

BRIGHTPOINT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

# *Currents*

ART & LITERARY REVIEW 2023

# PREFACE

IN 1968, our institution began publishing *Sherwood Forest*, which ran consistently until 2020. Now it is our genuine privilege to welcome you to the first issue of *Currents Art & Literary Review*, Brightpoint Community College's new journal! We are proud to carry on a tradition dedicated to showcasing the creative work of our students. In the pages that follow, you will find their contributions expressed in visual art, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. We are grateful to every student who submitted this year – *Currents* could not exist without their interests and efforts. This journal is for them!

**Mike Gray, Editor**

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FIRST PLACE • Art

***A Single Mother's Escape*** Aniya Thomas

# ***Vagrant Birds***

John Bernard

The thrush looks northward  
Yearning for the days of summer  
Deer bones lie bleached in autumn earth  
Buried ochre upon restless spirits  
The mountain stream surges forth  
Beneath a shroud of cloudy ice

Where will you fly little bird  
What songs will you bury  
What words will twist within you

The thrush will fly north  
The stream will melt  
Grass will green on cervids grave  
Words calcify like bronze in a barrow  
Awaiting spring rain

# **Buttons, Stockings, Mittens, Lace**

Adeniyani Fogofoluwa

Buttons, stockings, mittens, lace  
A girl is more than a lovely face  
Curves, hips, a slender nape  
A woman is more than her body and shape  
Sculpture, painting, work of art  
Judge her by what's in her heart  
Priceless, precious, endless pleasure  
Judge a woman by what she treasures  
Feeble, shallow, petty, weak  
Listen to her and see how she speaks  
She's not worth the trouble. There's nothing to see  
Don't worry little boy, she's happy. She's free.  
She wears what she wants, does as she desires  
She's an angel with wings floating higher and higher  
You can't get her back cause she now knows her worth  
No thanks to you, to you, she was dirt  
Now you will watch as she soars through the sky  
And you'll cry on your knees as she mouths with a smile  
The word that you hate, the word you despise  
An eternally, everlasting, destructive goodbye

# ***A Question for the Reader***

Tyler Koval-Heatherly

I'm not as verbose as Whitman  
I don't have Carroll's wit  
If you're looking for some wisdom  
Well, frankly, this ain't it

I'm not as creative as Giesel  
Death went and passed me by  
I don't have Hughes' blue cloud cloth  
A-woven from the sky.

I don't know why the caged bird sings  
My iambic isn't great  
I'd rather walk the traveled path  
Easy to hike and straight

My free verse is abysmal  
That's why I keep in rhyme  
And even this is clunky  
I'm afraid this isn't prime

So the question I will ask of you  
The thing I cannot see  
Why don't you read these other guys  
Instead of reading me?



# ***Drunk Crow***

Vivian Plante

Every June, I see my friend  
most beautiful of crows  
So full of woe

He isn't here for me though  
He's here for a sweet treat  
He comes for my mimosa tree

The fallen forbidden delights  
with their sweet fermentation  
make him dizzy and silly

So full of joy  
drunk as a skunk  
He waddles and thumps

He picks the best of the bunch  
Surprised to find  
he's the only one

at this summer brunch  
After he's had his fill  
he finds it hard to stand still

Flopping on his belly  
balance is tricky  
and his beak—so very sticky

Oh,  
beautiful crow  
No longer full of woe

# ***Pyropulchritudinous***

Hanna Hathaway

It's the entirety of spontaneity  
The way it ebbs and flows

But not in the way  
That water sways  
It's more of a "contract; explode"

The reference here is fire  
Due to its behavior

And even if  
It has a dangerous drift  
Fire is my symbolic savior

Because fire may be smothered  
Its ashes risk losing heat

And sometimes the wind  
Whirls and spins  
Knocking fire off its feet

This flame might be weary now  
While it fights, spits, and spews

But the fire that will never  
Break its pyro tether  
Is the fire that's in you

# ***Escaping from Escapism***

Maria Kachmar

**S**OME OF THE RABBITS were already dead by the time I got there, decaying and crusting into the carpet like wads of fuzzy gum. The rest of them scattered at the sound of my arrival, running under the couch, behind stacks of magazines, into sturdy urban burrows made from piles of denim, fleece, corduroy. I couldn't even entertain the idea of going after them; by then, enough trash littered the house to hide several grown people, nevermind twenty or so rabbits. Animal control would be around later that day, equipped with nets and cages and a real desire to help the creatures left behind in the wake of my grandfather's death. I just wanted my book.

I stood in the doorway for a moment, thinking, The smell should be worse. If this was July, the smell would be so much worse. But it was October; two full weeks into autumn and five days since grandpa died. Low temperatures had done their part to slow decomposition, and fresh air blew in on breezes through several windows. Whoever found Grandpa must have opened them, unable to deal with the smell or maybe they were struck with a very specific bout of sympathy for the granddaughter who would have to return later on. They couldn't have known that I was already used to it—that I had spent much of my childhood navigating the aromas, sights and textures of my grandfather's life-long aggregation. Most of what he owned came with its own unique smell, and he owned so much. The odor of rotting animals, while new and unpleasant, was lost fairly easily to me amidst other strong scents that had been there far

longer, like nicotine and mothballs, leather and wood polish. He used to refer to all of his things (lovingly, and later defensively) as “collections.” Once I became old enough to question it—to consult psychologists and talk with trusted friends about the nature of my grandfather’s compulsions—I came to know it all by a different name: Hoarding.

