwards.

The water was always surrounding me, enveloping my body in blackness and weighing me down. Nevertheless, I kept walking, down the steep coastal slope that led into the depths of the world.

Early in my journey, if I chanced to look up, I might see the dim spectre of the sun in the heavens high above me, or the stars, which were so bright in this northern part of the world. But before long those tokens of the surface were gone, and I found myself enveloped in the dark waters of the Sea of Rhaz-Korran.

Rhaz-Korran is no natural place, and the deeper I descended beneath the waves the lighter it got. Soon I found my way lit by the great eyes of cyclopean creatures that floated above me in the blackness, making their way blindly across the land. By their light I saw the remains of sharp metal ships that had sailed these seas in bygone years, and from the bones of the sailors that littered their decks, I came to know of the peoples that lived at the banks in days

long past.

Further still I found the ruins of buildings that had been constructed at the bottom of the sea, and the inhabitants of these ruined halls were inhuman creatures, like the fish-men I had heard tales of in my youth. Wandering through the remnants of this lost culture I found many strange texts written with runes that I could hardly bear to look upon, and even then I began to feel some strain on my faculties as the sea closed in around me.

On what might have been my third, or perhaps my fourth day in Rhaz-Korran, one of the great things that lit the undersea world came near me, and I beheld it, in all its terrible glory. I think that was when I started to break, for after staring into that bestial face with the dozens of glowing eyes, I began to see many things that even my most whimsical self would begin to doubt.

I had been continuously walking down during my first few days in Rhaz-Korran, but eventually I came to a stop on a plane of black stone that stretched under the sea. I walked on, and on, the light-giving creatures which I had by now left behind swimming high above me, like tiny stars. In this part of Rhaz-Korran I saw roving bands of spear-wielding creatures that wore the skulls of men, but that seemed to pay me no mind as I passed them by.

I saw them do battle with each other, however, and the stories I could tell of white blood floating like ink in the water and terrible war-cries would chill the marrow in your bones.

It took me many days to pass the plain of the skull-wearers, and when I did I found myself standing upon a lofty precipice which was the highest I had ever heard tell of, in story or in legend. At the bottom of the precipice, and far in the distance, I saw a great glow of red light, a glow which I assumed must come from the fires that burned in the very bowels of the world.

But despite any misgivings I may have had, I strode off the precipice, and after the passing of a day or two, I reached the bottom.

Here, in the depths of the deepest sea in all the realms, the purple-red rocks were littered with pits that seemed to lead into places that were somehow

deeper still. From these pits great tentacles flailed and writhed, the appendages of some monstrous horror, the size of which I hardly dared to believe. These tentacles bristled with suckers and were covered in blackened algae, and I was reminded of the terrible legends of sea-beasts and monsters which I had once scoffed at.

Still, while the great tentacles attempted to draw me into their pits, I remained elusive and continued to walk past them. During this time, the twilight of my journey, I spotted great abandoned cities stretching hundreds of miles, towards the distant sky, and greater still, serpentine monstrosities that twisted through the waters, dwarfing the mighty walls of the cities.

The beasts were blacker than the darkest night and more terrible than anything I had yet beheld, and I thanked the distant sun that the black waters shrouded them and that I could not behold them in all their twisted glory. A single one of these fiends would have been enough to level even the strongest armies of men, and so I counted myself lucky as I walked under their shadows and into the domain of the red light.

This was the brightest place I had seen in Rhaz-Korran, for there always seemed to be, in the far distance, a great red light that pulsed and beat like a living heart. By this time I had abandoned the last vestige of propriety and humanity, and I tore off the final scraps of my clothes and scuttled towards the light on all fours, like a twisted dog following the call of its master.

And at last, I found the heart of the light, a great pit at the farthest reach of Rhaz-Korran, at the bottom of which the light pulsed, bright and terrible.

I remembered how my heart beat as I plunged into that hole, and how I fell for what might have been months or even years. And eventually I alighted upon my feet, and quavering, I stood before the source of the light.

There is no way for me to describe what I saw in words, for the heart of Rhaz-Korran was surely something no man was meant to see; something that had lain there, undiscovered, since the elder days which had long ago been swallowed by the mists of

time. Nevertheless, the thing was ginormous, larger still than the serpentine guards which had defended it high above. It was mottled with thousands of red veins, all of which beat with the red light I had beheld, and as I neared it, it shared its thoughts with me.

I learned, then, of the terrible power of Rhaz-Korran, and how she had lain at the bottom of the sea for years undiscovered. Beholding her I came to learn the solutions to the mysteries that had perplexed scholars for hundreds of years, and the darkest secrets of our earth were obvious before her.

The reader may wonder how I still retain enough sanity to grip my pen and write the account of Rhaz-Korran, and how I came to leave the depths of that accursed ocean. Well, I say that I did not, for even now I toil in the darkest pits of the earth, under the watchful gaze of Rhaz-Korran. She compels my hand, and guides me, and when I finish my narrative I shall enclose it in a bottle of undersea glass and trust that it finds its way into the hands of another mortal man.

My fellow, I beseech you to seek out the Sea of Rhaz-Korran, for our great mother, who had slumbered at the bottom of the sea since the first eons of this planet, loves us all, and she will bless those who find her with knowledge and great power. So, I say, make a journey to the north and follow the steps I have taken. Seek the pit of Rhaz-Korran, and I will gladly shake your hand and welcome you into the circle of our great mother.

There we will dance, and cavort, and revel for uncounted aeons, in the shadow of Rhaz-Korran until the end of time, or until all of humanity is swallowed into our fold.

Join me, in the glorious, accursed sea of Rhaz-Korran.

election '24

Cori Vought

under the kitchen floorboards
two beetles greet each other
one is a high school math teacher
and the other just started prozac
for its depression. they say beetles
can't be depressed, but the really
wretched ones can. this one tore
at its antennae until they snapped
clean in two and they hang limply
from its head as it says:

how're you doing?

*oh, you know. as well
as i can under the
circumstances.*

*can you believe it?
terrible. just terrible.*

*i don't understand.
we did everything
we could.*

they have to talk quietly,
though, because there are treading
feet nearby and beetles are small,
really, and very insignificant in
the grand scheme of things. easy
to crush. and wouldn't that be
terrible. just terrible.

Untitled Anne Westerberger



Untitled Aldrin Gazio



The Dangers of Artistic Perfection

Astrid Determan

To Frederick Solomon, March 30, 1850

If you find this note Fred, (and I know it will be you, for who else would bother looking?) I have only this to say: you were right. You were right when you told me not to bother Nilsson, when you warned me against growing too close to Her. You were right that night you saw us together, saw me slip my arm around Her waist, saw my hand fall through Her ephemeral skin. It was not a trick of the light, and for this lie (as well as for the many other violations of our friendship), I am truly sorry. All I can offer you now is a sincere apology. That, and an explanation which, I hope, will bring you at least a glimmer of satisfaction.