I made my way to the back of the house, slow work considering the changed landscape. Nine years is a long time for a hoarder in isolation, and the memory of Grandpa’s home was now irreconcilable with what I was seeing: doorways completely clogged with boxes, National Geographics stacked up in the hundreds, pile after pile of clothes, ten lamps, twenty computer monitors, cans of food, cans of paint, cans of oxygen. Books. And all the rabbits. I don’t know when he started keeping those, only that it was after we had left.

My room sat at the end of the hallway, a ten second walk that took ten minutes because of all the maneuvering, reaching out to catch falling debris, high-stepping across broken glass and potential infant rabbits. By the time I got there, I was out of breath. I shouldn’t have been startled to find my old bedroom in a similar state as the rest of the house, but it took me by surprise anyway.

The book I was looking for was in the closet, in a box with other paraphernalia I’d left behind. Mom and dad hadn’t provided much advance notice when they decided to move from New Jersey to Virginia, stating only that we’d be leaving in a few days, and “To make sure you got your stuff from Grandpa’s.” I’d forgotten it all during that last visit with him, opting instead to spend those remaining hours like we always did: lost between the pages of a book. When I called him from Richmond a few days later, distraught, he promised to keep it safe for me. “You

can pick it up when you come visit,” he said, to my relief. Years passed, but I never got to visit.

Grandpa had been the first person to encourage my love of reading. I can still recall most visits to his house, more often than not prompted by some trouble unfolding within my own childhood home; raised voices echoing through thin walls. After bounding out the back door and down a few blocks, all it took was a knock on Grandpa’s kitchen window to gain admittance, him ushering me through to the living room with those four magic words: “Go grab a book.” Even on my worst days, it only took a few minutes with him and his books to start feeling better—too young to acknowledge that I was probably offering him a similar reprieve, each of us like victims of a shipwreck, having no idea that the other served as a lighthouse.

His selection was endless. In younger years, I gravitated towards colorful titles like *The Hardy Boys* or *Nancy Drew*, those glossy blue and yellow spines sticking out like wildflowers amidst the browns, whites, and beiges of their contemporaries. Toward the end, I read anything I could get my hands on, finding camaraderie with such unexpected protagonists as Carrie White and Esther Greenwood, slowly learning how to convert loneliness into solitude. On some level, I knew that bonding with these fictional people was unhealthy, but at the same time they were all I had. Recognizing parts of myself in peer groups was not possible, so I made myself feel seen in literature. How comforting to read about other lonely, sad, angry girls, some of them not even bothering to change their situation, but acknowledging it.

Even though our move to Virginia dampened my relationship with Grandpa, I held on tightly to our shared love of books,

both as a vehicle for escapism and for the physical comfort they provided; grasping a book, fanning through pages, smelling that familiar combination of dust and ink never failed to put me at ease.

It wasn't until I was in my late teens that I realized most of my free time was being spent reading, that I had very few friends, and that functioning in the real world was becoming more and more difficult. Every corner of my bedroom had been cluttered with stacks of books, some of which were growing hazardous. In a flash I remembered my grandfather and, looking back through the lens of adolescence, I could finally recognize that his love of books (and now mine) had become a detriment. Accepting this was bittersweet, but it allowed me to start changing my habits in ways that would be beneficial later on. I was able to halve my collection, and began pushing myself into new situations and relationships.

The book I had left behind in my grandfather's house was titled *The Giving Tree*. I felt compelled to return for it after his death because he had given it to me specifically. In my grief, I was falling back into the old habit of relying on physical ownership for comfort, but then I looked around. Seeing firsthand the mess my grandfather had been living in at the end of his life was enough to remind me that stories are meant to be carried in your heart, not necessarily your hands. His house and company had offered me so much in ten short years, and I could honor both by living the life he never got to. I left *The Giving Tree*, because I didn't need it. Grandpa and I would always share a love of books, stories built up around our hearts like layers of dried paint, a carapace of memories and muted history. ■



# Reds

John Bernard

06/10/2021

ARRIVED YESTERDAY. Getting along well with Cap and the boys, K\*\*\* and F\*\*\*. Mostly moving things around for Cap's apartment and getting supplies for the boat, the M\*\*\* M, situated. Meals were had at the canteen of the cannery. Not bad but not great. We'll be trying to eat our own food from now on of which we have plenty. Wheeled about all day yesterday on the ATV, piled on like a momma possum; much to the amusement of the cannery staff. This morning has been a slow start. Woke about 7AM. Ate instant ramen, protein bars, and salt and vinegar chips for breakfast. As of writing this, Cap has not emerged from quarters. Supposed to work on boat today (dry docked). Had a cup of coffee today with Captains J\*\*\* and B\*\*\*. Nice guys. Everyone I've met thus far has been friendly. Joked to F\*\*\* that we ought to start a fight club to even things out. Truthfully I hope things keep positive, though I hope Cap doesn't make it a habit of staying in bed this late. Pace is easy but I'm anxious to get on the water and make some money.

06/12/2021

IT'S BEEN A HELL of a week. K\*\*\*, F\*\*\*, and I have for the most part been left to our own devices as far as getting the boat up to snuff. Cap gives us instructions and then dips for this reason or another. I don't think he thought we'd be so driven. Morale is good, but there is a hint of frustration between the three of us deckhands; we wish Cap would be more present. Someone stole our boat's stereo over the winter, and Cap has been prioritizing getting it replaced. Woke up at 7AM as per usual, ate oatmeal with peanut butter. Headed to the boat and took a nap in the cabin. Woke up and began washing windows while listening to music. The other two fetched me and Cap took us into town. Fetched food and supplies then got lunch. Girl with a pixie cut opened up a lane for me at the grocery store. She was very kind and patient. I was so nervous I forgot how to operate the credit card swiper thing and ended up having to re-do it three times. There are fewer women here than any other town I've been to up here. Cap helped with the boat when we got back. Fired her up and

changed the oil. Diagnostics looked good today. Everyone is cautiously optimistic and in good spirits. Saw two sandhill cranes and seabirds chasing a raven; I suspect it was after their eggs. Thus far I'm really enjoying the work up here.

06/18/2021

TODAY IS FRIDAY. Cannery wants us on the water by Sunday. Antennae fixed and replaced. Prow anchor roller replaced. Paint retouched. Routine engine maintenance performed. Cap wants rudders piston coupling wired into place to reduce play. Not thrilled. Holes in keel leaking coolant which the mechanic says can't be welded. New coat of splashzone resin will be applied. Will keep an eye on coolant levels. Cap has been touch and go. Spends a good deal of time in town and doesn't check in when he gets back. Still a late riser. Would be nice if he were a bit more communicative. Still optimistic. I keep advocating for him to the other two. Things will happen at their own pace. I write this from the "old bunkhouse," the two story building where cap stays. It is slanted, decrepit, and the first floor of the building is sinking into a peat bog. It is connected to the rest of the cannery campus by a network of boardwalks. It

has two kitchens which is more than can be said for the "new bunkhouse." Sitting at the table talking with Cap and Captain J\*\*\*. Debriefed Cap on yesterdays progress. There is white residue on Captain J\*\*\*'s left nostril. It goes unacknowledged. The other captain, B\*\*\*, was up and about earlier. One of his crew, C\*\*\*, is restricted to his quarters on account of being belligerently and very visibly wasted two nights ago. After winning a fight with half a handle of Jack, he rolled around on the patch of peat in front on the bunks in full view of the new cannery workers undergoing orientation, ran yelling through the messhall staffs' bunk, and vomited in a variety of locations. It's a dry cannery.

06/19/2021

THE MECHANIC has told Cap that he'll weld the keel, so no splashzone. Yesterday there was a big dinner in the old bunkhouse. The first fish of the season were caught by a set netter friend of Cap, so they cubed it and put it in a linguini. Personally I'd have preferred it grilled or broiled, but it was good nonetheless. Yesterday I overheard Cap discussing his friend/frequent collaborator N\*\*\*'s trouble with finding decent workers. Seeing

as how its a crabbing boat I'll keep an eye on this. If I do well over the next month I'll see if Cap can put in a good word for me. We'll be meeting N\*\*\* in a few days on account of his vessel doubling as a tender.

06/21/2021

THIS EVENING N\*\*\* has delivered on the crab. They put some of it into a lettuce salad and some of it into a bolognese. Not sure how I feel about it. There is also halibut wrapped in bacon with banana peppers. Two days ago I saw a pod of belugas traveling south. At one point I saw eight of them surface at once. For all I know there could've been dozens. Today I walked the beach toward town. Got to the outskirts but saw a bear in my path at 100 yards so had to turn back. Saw swallows nesting in the eroded cliffs over the beach. Sandpipers and a young eagle. I need a bigger lens. A\*\*\* got drunk last night and got into two fights in Old Fisherman. C\*\*\* and I minded him and made sure he didn't fall backwards off the balcony.

Dinner was good. The regulars were present in addition to N\*\*\*'s crew and a few other friends of the circle. N\*\*\*'s mechanic is also named Zane. The two

of us engaged in rapport over that, but shared little else in common. I was able to get some useful information out of him with regard to Kodiak. I think I made a good first impression with N\*\*\*. We may not be out of here until Thursday. Fish have yet to arrive in sufficient numbers.

06/22/2021

SEVERAL BEAR ENCOUNTERS were had yesterday. The one on the beach was enough for me, so I didn't go chasing them like some people. Bear scat is everywhere. Looks like horse apples. They're subsisting off of plants and garbage at the moment. They are fully awake. More bears, more seals, more eagles, and more sea birds. The fish will be here shortly. Captain J\*\*\*'s crew departed yesterday. I exchanged kind words with C\*\*\* and A\*\*\*; I hope our paths cross again. Sound system on the boat is online. Hopefully Cap gets it squared away soon. Had my fingers crossed we'd be gone today but here we are. Hurry up and wait. The other two are champing at the bit. I'm practically frothing at the mouth. More boats have been taken out of dry dock and plopped into the water. B\*\*\*'s boat was damaged a few days ago when the pronged trailer used to move it ruptured

the hull. The boats coolant system was damaged in the process. The crotchety mechanic managed to patch it, but his truck mounted welding rig got busted in the process. We'll have to be loaded on the trailer, backed into the shop, and welded right before launch. The boat yard is much quieter as a result of fewer boats and fewer tasks needing doing. There's an onsite generator thats still loud as shit though.

06/23/2021

BUTCH HAS BEGUN welding on the keel. I pray we are in the water by tomorrow. Lots of wind and a little rain. Not much work to be done today.

06/24/2021

GOOD MOTHER of God. Had to give K\*\*\* the southern table manners talk today. He keeps very subtly trying to coax out conversation about "the deep state." He seemed to take it remarkably well. We are now, however, watching a Clint Eastwood movie. Not great. Heavy handed American exceptionalism/conservative allegory. Weird white knight/child seduction shit going on. Jesus fuckin christ. I don't know what's gotten into K\*\*\*. He's got something to prove

for some reason. Keel is welded and splashzoned. A few things in the room and fridge is all that remains. Weather is fair. Whitecaps on water though this morning it looked so smooth it could've been polished glass. Wind and a sprinkle every now and again. No word on the fish quite yet. My hair is falling into coils. My skin is olive. My eyes are bright blue. I feel beautiful. I can't wait to hit the town when this is all over and show myself off. I plan on having my hair done professionally. I am positively jazzed.