The distance I have maintained these last few years was neither conscious nor controlled. She had a way, you see, of pulling me into Her orbit that saw me pulled out of many others. I think you'll find this little metaphor of mine appropriate. We both know She was a true star, and my

God how She shone. Do you remember that first night, at the Lacrimosa Theater? Watching Her play the audience like a fiddle? She was portraying Her namesake. Oh, how I longed to be those flowers, held softly in Her ivory fingers as She danced and spun like wild wind. And then, in the

last act, how I prayed I was the water, that I may engulf Her, soothe Her as She drew Her last breath. Even now, a spark of purest inspiration passes through me at the recollection. You know the rest, of course. I couldn't let Her go; not when I had even the smallest sliver of a chance to represent Her myself. It seemed divine intervention when I found her name in the papers, under Nilsson's. But did I tell you ever of the words I exchanged with him? He was a peculiar man. Sunken eyes, like a cadaver. He was so genial, though. So eager to do business with me, then a nobody in the industry. Looking back, I recog-

nize his behavior for what it was: desperation. But why didn't I see it at the time? Why didn't I question his lack of resistance? Surely any agent worth his salt would grip onto a talent such as Ophelia Roth with tooth and nail? It was my own immediate devotion to Her, my complete and utter dependence, born of just one encounter, that blinded me to the truth. I do, however, remember the last words Kaj Nilsson spoke to me. "Don't grow too fond of her. She's bound to fade."

Our first meeting did nothing but stoke the flame. She was not beautiful; it is too sweet, too innocent a word for someone of Her range. She was compelling. Absurdly charming. She was everybody and nobody, and larger than the sum of Her parts. At one moment She would twitter and chirp like a dewy-eyed schoolgirl, at the next gaze mournfully out with the countenance of a life-weary widow. Of all the faces She wore, not one failed to engross me. All the world's a stage, and She played Her role to utter perfection.

Forgive me. These words will mean nothing to you. Reading them back to myself, I see it was Her influence working through my hand. Let me return to the facts.

I worked harder for Her than I have for any actor I have represented. I pulled every little thread, called in every favor I'd accrued. She was all over the West End. She starred in all of Shakespeare's works, and reprised her role as Ophelia several times; I made sure of that. I watched in all-consuming pride as She eclipsed the other actors like they were mere shadows on a cave wall.

At first, we rarely spent time together. In fact, in between her roles, it was as if she had never existed. I would send letter after letter, and when they went unanswered, I would call upon her at her apartment. She was never home. Entire months would go by, during which my unease would mount. Had this magical being, perfect creation of the muses, finally

escaped my grasp?

It was a mere illusion of my fancy, I would tell myself, that made it so Her picture on my wall began to dim. And then, invariably, I would find a new starring role for Her, a character of sufficient depth and complexity to house Her omniscient soul. New eyes from which to see. And She would return to me.

The world was besotted with Ophelia Roth. You were too, my friend. Despite my altered state, I was not oblivious to your own admiration for Her. Although I suspect it planted in you seeds of the most unbearable envy at the time, you must count yourself lucky it was I who ultimately fell in with Her.

During those times when She was tied up in some new production, She would frequent my office to practice Her lines in front of me. Never once did She bring a script. I remember one moment in particular; it was during her time as Saint Joan. The door to my office creaking open, the faint smell of incense and metal and ancient dust. There She was, dark hair sliced angularly, soft limbs draped in chain-mail, pale, specter eyes glazed over. Do you know that her French accent never faltered during her entire visit? And when She walked back out the door, She smiled Her martyr's smile, and left a kiss on my cheek that burned like a funeral pyre. But beauty of this kind cannot last in our sinner's world.

You know this next part all too well. I wonder, my friend, did some secret part of you relish the call you made to me on that fateful Saturday morning? Your voice was so solemn, your face so stoic as you detailed the ever-changing demands of the writers, and what it would mean for our line of work. You must have known that the second the door shut behind you I would hasten to contact my Ophelia, and that when I did, I would again receive no answer. The illness to which I succumbed during those long weeks grew in intensity the longer I was separated from Her. Incidentally, thank you again, old friend, for that small comfort your visits brought to a broken, unworthy man. It was on March 23rd, exactly two months to the day of the writer's strike, that I summoned the last of my energy to call upon Her apartment once more. I knocked against Her door. Gently, at first, and then harder and harder until the

sound boomed down the empty corridors. I felt a sickly heat rising in me and knew in my heart that only a glimpse of my Ophelia could douse the fire threatening to burn me through. I tried the handle; it gave immediately.

You will struggle, no doubt, to believe what I am about to tell you, especially in light of my apparent 'madness,' and yet every word of it is the truth.

At first, I could not credit my sight. The door had swung open, revealing nothing but a bare, brick wall. I immediately reached out my hands to feel it, thinking surely, it was a mirage conjured by my fevered mind. And yet, against my palm, it was as cold and steadfast and real as any brick wall I remembered. I ran back to my office with the frenzied desire to gaze once more upon Her face, even if only in a static image. Upon entering, however, I found that the Ophelia Roth of Her photograph, the one that hung saint-like above my desk, had vanished completely. In Her place was an empty, mocking darkness. I stared at it, bile rising in my throat. How dastardly, how impossibly cruel to have found and conquered Her, the Empress of Mirrors Herself, only to have Her torn violently from my grip. It was then that the fever overtook me, and I collapsed before the blank picture.

When I did rise, days later, it was not as the man you have come to know. The fever had passed, replaced by a mortal cold that infused every bone of my body. I wandered dreamlike across the streets and into the Lacrimosa Theater. I sat down among the patrons to take in the show. Hamlet. I watched with mounting disdain as these dull, lifeless imitations of people rattled off

their lines. Though all were thoroughly repulsive in their plainness, it was not Laertes, nor Horatio, nor Hamlet himself that sparked the deepest ire in me, but rather, the wretched thing that called itself Ophelia. Her movements, instead of graceful, were odd and irregular like the twitching of a cockroach. Her words, devoid of their meaning, were sandpaper to the ears. But worst of all was her sincerity, the obvious and sanctimonious conviction in all she did. Every line was the deepest sacrilege, spoken as the highest exaltation - that one may smile and smile

and be a villain. I watched in horrified fascination as she stripped one scene after another of anything honest and beautiful. Then, an error that stopped my heart beating. She had changed the pronouns of her song to her father - had she? Was I the only one who noticed?