06/26/2021

TODAY IS THE DAY! Though I suppose we won't know until we're well and truly there. Reports from the fishing grounds we intend to hit are heartening. We splashdown at 3 today in the PM. 6hr steam to our destination. From there I pray its little more than picking fish. I've been reflecting a lot recently. Before I take any action of expression I must make sure I am not making it out of fear and that I am being authentic to myself. I still intend on \*\*\*\* but I'm apprehensive. It's been a long time. \*\*\* apathetic to my existence. Either way it feels like things are weird \*\*\* feel like I didn't live up to some expectation. Truth be told I'm still

confused \*\*\*\* something was riding on that. \*\*\* and I always will. I wish I'd been a more realized person when we met, but then again none of that growth would have happened without us meeting to begin with. There is a disparity between how important I \*\*\* is to me. Our last conversation haunts me. I've never had someone ask me not to leave like that. "\*\*\*\*" she'd said. How do I explain the truth to her? She saw me start to break right there in her sitting room. I think a lot about what would have happened if\*\*\*.

06/28/2021

WE'VE OFFICIALLY been fishing for two days now. I'm sorry to say it's been a bit slower than it could be. The least amount of fish we've pulled in on a set is one. The most was forty give or take. Our experience seems to be mirrored by the other boats around us. This morning we were up at 3AM but it was so slow we took pause and laid anchor until 3PM. It's shaping up to be another slow day. Getting better at the routine onboard. We've seen N\*\*\* about three times now. He seems to regard me and the other two with passive disinterest. I've seen it before. He's not gonna invest socially in

people who in his mind aren't likely to be back next year. I've decided, in response to this, to adjust my behavior accordingly. Can't say I'm not disappointed. I'll remain amiable but detach my feelings from the mix. Our last set had two reds and a king. Need to work on my picking. Still really enjoy it out here just wish the pace would pick up. Read more of "Rich Dad, Poor Dad"; pretty disgusted on his lack of nuance regarding taxation. Dude bemoans government overreach and then calls Robin Hood a crook. You truly do not need to be terribly smart to be wealthy. Lots of seals!

07/03/2021

BUSY. Very busy. The other two are having trouble keeping up the pace. Not to say I'm not, but the two have serious problems with exhaustion. I've taken my Adderall twice since I've been on the water here. Keep having to re-arrange shit they take out and don't put back properly. The other day we caught 22,000 lbs of fish at once. That was cool. Storm blew in and our net became extremely tangled on itself, which was not quite as fun. Lost precious sleep as a result. Thus far I believe we average between 200 and 800 lbs of fish between shifts. Hopefully

07/11/2021

it picks up. Hopefully the other two stop whining quite so much. I pray this is worth it. I'm getting fast at picking fish and I hope I continue to pick up the pace. Both generators are kinda fucked. Working on the old one's carb. New one got bad gas in it and now the engine is locked up. We'll see what happens. Personally I've been doing fine without it. Plenty of seals but otherwise little animal life. Interesting seabirds. Boat went down two nights ago. Big wave in a known dangerous area. Captain perished, three crew survived as far as I know. Bit shaken.

07/07/2021

IT HAS BEEN an incredibly difficult past few days. Cold weather, and we essentially fished nonstop for 92 hours with about 4 hours of sleep. We hover in total around 50–75 thousand lbs of fish. Have started taking medication daily once more. Had a few anxiety attacks. Reciting verses from the Tao Te Ching has basically been the only thing keeping me from jumping on a tender and quitting. My hands are stiff and sore from picking and my handwriting is significantly worse for it. Sunny today.

TRUTHFULLY I remember little of the last few days, as they all blend together in character and routine. Net out, net in, pick fish, sell to tender. Sleep for two hours, four if you're lucky. Almost lost most of the fingers on my right hand pulling the anchor. We've left the Nushagak River and are posted outside of Naknek. I'm thankful we only have a week or so left. Still unsure of how much money I'll be walking away with. Still plan on making a b-line for Cordova. Once there I'll walk the docks and see if I can get anything there. I'm proud of myself for toughing it out. I think I'll still try to do trail guiding next year. I'm confident I won't be returning to Naknek. The town itself is fucking depressing. I yearn for southcentral/southeast. I came up this far north for money, but every calculation I've done based on our numbers has me a bit crestfallen. It's certainly more than I've ever made in two months before, but not quite the windfall I'd prayed for. I need to be my own boss. This is just another thing I've proven to myself that I can do like firefighting and forestry.

My coworkers are fucking idiots and K\*\*\* almost just lost his fingers pulling the anchor. ■



# **Observation of a Blood Moon Eclipse**

Molly Bergen

**T**HERE IS A FISSURE in space. The shadow of the oncoming eclipse grows by steady intervals, taking its time to engulf the moon. Through slow encroaching midnight satin peaks glimpses of pure radiance, disappearing under modest veil of mystery. The eerie arctic white of lunar fire reaches outwards, graceful fingers wiggling through the cranny of midnight's board, extending herself to us from on high.

Every other day of the year the fair monarch holds a mirror up to her flame-crested son.

Sun and Moon, two ever observing celestial eyes, shining over seven governors, twelve houses, four elements; lighting the way for all of life below. In the hours of her rule, she becomes Hecate's torchlight and Isis's illumined headdress, refracting Sól through her own chosen expression. Night has been called the time of mystery and chaos, that the absence of Light means Death, yet the lunar monarch is nothing if not organized and there is no absolute Death in Nature. When all else is cast into frenzy, she stands above, unmoved as she moves, dancing an immortal course.