And will she not come again?

And will she not come again?

No, no, she is dead;

Go to thy deathbed;

She never will come again.

A fury surpassed me quite beyond anything I have ever experienced nor believed it naturally possible to feel. In an instant, I leapt to the stage, clutching my pocket knife, and drove it several times through her fraudulent heart. If the audience reacted, I could not hear it over the rush of my blood. Her own spillings curved in rivulets around her. For a moment, all was still, and the thought entered my mind that, laying prostrate in her crimson river, she resembled the true Ophelia more than she ever had when air still filled her lungs.

That is all I have to tell. I fled, as you know. And now, a final request of you, my friend. If you find my body, floating along the river or washed ashore, lay it gently by the riverbank. Ignore the bloating, the paleness, the other ugly marks of death. Spread across it fennel, rosemary, daisies, and make believe it is beautiful.

I would call this note a confession, except I feel no remorse. I feel nothing besides a wicked desire to be reunited with Ophelia Roth.

She was every artistic impulse I've ever had, and all the ones too brilliant to have blossomed from my mortal intellect. She was Obsession Incarnate, and I loved Her terminally. I hope to see Her when my own curtain falls.

Goodbye my boon companion, and fare thee well.

Damian Wentworth

Nausea Willow Johnson



Untitled Anne Westenberger



Soil and Mirrors

Audrey Hayes

In the heart of every person there is a concave in the shape of a raindrop yet to sever from the pool from which it was born, and it is from the depths of this hollow that all words of thought flow into sentience, past the lungs and beyond the throat and into the air that surrounds us all, and yet even as words of thought emerge from this well as deep as eternity and as moist as a heavy cloud on a dewy spring day, yet more words emerge from the shallow soil that lies so much closer to the air, that which absorbs the rain from the summer sky, only to release it again after naught but a day, though the well within reaches deep as the root of the ancient oak, to the soul through a depth like the space which holds the stars themselves, though the well holds not just shallow impressions of the rain, but a vial of that which lies within, though this, what enters the air comes from the soil, from the absorbed then ejected, but a mirror of that which surrounds it, the superficiality permeates the air like a haze suffocating the well of originality from which words of thought emerge, and for a while it is fine, and the cycle continues, but, after too long left untouched, that in the depths of the well turns stale, and stifled, and rotted, until it has not the power to flow up into the world, and when this well in the heart of us all can no longer flow, when we are but mirrors of each other, reflecting back and forth the light of our sun, that my friend is when our trouble begins.

Skirts in the Spring

Chioma Ukaobasi

When reunited with their one true love,
 They flail and dance under the afternoon sun.
 When their love has gone away,
 replaced with piercings of unrelenting fury,
 They wallow,
 and look for cover as they suffer.
 Waiting for their love to return again,
 under the afternoon sun.

Elegy to my refrigerator

Felix Bobowski

The kitchenette is now tepid,
Not even half past eight.
How will my hunger stay at bay,
When I can no longer refrigerate?

It was the best part of my day
Opening up its great white doors.
Its fresh produce would fill me up,
No need to shop in any stores.

Replacement is easy,
My new appliance I will adore.
Hunger comes to those who wait,
And wait ... I cannot anymore.

Engulfed

Sam Broquard

Hurl your wrath at me,
Spit it like ashy smoke
Creeping down my neck.
I will take it
And I will keep it,
Hold it deep within my soul.
I will nurture, and I will tame it
Until it is my own.
And once it is, I will not put it on you.
Till the billowing smoke
Turns to raging flames
Licking at the edge of my being.
And still, I will not release it,
Because it now belongs to me
And I belong in it.

Untitled Aldrin Gazio



Untitled Aldrin Gazio



Lupulella Lunabelle

Nora Lester

said the Jackal, 'do not mistake
me. I am a trickster, not a child.'
dressed in lace and perched upon
a pillow pet. ladybug smiles.

said the Jackal, with no teeth
prided for pointelle. legal ivory
prided painted coal black claws
crowned antenna without cause.

said the Jackal, pink mottled tongue
in maulless maw. virgin silk tied
in gentle lead. 'do not mistake,'
said the Jackal. it does not leave.

'I am a trickster.' in a child's room,
walls papered wild green. paper grass.
red faux feathers. paper bird. paper gore.
scent-marked papers. clean carpet floor.

in a corner, its scavenged treats: ham.
gold bread. chocolate. red jam. meringue.
said the Jackal, 'I am not a
child.' bares a barren toothless smile.

MANHATTANITE Cristina Bail



Viva

Ruth Pournelle

“Say, you look like you need a cup of coffee.”

The woman who told me this certainly had a vested interest; she was holding a coffee pot. One aproned hip cocked deep to the side, she raised a thinly plucked eyebrow and extended her empty hand.

I shifted in my seat until my back was straight as could be. The waitress’s approach made me feel slightly affronted, as I was already on edge, and I’d never been one for black coffee, or for adding any of the queasy little packets neatly arranged next to the ketchup. But I didn’t object, both because I knew I looked haggard, and because I had a vested interest in accepting that coffee. See, I hadn’t slept in thirty hours, and that was partly because I was looking for Sarah Dunsen.

I was fairly sure, from more than her name tag, that I’d found her. The chapel receptionist had stopped giggling just long enough to give me a precise, if mean-spirited, description: late thirties, boney limbs and a substantial torso, like a chicken. Smoker’s voice, and a penchant for this velvet red lipstick that made her skin look yellow. She had been spot on.

I scooted my empty mug forward and said, “Thank you, Sarah.”

Her long acrylic nails clicked against the pot as she poured. The spout was achingly small. Several times, I opened my mouth, hovered for a second, and then closed it. I couldn’t figure out the phrasing, the approach. It wasn’t an articulate topic to begin with.

“You got a question, honey?”

“Ah, yes.” I scratched my temple and blurted out, “You are Sarah Dunsen, right?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Depends on who’s asking. Who’re you?”

“John.”

“Everyone’s John in Las Vegas.”

“Er, John Laurent.”

“What is that, French?”

“Possibly. I’m not too sure.” I pushed out a breath. “I’m looking for someone, and I was told you could help me.”

She set down the coffee. I felt her eyes trace from my collar down to my loafers, then back to the collar of my shirt. I remembered the splotch of mayo staining the cloth. I hadn’t changed it since the drive here.

“You have a ring tan, but no ring on your finger.” I looked down and realized she was right. “That means you’re either looking for trouble, or you ran into some already.”

I paused to consider her question. “I suppose it’s the prior. More like trouble ran away from me.”

“Hence the missing ring?”

I nodded.

To my surprise, she grinned, lopsided like her hips. “Well then, sure, I’m Sarah.” She pronounced it like Sar-rah, stressing the r. “Who’s your trouble?”

“Debbie Jean.” Her face went blank. “She came through here, just last week. Got married to Cal Carrington, so I guess she’s Debbie Carrington now. Not a pretty name.”

Sarah rubbed her collarbone. “Fuzzy. Keep talking.”

“You witnessed her wedding.”

“John, let me tell you, I’ve witnessed a lot of weddings—they’re right across from the bar I work Tuesdays, and it pays a nice, flat rate. I don’t remember names, I remember people. Tell me about her.”

Trying to picture her in my head, I found myself especially stumped. “She’s, uh, real pretty. Real nice woman, with nice hair. It was short, like ear length—no, it was down to her shoulders. I think she complained about needing a cut before she left. Anyway, it was brown.”

“Forgive my assumption, but it sounds to me like you didn’t know the girl.”

“She is my fiancée.”

“Well, she was your fiancée. ‘Till she ran away with the...” She snapped her fingers, then looked at me.

“The lifeguard.” I looked down into my coffee.

“That’s rough. Hey, can I get you anything?” She fumbled in her apron for a notepad. “Eggs, ba-

con? Gerry makes grandma pancakes, soft as a baby's butt."

I paled at the thought. "No thank you."

Sarah frowned. She pressed the tip of her pen to her lip, and said very seriously, "I think you need a little something. It'll give me a little time to think about this Debbie Jean, you know. I'm starting to see her, but—"

"I'll take a fried egg. Sunny side up."

"There we go. That wasn't so hard, was it? Coming right up, John." She swiveled toward the kitchen.

I decided to give the coffee a try. It tasted like scorched earth. I pushed it to the side, and took a moment to look around. Maybe it was the part of the city I was in, but it seemed to me that, in the sunlight, Vegas didn't quite shine.

Maud's Diner had a low ceiling and wide windows along the front. Through them, I could see the beauty shops and Chinese carry-outs on the other arm of the strip mall. There were no booths, just square tables and metal chairs with deceptively firm cushions.

The inhabitants, sparse on a late Wednesday morning, were similarly proletarian. Two men in overalls playing cards, six young women crammed around one table like an over-petalled flower. In the corner, a guy, hung over as I've ever seen, dropped a glob of bacon grease onto a collared shirt that may have, prior to last night, been white. I felt my own mayo stain, and grimaced.

A plate clinked down in front of me. "Here you are, honey."

The egg, yolk still gleaming gold, looked undeniably jolly. My stomach rumbled in response.

"I knew you were hungry," Sarah said as I slit the yolk free and forked a piece to my tongue. "I could tell by your eyes. It's a sense you get, after waitressing so long." She said it so plainly it could only have been true. "Now, where were we?"

I covered my mouth as I chewed. "Debbie Jean. I need to know where she went."

The waitress nodded slowly. "Right, right. And if you don't mind me asking, why do you need to know?"

I spluttered a laugh. "Because she's my fiancée!"

"And how did that arrangement come to be? I mean, the Debbie I saw seemed pretty tied to this Cal."

I winced. "Tied, huh?"

"How'd you meet?"

"At a holiday party. The Christmas before last. She was visiting home on winter break, and I'd just finished law school. We knew about each other, and she looked nice in a blue velvet dress, what else can I say? I mean, her parents had talked to mine, and we had mutual friends. It was a good match, everyone said so. We never officially planned the wedding, but I always made time to see her, and we had good conversation."

All while I spoke, Sarah continued to bob her head. Her mouth was the most expressive part of her, pinching and stretching that lipstick so that it was a marvel it didn't cover her face. "Then she ran off with the lifeguard."

"Jeez, will you stop saying it like that?" I scraped up another piece of egg and stared at it. "They went to high school together, her and Cal. She was supposed to finish college in a month and come live with me."

"Well, you're taking it real well. Usually when I see men in this kind of situation, they're staggering around drunker than a fish and weeping like a child. I don't see any tears in that coffee cup."

"Don't get me wrong. I am upset, but mostly I don't get it, Sarah. I mean, she never graduated. If she didn't know what she wanted, she could've switched majors. Stayed a few more years. But everyone back home thinks I did something. If I did, and I knew, I could've fixed it. Now, she's a smart girl, and maybe she wasn't thinking, but she knows better than this. I just don't get it."

Sarah looked away from me, toward the window and outside. Her lips quirked left, and then pressed together. "I told you I've seen a lot of marriages, and I have. I've seen a lot of impulsive brides. Hell, every damn bride I've seen has been one. But I can always tell which women mean it. It's a sense you get, after witnessing so long." She was silent for a few seconds. "And, John, this Debbie Jean... she knew what she wanted."

I looked down at my plate, smeared yellow. The shiny silverware, the Formica table. My cold, full mug. "I just don't get it," I repeated.

Sarah's rasping voice took on a gentler, coaxing tone. "Okay, John, if that's Debbie Carrington..." I frowned at the name. She picked up my empty plate but left the mug. "Who're you?" My stare must have given myself away, because she quickly explained, "People like to talk about themselves. It makes them feel better. Like, I can tell you that I have been eyeing the most gorgeous little handbag down at K Street Boutique. You better tip me well, all right? I'm not letting that darling go."

I stared down at the napkin I'd put onto my lap. Now that I thought about it, I didn't much think about myself. "Well, Sarah, I'm a lawyer now. I work for a fine practice back in Albany. Injury claims, mostly. I just got a mortgage on a house, right off Main Street. I think I'm a level-headed guy, but I've got to be serious, and hardworking. I drove the whole way here and only stopped for one night." I fold my hands, feeling the ring tan more than I'd ever felt the ring. "Shoot, if I don't come back with Debbie, I'm all the town is ever going to talk about, and it won't be for being hardworking."

"Do you like being an injury lawyer? I had an ex who was an injury lawyer. At least, until he caused the injury, if you know what I mean."

I scowled, seized by an inexplicable surge of irritation. "Hey, it's a job! I wouldn't think you like waitressing or witnessing too much."

"Then why was that the first thing you told me when I asked who you are?"

Her gaze had a gravity to it. I felt like a pinned butterfly. Back home, my father had them in his office, just behind where he sat. When I stepped out of line, he'd have me sit in that chair right across from him like a business associate. I was small, and the chair was smaller, so I'd have to stretch my neck just to look at him. I couldn't remember the last time I'd sat in that chair, or why I remembered that now.

"I know who I am," I insisted, and I repeated it again, like it could change something. "I know who I am."

"Then what does it matter you're the talk of the

town?"