Every other day of the year, the fair monarch holds a mirror to her son, but in these small dark hours of a November night, we are in the way.

Slowly, slowly, clefted night mends, casting all things into darkness without the mother's illumined hand. Then, the veil lifts, and Earth reflects down to itself.

We must see ourselves every now and again.

Not in the clear, crystalline rays of the feminine flame, but in red. A muted, animal red. The red of rust, the red of meat, the red pulsing through your hands and heart and head, the red of ebbing embers after a healthy blaze. Something primeval and profane, projected onto the divine sphere. Deep and ruddy and alive.

Like dirt.

Like flame.

Earth and fire, as the tongues of old declared it so: in creating humanity that is all there is, clay breathed into, galvanized with the spit and spirit of gods.

We are a crossroad between above and below, an entwinement of god and goddess, a microcosm floating adrift within the macrocosm. Small yet infinite, our structure imprinted with the original conception of all, our flesh clinging to celestial particles. The iron of our blood winks at the molten iron of a supernova. The calcium of our bones smiles familiarly at the calcium of the lunar disk above.

Nature shares her materials, weaving with similar threads. Tonight is the night to re-realize that bond: that the whole universe breathes in one tempo within immeasurable scales. The whole of creation beats with one singular golden pulse.

You stand, rooted to the ground, rooted to Æther, singular and infinite. Cradled within your ribs and vaulting above your head lay the moon, the sun, and the stars, unfolding and refolding. Like the tongues of old declared:

You are the stuff of your ancestors' legends. You are the stuff of cosmos and countryside.

And even as the moon lowers its mirror at dawn, the sun rises to greet you once more, dancing onwards in an immortal course. ■





**SECOND PLACE • Art**

**Gold Carrion** Alex Waitkus

# ***Bet Against Me, I Dare You***

David Stinnett

**E**FFORT IS THE ENGINE of progress. It is the silent force that propels us toward our aspirations, no matter how lofty they may seem. It is the grit in our teeth and the fire in our hearts. It is the calloused hands and the aching muscles that remind us of the dedication we have put in.

It is easy to take the path of least resistance, to let the world pass us by as we idly drift along. But true liberation and contentment come from overcoming obstacles and pushing ourselves to our limits.

Effort is the plow that cultivates the soil, the hammer that shapes the steel. It is the sweat and tears that nourish our souls. It is the toil that gives birth to greatness. As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. And so are we also shaped by the world around us, until we are the tool that will shape the world in the image we want it to be. The hammer must be forged in the fires of effort before it can strike the marble of our own potential.

The virtue of effort is not just in the outcome, but in the journey itself. It teaches us to persevere, to be resilient, to be self-reliant and to never give up. It is through effort that we achieve true freedom and satisfaction, for it is through effort we become who we are meant to be. So let us embrace the struggle, for it is through effort that we will find our freedom, our purpose, and our satisfaction. ■



# ***End of the Road***

Matthew Squires

**O**N A LATE DECEMBER NIGHT in 2019, a private jet makes its way to Midway Airport. Onboard the flight is a young phenom rapper named Juice Wrld, accompanied by his girlfriend and his team. Unbeknownst to them, the DEA is waiting at Midway with warrants to search the jet and their personal belongings. The DEA suspects that Juice and his team possess opioids, marijuana, and codeine aboard the flight. Moments before they land, the pilot is informed that law enforcement is waiting for them in the terminal. The pilot urgently alerts the passengers of the situation at hand.

With bags full of various narcotics, Juice Wrld starts to panic. He takes his Louis Vuitton bags into the bathroom. As he dumps the codeine down the toilet, the smell of the drink fills the cabin. As every second goes by, the anxiety pursues. His heart thumps against his chest as the plane descends onto the runway. Even though Juice has discarded most of the codeine, he still possesses enough opioids to kill a herd of elephants.

He's losing his sanity. He feels the walls of the bathroom closing in on him. His breathing becomes strenuous. Everything he had worked so hard for was slipping from his grasp. Before dumping the rest of the pills, he reaches into a plastic bag and grabs a handful of oxycodone, hoping they will comfort him.

When they land, Juice and his team head inside the terminal, fully expecting to be taken into police custody. As they walk down the bleak narrow hallway, they see men and women with DEA vests waiting for them. Before the DEA can intercept them, Juice begins to feel a burning pain in his chest. Suddenly, his pupils widen as he groans, "Lotti." He reaches for her as he collapses to the ground.

Blood drips from down his lips, staining the white floor. Juice gasps for breath as his throat closes up. He violently shakes on the ground as the DEA rapidly approaches. Instead of helping, they slap cuffs onto everyone in the group. They

force them to the ground as Juice's people scream at them to help. "We'll help as soon as we deal with you," says one agent, pinning Ally Lotti to the ground. The paramedics arrive approximately 5 minutes later. They charge down the hallway carrying a crash bag and rolling a stretcher. The medical personnel injects Juice's blood with Narcan, which helps fight the effects of an opioid overdose. They rush Juice into an ambulance and take him to a hospital. Even with the doctor's undivided attention, nothing could be done. Juice Wrld sadly passed away on December 9th, 2019, at the young age of 21 years old.

Juice Wrld, whose real name is Jarad Anthony Higgins, was a songwriter, rapper, and singer. Born and raised in Chicago, music was a part of his life from a very young age. He was raised by his mother, who introduced Juice to rock as a little kid. Jarad loved games like *Guitar Hero* because he could make music. At the age of four, he learned to play notes on the piano. It was apparent that young Jarad already had a love for music. Jarad was not only musically talented but athletically gifted. Every spring, he would

play baseball, and every winter, he would play basketball.