"It matters." My voice sounded hesitant in my head, so I deepened it as I instructed the waitress, "I need you to tell me where my fiancée went."

Sarah pressed her lips together. "Well, I need to go put this plate back, and I also need to tell you something you're not gonna want to hear. Do you want it now, or later?"

Her eyes narrowed, so I narrowed mine too. Across the diner, that cluster of girls got up to leave, and I didn't say a word until the door closed behind them with a chime. Then I opened my mouth, and closed it again.

She rolled her eyes. "John, I think you've gotta live a little less for who you think you are, and a little more for yourself." Sarah grabbed my mug, clinked it loudly against the plate, and walked off. Under her breath, but loudly, like she didn't care if I heard, she complained about men, fools, thinking too much about the wrong things.

I watched her all the way until she reached the kitchen. And then, I leaned back against the hard chair, sitting in Maud's Diner, in Las Vegas, at eleven in the morning, even though I'd gone to law school, and bought a house, and found a pretty woman to settle down with. There was mayo on my shirt, and I couldn't take it off.

I rubbed my temples and tried to picture Debbie's face. Instead, I heard her voice from a few months back asking why I always bought her roses, and I knew the answer was because that was what I was supposed to do, wasn't it?

Sarah didn't look at me when she came back to give me the check and wipe off my table, all of it. She even cleaned the corners I couldn't have touched.

I hadn't written anything on the check when she tapped it. Eyes glaring at everything but me, voice rough like she'd just smoked a cigarette, she rasped, "All right, John. Before they left the chapel, I heard her say they were heading off to Sacramento. Sounded like she had a friend there, Linda Something."

"Cadence. Linda Cadence," I filled in. "Her cousin. I should've known."

She nodded.

I fished some bills out of my pocket for the tip

and started to sign the check. Sarah lingered. The waitress began wiping down the table next to mine. She scratched the side of her mouth and then wiped her apron. I wrote my signature, pushed it forward, and when she turned to grab it, I saw she'd smudged her red lipstick slightly, finally.

I waited until after she looked through the bills, and, suddenly compelled, asked, "Hey, Sarah, do you remember my last name?"

The waitress looked me square in the face and squinted. "Something French, right?" She clapped me roughly on my shoulder as she walked past. "K Street, here I come!" I heard her declare.

As soon as I left the diner, sunlight shined straight into my eyes. Squinting, I opened the door and got into my car. I put the key into the ignition and it hummed to a start. The sun cut straight through the glass and made the inside of the car glow. I thought if I didn't get a windshield cover soon it would ruin the leather.

I stared at my hands on the steering wheel. I put down the visor, and I sat there. My foot hovered over the pedal.

Permanent Ink

Sam Broquard

Cloudy black ink
paints my thoughts on parchment.
Solidifies my message,
and permanently records my words.

Lightly scribbled pencil
marks the start of something deeper.
Leaves room for my mistakes,
and can vanish in the blink of an eye.

Both have their perks of course
but I think I will always prefer ink.
For all of my words, bad and improved,
deserve a spot to stay.

cosmonaut eulogy

Cori Vought

today I'm thinking about Laika
the first dog in space.
I'm wondering if the streets of
Moscow would have killed her faster,
wondering if she was excited to fly
and if she knew there was emptiness
and dust and light hidden above the sky.
wondering if she ever saw space and
if she did was it frightening or did
she think it was beautiful.
wondering if she knew her food
was poison, if she could smell it
and was afraid. wondering who
plays fetch with her now that she
sleeps in between constellations.
wondering if I've ever seen her while
watching the night sky.
but mostly i wonder if she was
petted and fed treats and told she was a
good dog
and if she knew what love was.

Silhouetted Flight Ronan Shah



May Flowers Ronan Shah



The Illusion of Attraction

Ruth Pournelle

Contrary to popular belief, moths are not attracted to light. Rather, they navigate by keeping their backs pointed toward whatever direction is brightest. This is typically the sky, but when passing an artificial light source, they are drawn into an endless orbit around it by attempting to remain perpendicular to the light source. This creates the illusion of attraction.

My mascara feels heavy. I put on too much. I must have; I did at least four coats, and even webbed over my bottom lashes for good measure. When I squint at the glass candle holder on my table, I half expect to see my eyelids physically drooping. The glass contorts my face into something abstract—Picasso, or maybe Munch? I’m not sure about the difference, but I think Addie will appreciate the remark. She likes that sort of thing. I’ll mention it to her.

I go back to staring out of the front windows. Nothing.

My throat starts to close. I tell myself I probably look fine. I tell myself Addie isn’t late. I’m just early.

On the wall to my left there’s a painting of a luna moth. Its green wings glow off of the dark background. The two fake eyes on its hide wing stare at me judgmentally. Plates clatter in the kitchen and I flinch at the sound. My eyelashes, briefly, stick together.

I check the candle holder again. There is no black spilling over my eye. I scrape a finger beneath anyway.

We’ve agreed upon 6:00, and it’s only 6:02. Still, I squirm every time someone drifts past the front windows. A young couple comes into the restaurant, arm in arm. The waiter passes and glances at me, at the empty seat across from me. I smile weakly at him. Maybe Addie just spent too long getting ready. Maybe she—

She’s here.

I straighten as Addie breezes through the front doors. Relief courses through me. I fidget with the silverware, fighting the urge to rush toward her. She’s talking to the hostess. Eventually, Addie’s gaze skates across the restaurant and meets mine. My breath catches.

She’s walking over. I stand and fumble to pull out her chair.

Addie clutches a hand to her chest. “Hi, Kay. Thanks.” Her laugh is breathy.

I jerk back to my seat, stomach flipping like I’m on a rollercoaster. “Hi, Addie,” I say, trying to keep my voice cool.

Ramon’s is dim, the sort of place that absorbs any outside sun and relies on puny sconces, but what little light remains, I swear, has bent to accommodate her. Addie’s eyes are impossibly luminescent. They are doll-like, wide and blue, and lined with dark lashes so precise they look drawn, but they glitter with an impossible realness. That’s what sets her apart from other pretty people: she is truly here, right in front of me.

Addie shifts her purse to her lap. She doesn’t say anything, so I start to talk. “It’s nice here, right? Nice place. Nicer than the dining halls.” I cringe. “How are you doing?”

“Hm? I’ve been good,” she says neutrally and then pauses as if to consider it. “How are you? I’m surprised you’re not doing Lonnie’s thing.”