By all means, he was a happy child, but he still struggled with mental health. His mother thought it would be good for him to go to weekly therapy. Little did Jarad know at the time that this would have lasting benefits. It was in therapy that he learned to express himself. Every week, he would sit down with his counselor and voice his anxiety and depression. Eventually, this therapy would evolve and morph into him writing rhymes to portray his feelings. Jarad started making music as an outlet. He would sit in his room and record for hours. He became so invested in it that he bought sound-proofing wall panels, a microphone, an Audiotex, and a laptop. It was through these old notes and melodies that Juice Wrld was created.

The creation of Juice Wrld was about to take the music industry by storm. Juice began releasing songs on a streaming platform called Soundcloud. Soundcloud was the new way for artists to make their music accessible to the mainstream. Knowing this, Juice Wrld started releasing freestyles. He quickly stacked up



streams and began putting more time and money into his craft. When he graduated high school, he started making music full-time. “I still see your shadows in my room, can’t take back the love that I gave you,” could be heard in many teenagers’ headphones in the summer of 2018. Juice Wrld’s first album, *Goodbye and Good Riddance*, was an absolute hit. Songs like “Lucid Dreams,” “All Girls Are the Same,” “End of the Road,” and “Lean Wit Me” pulled in tens of millions of streams over a single summer. People everywhere were captivated by Juice Wrld. His songs resonated with young listeners especially.

Juice Wrld was suddenly one of the biggest names in Hip Hop. The listeners loved his harmony, which usually included the guitar, keyboard, and snare. The harmony was anyways soothing, calm, and simple. His early work was also heavily inspired by rock, giving listeners a combination of Hip-Hop and Rock.

What the hip-hop community loved about Juice Wrld was his ability to express himself. His lyrics were so uncut and genuine that the audience felt like he was talking to them. In a sense, he was.

He wanted each person to feel something from his music. Juice used the microphone to open up about who he was through the good, the bad, and the ugly. In his first album, he sings about his mental health and his crippling drug addiction.

Mental health and drug addiction can often intertwine. Pills can become a way to cope with mental issues such as depression and anxiety. Pills such as Xanax can help counteract mental illness, making them highly addictive. During interviews, Juice used to talk about how he got addicted to Xanax and Adderall in high school to “help him fight his demons.” Unfortunately, it was a habit that stuck with him into his music career.

The rap industry is no stranger to drug addiction. Drugs have always been a big part of Hip-Hop culture, so it’s no surprise that Juice Wrld’s pill addiction worsened. In this generation of Hip Hop, drug abuse is not only accepted but typical. Multiple rappers such as Future, Lil Wayne, and Gucci Mane have made millions of dollars by rapping about drinking lean and popping pills. Juice Wrld eventually cited Future as a reason he

started doing lean because he looked up to Future when he began making music. It's safe to say drug abuse is a pitfall in the music industry.

What was interesting about Juice was he didn't sing about drugs in a positive way. Instead, when he spoke about drugs, he talked about how they bring him pain. Juice was a man that understood that drugs were getting the better of him and that he did have a severe problem. He expressed how he wished he didn't depend on drugs every day, how they were taking a toll on his mind, and how urgently he needed them. The drugs he took were to ease whatever kind of pain came at him every day. In one of his songs, "End of the Road," he sings, "I'm doing drugs till I'm in a coma." These are lyrics from a man who was coping with serious mental illness by drowning his feelings with drugs.

The way Juice talked about his drug use and feelings openly eventually elevated him to superstar status. After *Goodbye and Good Riddance*, he dropped a collab album with Future, one of his favorite rappers. He also dropped another album in February 2019 called *Death*

*Race For Love*. Both albums brought in more streams, cash, love, and fame. The average Hip-Hop fan loved Juice Wrld. It seemed like Juice Wrld was on top of the world, but even with all the money and fame, Juice felt lonely, depressed, and worthless. At the end of the day, he would always be Jarad, a man that struggles with daily life like the rest of us.

Although Juice had everything he ever wanted, he still felt a sorrow so deep you could hear it in his voice. In his song, "Fast," he sings, "I go through so much, I'm 19 years old, it's been months since I've felt at home, but it's ok cuz I'm rich, sike, I'm still sad as a bitch, right." This gave his devoted fans an insight into how Juice Wrld felt. There was something reassuring about hearing Juice open up about something so profound yet simple. It showed that we all go through our own pain, and we have to fight our own battles, even with people we idolize.

As 2019 ended, it seemed evident that it was another record-breaking year for Juice. He collaborated with many mainstream artists, dropped multiple gold tracks, and even talked about going to rehab after his tour was done. He was

growing in popularity every day. He and his girlfriend got engaged in December and were to be married after he was done touring. In less than two years, he had lived most artists' dreams. The sky's the limit for Juice Wrld.

December 8, 2019, Juice Wrld fans woke up to tragic news. People's Instagram feeds were filled with headlines saying, "Famous Rapper, Juice Wrld, has passed from a seizure." Famous rappers were posting pictures they had together with Juice, fans were posting their favorite lyrics, and people played their favorite songs to pay respect. Even though his fans knew he had a drug problem, no one expected this day to come so soon. His death was felt deep within the hearts of Juice's fans, who looked at him as an inspiration to keep living. Millions of people worldwide didn't see him as just an artist, but as someone they knew very well; Therefore, his death weighed on others on a more personal level.

Juice always prided himself on being able to heal himself and others through his music. In his song "Empty," he sang, "I was put here to lead the lost soul." Many

of his biggest fans agreed with this lyric, which made his death feel more tragic. Ordinary people looked to him for advice through his music.

His death brought him more fame and recognition. The tragedy of Juice Wrld's early death captivated the mainstream music scene. It was a story filled with sadness, rise to stardom, and the misunderstanding of a lost soul. To this day, his close friends and family continue to release music he recorded before his passing under his name.

Juice touched many souls in his short time in this world. He transformed his struggles into something useful. His music helped millions of people get through their trauma and helped them cope with their mental illnesses. Most importantly, he let his fans know they weren't going through their struggles alone. He made every fan feel a sense of hope. Even though Juice Wrld isn't with us anymore, his music will continue to guide the lost souls. ■





THIRD PLACE • *Art*

**Everett Matthews** Miranda Dearbeck

# ***My Death, My Dignity***

Corrie Blackwell

## ***Chapter 1***

**I** WOKE UP in Providence Medical Center with a migraine that felt like I had been hit in the head with a cinder block. Confused as to why I was there, I looked over at my mom who was sitting in a blue leather reclining chair by a floor-to-ceiling window with awful green curtains. These were pulled together slightly to block out the sunlight. My mom had her eyes closed with a white pillow behind her head and a thin beige blanket covering her.

“Mom?” I whispered. She opened her eyes immediately and rushed over to my bedside, grabbing my hand and stroking my cheek as if it were the first time she had ever seen me.

“What’s going on? Why am I here?” I winced in pain. The constant beeping of monitors echoing throughout the room felt like a drill being driven into my ear canal.

“You had a seizure,” she said. “You wouldn’t wake up so we called an ambulance.”

I stared at her with uncertainty. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Two days.” Her eyes started to fill with tears. “Let me go get the doctor,” she said.

That was two years ago.

I still remember the doctor coming in with his manilla folder and a grin that said “I am about to deliver the worst news of your life but I am going to smile at you anyways.” Like a stupid grin would make anything that he was about to say even remotely easier to swallow. He was tall, about six feet with khaki slacks and a blue and white plaid shirt with brown loafers. He looked to be in his early 40s with slightly gray hair and a five o’clock shadow. Dr. Roberts was the name sewn into his white medical coat.



“Ms. Blanton, I’m Dr. Roberts, an Oncologist here at Providence Medical Center. You had a seizure two days ago and you were admitted so that we could check a few things out to see what may have caused it. Your mother says you don’t have a history of seizures, is that correct?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“While you were unconscious, we did a few scans and some blood work. All of which came back with abnormal results.” I felt the knot in my throat start to form.

“Ms. Blanton, you have a condition called Glioblastoma. Glioblastoma is an aggressive form of brain cancer. While there is no cure, there are treatments to keep you comfortable.”

Keep me comfortable. After two years of chemo and multiple brain surgeries, I have been anything but comfortable. I’m tired. I am twenty-two years old, my entire body is shutting down, and I can’t even hold a full conversation with someone without my words starting to

slur together. I can’t even go anywhere and do anything or else I take the risk of catching COVID.

That’s why I’m back in this stupid fucking hospital, in this stupid fucking room.

They brought me back to Providence Medical in February to be monitored after my Dad found out that he had caught COVID from someone at his job. Just so happens that my immune system picked it up as soon as he walked through the door. Good thing I was already in the hospital when we found out I tested positive. That’s why I am still here. Why. I’m. Still. Here. Why am I still here?

Call me a squash because I’m a vegetable. At least it feels that way. I’m just taking up space. There are healthy people dying because of the lack of supplies and crowded hospitals. I died two years ago. Give them my bed. Give them this stupid fucking room.

## ***Chapter 2***

I’VE BEEN BACK here for six months now.

Do you know what you can do in a hospital bed for six months? When you’re

not throwing up and calling for help to go to the bathroom, you google things. One day I came across one of those Reddit forums, the ones where people ask



random shit to see if other people think the same as they do. I was hoping to connect with someone that would be able to understand what living is like now.

When I had COVID, the doctors told my parents that I only had two weeks or so left and that my body was too weak to keep fighting. My dad hated himself at that moment. He just kept repeating, “I killed my daughter, I killed my daughter.” He just doesn’t know how much I wanted to thank him for trying.

Unfortunately, I’m still here.

I was reading one of the forums on Reddit where someone had just been diagnosed with

Glioblastoma. Everyone was giving their little bit of advice on how to cope and deal with all of the mixed emotions. One comment stuck out by Reddit user “FuckCancer420”: “Save yourself some time *Death with Dignity Act (DWDA) - End of Life Choices Oregon* (eolcoregon.org).”

Death with Dignity. I didn’t even know this kind of thing was legal in Oregon, but apparently it was. A description read:

“Planning for the end of life allows individuals to spend their final days with friends and loved ones, focusing on the present. Informing

family and friends of your wishes ahead of time relieves them of the possible burden of making decisions about your final arrangements.”

Did you read that? Planning for the end of life. That’s all that I want right now. Everyone is deciding what I’m supposed to do with the little bit of life I have inside of me, without even giving any type of thought as to what I may want.

I want to go home. I want to leave this fucking prison cell that I’ve been confined to for the last six months. I want to crawl into my queen-sized bed with my thick burgundy duvet and my 1800 thread count European cotton sheets and melt into my therapeutic mattress while I take the last breath that I’ll ever struggle to take again.

It’s almost time for Dr. Roberts to make his end of shift rounds. I hear the rhythmic clicking sound of his loafers approaching my door. He gives a quick knock before entering.

“Good evening, Laura. How are you feeling?”

“Like shit. Every single minute of every single day I feel like shit.”

“Fair enough.”