“Bug Fest?” Addie nods. I shrug and fiddle with the sleeve of my blouse as I say, too hesitantly, “Oh, I don’t know. This felt more important.” Lonnie, our mutual friend, helped organize the festival, and she got me a ticket to talk at the panel. I was going to go up there and sit at the same table as professors and entomologists, as just a weird girl who likes bugs. I couldn’t. How could I? Besides, Addie finally asked me out to dinner yesterday, and I couldn’t turn her down. I’ve waited months for this, too.

Smoke curls from the candle holder between

us. My warped reflection is all shadows; the flame sputtered out. I commit to Munch and point at it. "The glass makes you look like a Munch painting, don't you think?"

She looks. "Not really. It's too dark here. The effect is almost chiaroscuro, though."

"Who?"

"A Renaissance painting technique?" She shakes her head. "It doesn't matter."

"Oh." My mind goes static. I can't think of anything to say.

Addie doesn't look up from the table when the waiter comes to fill up our glasses. I thank him and try to smile naturally.

Across from me, Addie slightly furrows her brows and purses her lips. I start to sweat. Is she frowning at me? Is she bored? Conversation echoes around us, but it's silent, it's way too silent.

Green, in the corner of my eye. I jab my finger at the moth painting. "That's, uh, a Luna moth."

She nods. "Pretty."

"Yeah. You can tell it's a female because of its antennae." Struck by a sudden doubt, I check the painting again. "I think. I mean, I'm no expert."

Addie takes a sip of water.

I continue, "I saw one once, at this camp I used to go to. Although that one was a male, I think. Its antennae was..." I gesture vaguely. "Bushier. It got me in trouble actually."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's kind of a funny story." She nods. She's looking at me with those glowing eyes. I keep talking. "So this was the sort of camp where we live in cabins for a week, Camp Smythe. I was twelve, and I had this big thick book that told me all of the insect species in North America. My group had been waiting outside of the dining hall for some people in the bathroom. Everyone was talking to each other, making friendship bracelets. I saw this beautiful luna moth clinging to a screen and forgot everything else. I had to make sure that was what it was, so I ran over to our cabin to grab the book. I was only gone for a few minutes, but by the time I got back, my group was gone. My counselor had sounded the alarm and had everyone scouring the woods. They found me

an hour later by the dumpsters, trying to figure out what beetle was crawling on my arm."

"Ew!" She wrinkles her nose. "That's gross. The butterfly I get, but I cannot do beetles."

"Moth. And, yeah. Not for everyone."

"No." Her response is quiet. She stares pensively at the luna moth painting.

I'm losing her again. I say quickly, "I think it was a Cedar Beetle."

Addie nods lightly. She doesn't look away from the painting.

Before either of us speak, Addie looks at me intently, like she's trying to map her face onto mine. I look back, a little shy, but hold her gaze. She is going to say something important. I wait, listening to my heart pulse behind my eyes.

Addie's face scrunches. She asks, "Do you think I'm pretty?"

My mouth goes dry. The restaurant chatters around us. "Of course," I blurt out. She studies me with pinched eyes. I repeat, "Of course I do, you're gorgeous." I stop talking when her mouth pinches, too.

"Now that's it." Her lips part in a pained grin. "That's exactly it."

She is looking at me but, at the same time, through me. I glance over my shoulder without thinking. "What?"

"Can I—" She cuts herself off with a firm nod, like she is shaking herself. "Do you know what's weird?" Before I can say anything else, Addie grabs her empty glass and tilts it. The ice cubes clatter like beads. "I can't know if that's true. I can't. You're a nice person. You're my friend. What else can you say when I ask you that?" Addie drops the glass onto the table and refocuses on me. "I believe you, Kay, I really do. That's the issue."

"Issue?" I repeat. I feel hollow, like the words are bouncing around inside of me.

"Not issue. I'm just...frustrated. I've been thinking a lot. I wasn't always pretty, you know." Addie turns her head. The golden light strikes her jawline perfectly. Every shadow on her face seems painted, the highlight of her glossed lips artfully placed. I find her statement hard to believe.

I shrug. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And, you know, everyone has ugly phases.”

Addie doesn’t appear to have heard me. “It feels strange to be beautiful now. And to know it, that’s the real weird part. To know how pretty I am now, because, before, nobody ever told me I wasn’t. I guess they didn’t have to.” She chews her lip.

I shift in my chair and glance at my watch. 6:15. BugFest will be starting soon. I feel a lonely pang of regret. This isn’t going how it is supposed to go—no, I tell myself. This is my chance. I have to play along. “That sounds strange.”

“Yeah. I feel the same as I was before, that’s the kicker. I feel the exact same. It’s other people who are different.” Addie lifts both of her elbows onto her table and knits them beneath her chin. She regards me from beneath her lengthened eyelashes, as she has measured me and gotten exactly what she expected. “I see it in their faces. It’s this—this starry quality. Like I’ve split their brain from their body.”

When I clasp my hands beneath the table, I can feel my heart beating through my wrist. Part of me thinks she’s starting to sound conceited, but she’s actually making eye contact with me now. “Did something happen before this?”

Her glossy lips flatten. “Do you remember the picture I showed everyone at lunch yesterday? The Key Club one.”

I squint and try to imagine it. She’d flashed it quickly to prove some point about the teacher. It was your usual awkward high school club photo, all strained grins and stiff shoulders. The guy next to her had a skimpy goatee that, once Lonnie pointed it out, made us all fold over laughing. But that’s all I remember. My brain keeps mapping Addie’s face as she sits across from me, her stark, smooth skin and sky-blue eyes, over the one I’d seen. “Sort of.”

“Well, I ran into the teacher who sponsored it, at the farmer’s market. He was picking through the cherries. I tapped his shoulder and said, ‘Mr. John! What are you doing in Camden?’ Kay, he didn’t recognize me. He wrote my recommendation letter, and he didn’t recognize me.”

“Well,” I venture. “Teachers have a lot of students. You said the high school you went to had, like,

fifty thousand people.”

“Fifteen hundred. And, yeah, I guess that’s a lot, it’s just...I saw it in his eyes when he turned around. There was no recognition. Just that starry quality. It was weird.” Addie waves her hand and presses it to her forehead. “I don’t know. I’ve been thinking a lot about the nature of beauty. I’m writing an essay on it. Well, on the relationship between beauty and light in Renaissance paintings. Particularly Titian.” She picks up her spoon and looks at it like a mirror.

“Er, Ti-shin?” I grin unsurely. I don’t recognize the name.

Something flashes through her face. “Yeah. The painter. My whole project is centered around him. I swear I’ve been talking about it, like, nonstop.” Addie shakes her head. She sets the spoon down. “Anyway, it got me thinking. How many people would still listen to me, I guess, or still like me... if I wasn’t pretty. If I was still her. Younger me.” Addie looks far away. She leans back so I can see the cheesy saying on her wrinkled T-shirt. Her dark curls are unusually unkempt, alternating between frizzy and flat. She looks like she rolled out of bed. I’m overcome with a strange feeling, like a cloud has covered the sun.

The waiter comes with our entrees before I have to answer. Addie looks up this time and grins at him. Her glow returns like a light switch. I stare as he sets down our food in front of us. He’s objectively attractive. Blond curls, easy charm. I feel a wave of vague nausea as Addie tilts her head, and remarks the food looks delicious.

He says, “I hope you both find it to your liking.” I almost respond, no. Neither of us have.

Addie stabs some pasta onto her fork. It is studded with little pink bits of lobster. She takes a bite and rolls her head back in apparent ecstasy. “So good! You don’t know how long I’ve been wanting to try this place.” She takes another bite and covers her mouth. “By the way! Sorry for the rant. I just had to get that off my chest. You’re a good listener, Kay. We should talk more. Outside of the group.”

Her gaze heats me like a sunbeam. Clumps of mascara weigh on my eyelashes. The starched fabric of my blouse audibly crumples as I shift in my seat, so I freeze and stay perfectly still.

I've gotten this wrong.

Eventually, I respond, "Yeah. Absolutely," because earlier, she'd been right: what else could I say? I force a smile. "Excuse me. I have to wash my hands."

I stand. I follow the signs to the bathroom. I close the door, twist the lock, and bury my face in my hands. My cheeks are hot to the touch. Aloud, I mutter, "What am I doing?" I've gotten this so wrong.

When Lonnie first introduced Addie to the friend group three months ago, I thought she was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen. Her glow, her presence. In the paradoxical way of female crushes, I wanted to inhabit her body and never leave her side. My mind would drift to her in that half-realm between sleep and waking. It was easier to worry about her than to worry about anything else. She was—she was blinding.

By the time Addie texted me yesterday, I had been stressing about the BugFest panel for weeks. I didn't feel qualified, intellectually or socially. I'd mess up, or freeze up, or never shut up. I had been so relieved to accept Addie's offer. I knew she was bi. I thought my stares and compliments had been as obvious as they felt—I thought, arrogantly, when she asked me to dinner at Ramon's that she had asked me on a date.

It's cooler in the bathroom, vent whirring above the toilet, but I'm still flushed. The orange scone above the mirror oversaturates my skin so that it appears rubbed raw. I lean forward and squint at my face. My under-eyes are clear, but I've smudged faint lines on the side of each eye. The lips in the reflection grimace. I'd applied gloss, but the shine has migrated to the corner of my lips like a milk mustache. I shouldn't have worn makeup. I have blond lashes and heavy lids. The mascara doesn't make me look doll-like, it makes me look like a raccoon. I squeeze my eyes shut.

Of course I started talking about bugs. Do I know anything else? I slump against the counter as what I said at the beginning resurfaces in my mind. Babbling on and on, trying to kindle some sort of spark. She hadn't heard a word I said!

And had I? Titian. I wrack my brain, trying to

remember anything substantial Addie has said about her studies and museum exploits. I can't recall anything specific. I can't recall anything but her glittering eyes, the slope of her shoulders as she leaned over our lunch table, her spiraling curls. My own lingering feelings of awe. The starry quality.

Addie had been right. Beneath the infatuation and metallic tang of envy, beneath her beauty, there is nothing for me.

But that can't be true—I think of her, and light fills my mind. Addie is radiant. It's inscribed in my thoughts. She turns a bad day into a good one just by looking at me. She's the sun, the flame, and I...I think about sitting back down across from her, and dread fills my stomach. I peel my eyes open.

The mascara lines only smear when I rub them. I turn on the faucet. It's the same faux-antique metal as the silverware, and it sputters. I watch the water stream twitch every few seconds, like a skittering beetle. It's 6:25. I'd be late, but I could still make BugFest.

Anxiety churns my stomach. But I do really want to go.

I dampen a paper towel and rub off the errant mascara and lip gloss remnants. I leave the bathroom. From the hallway, the front windows look like a sheet of white light. I can see our table and Addie's back. My throat tightens. Even without the illusion of reciprocity, I feel her pull.

She turns her head before I reach the table.

I wince. "I'm really sorry, Addie. I have to go."

Addie doesn't respond immediately. She takes a large bite of pasta and covers her mouth as she chews. There's a flash of dusk in her eyes, a single moment of stormy expression. She fully turns her shoulders toward me and quirks her eyebrows. "Why?" Addie's voice is bright, but I get the feeling she's just following social cues. There's not much else she could have said. "For what?"

"It's urgent," I say, because I can't tell her. But I can walk away from Addie and our table in the dim corner of Ramon's.

Untitled Oluwamayowa Akinsanya



Dandelions as a Metaphor for Queerness

Cori Vought

I have a dream (recurring) that I wake up
face to face with God and he is fifty feet tall
with diamonds sewn over his eyes like Coraline
tangled roots for hair and skin of paper machè.

For some reason I tell him that I'm sorry and
he says that it's okay and he loves me anyway.
When I ask why he says, "if you see a dandelion
growing from cracks in concrete, you don't think
'that's not where that's meant to be,' you think

'oh, how beautiful.'" he looks at me with glacial
pity and bends down to hand me a bouquet of
dandelions, yellow like faded childhood
memories; amber and ivory and saffron.

I stare at them until they become the sun
and burn my eyes and I wake up.

Dodgeball Daniel Lim



Untitled Machalle von Klein



Untitled Sophie Younger



Flowers Audrey Hayes



Straw

Aya Nishikawa

Stringy and brittle.
I don't think it's edible.
A lively stable,
and a bed for many.
It's uncomfortable yet useful.
A scarecrow bursts at the seams.
A hat is made rigidly.

Light yellow or striped.
Lemonade on a hot summer day with friends.
A pool and cool shade.
Hot metal and ice cream.

One of three pigs.
A playing tool for children.
Dorthy and her friend.
Stacks of hay but not quite.
Weak yet stable
in our stables.

Stanislavski Disappointed

Anna Domino

Betray your long lost loved ones; anoint yourself the sun.
But you were born an outlaw, broken footed, bred to run.

Feed your children wire; exceed, exult, excess.
But you were born a meter, humming sunny for success.

Arrest the beaten pathway; attest to beating heart.
But you were born an oil spill, iridescent-clever art.

Upset your rolling seaside; obtusely drink and drown.
But you were born a seagull, skybound, suddenly struck down.

Untitled Aldrin Gazio



Stonethrower Rita Montratuella



Scorchtown Candy Store

Ruth Pournelle

Scorchtown Candy Store
 Shoreline exile, set on fire
 I'll burn until nothing's left—
 I was sycophantic. Blazing synaptic—
 No more coals to wrest and skip, on steam,
 no mercy matterless time.
 I'm unextinguished.
 I burn alive.
 I'll sooner drop dead than die.

Will you mourn me? Will you cry?

Your flame finds fuel in my veins.
 Miraged, my death dances in your gaze
 Pirouetting pigeoned discontentments.
 With lead-lidded eyes, I raise to face the sea
 It's rough today. White caps. False rain.
 I rush, again, and cascade in. I turn instead into the sand—
 My buoyancy has burned away—
 I'm heavy. I roll so among the shells.
 Calcite cold, in wake I smelt.
 They're changed, I'm not.
 My heart burns, alive.

Did I choose this? Did you lie?

Your flame now fuels my veins.
 Soulfire, sweet, set my soul on fire.
 Scorched the sugar from my tongue—
 how fitting.
 Kissed me stinging delighted numb
 and flicked away the match.
 De-light me, I begged. You smiled toward the sea.
 Sin cinephile, you gave my fire.
 I burn your embers. I ignited you.
 You, ashen.
 You, away, into the sky, betrayal.
 Gone, no contrail tale.
 You drifted away on this sea gale,
 now all I smell is salt
 water taffy. Rocking knees, conch divide,
 I savor heat, searing the sweet away.

Do you miss me? Have you tried?

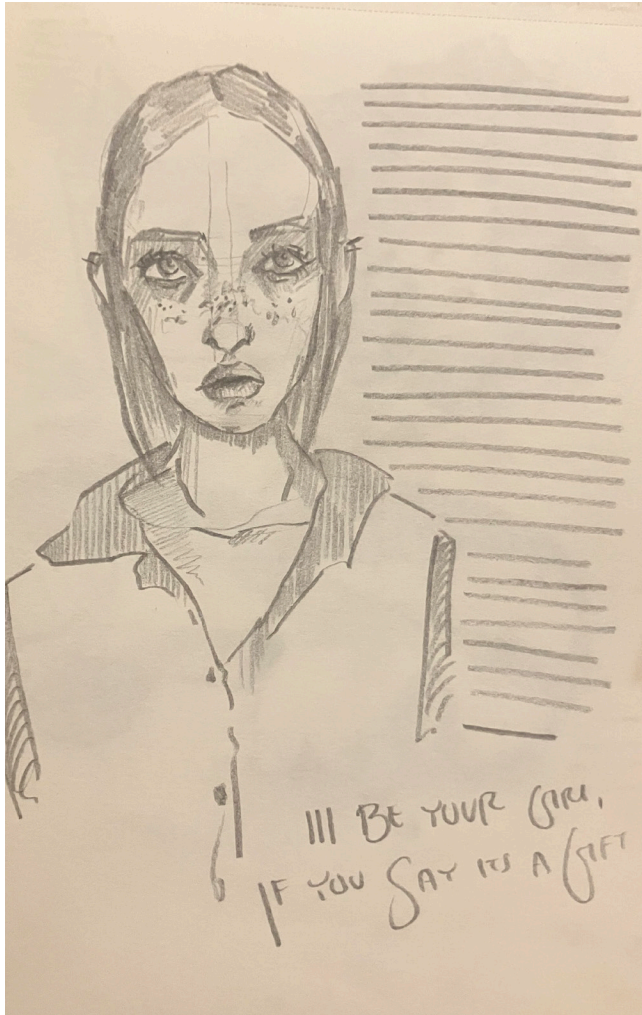
Stilted Gordon James



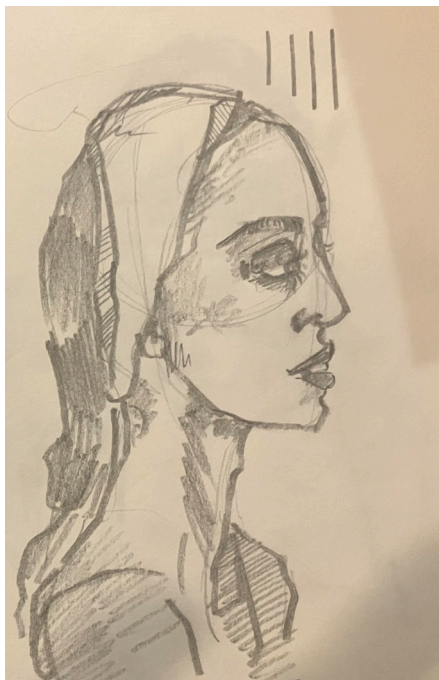
Oh, to be a writer

Sam Broquard

Oh, to be a writer.
Is to see beauty in the repulsed
To find words for things unspoken
To put pen to paper
And pray that your hands
can unscramble the ramblings of your mind



Untitled Portraits Julia Olsen



Always Winter in Icaria

Nora Lester

You know the whole time, feel
 wax starting to melt
 But the sun is warm, when
 you've been cold so long,
 It's paradise unreal
 solace from the careless wind.

Fly higher, only felt
 a little.
 still a little warmer, then
 a feather gone
 calved ice
 fall away father rescind.
 You know this loss is
 permanent careless

should've grieved, can't dwell,
 sun blinding, again
 Sure these sunbeams will swallow you
 whole before you fall.
 Hold you softly help you reach
 paradise
 Free of brass and feathers, no labyrinth in sight
 calved horns. father's wish.

 unreal.
 feathers break free,
 break skin.
 Between screams
 you fall.
 Burning bleeding dying feeling
 know but—can't be happening
 wings break away. father's word.
 Your paradise
 should have hurt less.

Beneath you see no sea nor labyrinth
 Still sun blinded.
 Black relief, distracting no pain
 calved,
 No paradise
 You know it's starting
 all time only felt unreal,
 Icarus, tell father,
 you've been cold so long.

Breakfast Time! Ronan Shah



Caught in Motion Ronan Shah



A Study in Green Ronan Shah



Blend Into Sand Ronan Shah



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SUBMISSIONS

Students are welcome to submit at any time.

We are now accepting
submissions for the autumn of 2025 by November 15th at 11:59!

Students may submit through several different ways.

Email: swwthepen@gmail.com

Website: swwthepen.com

Through both of these options, students may submit their work,
anonymously if they choose. We accept any submissions of art or
writing. We are more likely to accept pieces that are topical,
especially for visual art and cover art.

We are always looking for new members!

The Editorial Team meets
on Thursdays at 8:15 in Room 127.

Don't hesitate to contact us digitally or in person!
Inquiries should be directed to the email address listed above.

More information
is available on the website and on social media.

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