He closes the door behind him. He removes his stethoscope, presses it against my chest and places two fingers and a thumb around my wrist to check my pulse. “Deep Breath,” he says.

“Oh, sure. No problem,” I say sarcastically.

I let him listen a moment before saying, “Is it gone yet?”

He didn’t really find it humorous. He moved to a laptop and started typing.

“Dr. Roberts?”

“Yes?”

“Have you heard of the Death with Dignity Act?”

“Yes, Laura, I have.”

“So...What do you think?”

He’s pondering what to say next, but I can tell he doesn’t want to have this conversation.

“Laura, listen, I know you’re in pain, I know that you don’t feel —”

“Feel what? That I don’t feel good? That I’m dealing with a lot of emotions right now and I just need some extra help to get through it? That it’s possible that I’m depressed and thinking irrationally that—”

“Laura!”

My mother’s voice rings through the room like a church bell on Sunday.

“What’s going on? I could hear you yelling down the hall.”

Dr. Roberts looks down at his watch.

“Well, I’ll leave you guys to it and um —”

“Wait!”

He looks at me with that “Not now” look.

“Mom, I want you to gather everyone,” I explain. “There’s something I need to say.”

The room is silent. My mom and dad are sitting on a small couch in front of the window. Those damn curtains. Seriously, who chose that color?

“I came across this website about a law called the Death with Dignity Act.”

My mom’s face immediately turns.

My dad grabs on to my mom’s knee like something I said sounded familiar.

“You’ve heard of it?”

“Yes, Laura, we have.”

“So why didn’t you tell me before now?”

## Chapter 3

The night nurse, Ruth, comes in with my scheduled medication. At this point I don't even know what all they put in that little plastic cup. Hopefully there's a Xanax mixed in there.

Everyone is so on edge right now. I can feel their nervous energy take over the room. I can't blame them. Nobody likes to hear "I am ready to die." Especially from their daughter.

"I spoke with an end-of-life counselor the other day. She gave me a lot of information."

My mom looks at me. Her eyes are so sad. "Honey, I know you are tired. I know you are in pain. But maybe we could just consider some therapy and talk to a pain specialist and —"

"Jesus Christ, what is it with you people thinking I'm depressed or thinking that I should try some different pill. Can it just be that maybe I'm tired of suffering? I'm tired of being sedated. I'm tired of barely being able to chew my food. I want to go home. I want to be done with all of this."

I take a deep breath.

"Look. I get it. You're scared. You're scared because you think God will not accept me into heaven if I choose to go before my time. You're all scared that this

is just the depression sinking in and I am making a choice irrationally."

My mom turns her gaze towards the floor. Dr. Roberts is leaning against the wall with his arms and ankles crossed. He looks tired.

"What do you think people will say if they find out this is what you chose to do? That you chose to commit suicide and we let you do it?"

"It's none of anyone's business and it's not called suicide. It's called Physician Assisted Death. In Oregon by law, I, a terminally ill cancer patient, has the right to an assisted death after all other options have been exasperated. My end-of-life counselor will assist all of us with the process. I can pick out a nice coffin, I can choose what I want to wear, I can be in my own bed. Will you all at least sit down with the counselor and let her talk with you?"

It's Friday. I'm sitting outside in my wheelchair in the hospital courtyard. In front of me are my parents and off to the left is Dr. Roberts as well as another oncologist, Dr. Chen.

We are sitting at a patio table with an umbrella. A small fish pond with a water-fall streams behind us and the flowers

and bird baths are surrounded by squirrels and hummingbirds. The sun is warm. For once I feel like everything is going to be okay. For once in the last 6 months there is a sense of tranquility within me. Is it because deep inside I know there's a possibility that this will all be over soon? I hope so.

"Hi Mr. & Mrs. Blanton, I am Erica Ramirez and I am an end-of-life counselor with one of the organizations that support the Death with Dignity Act here in Oregon."

Erica is dressed in a black pencil skirt with a silk lavender shirt tucked in neatly and two-inch black high heels. Her hair is dark brown with ringlet-like curls and she smells of vanilla and sandalwood.

"I understand that you all had some questions and concerns about whether or not you feel comfortable with Laura exercising her Death with Dignity Right?"

"We don't feel comfortable with it," my mom says. "Not at all."

"And why is that?"

Erica crosses her legs underneath the table. She clasps her hands together and stares at them intensely to show that my parents have her full attention.

"Because we are good Christian people and we believe that when God is ready for her to go he will take her."

"Anything else?" Erica asked.

"We just think that this whole Physician Assisted Death thing is another way for people to make suicide not look so bad. I mean, do you know how many mentally-ill people would use this as an excuse? Does this teach our young people that if you are depressed then you have a legal and easy way to end your life? We just don't agree with that. It's against God's will."

I look over at Dr. Roberts and Dr. Chen. They are whispering about something but I can't make it out.

"What kind of doctor would even participate in something like that?" my mom continues. "Their job is to keep people safe, to cure them, not help them die."

We see how well that turned out.

Erica uncrosses her legs and leans forward. "I understand your concerns, I really do. Losing someone is never easy. Whether it's natural or assisted. You may even view the physician who is assisting as unethical and in violation of their medical oath. You may also think that since someone is terminally ill, they must be depressed and in some instances that may be true. We perform psychological evaluations on every patient that is interested in moving forward with initiating their Death with Dignity right. We

also take into consideration their diagnosis, their progress, and their life expectancy. We work with doctors such as Dr. Roberts and Dr. Chen in order to make a proper determination that the patient is fully qualified for the Physician Assisted Death process. This process is very well regulated. To ease your mind, the majority of suicides in the state of Oregon are not related to physician assisted death at all.”

There is silence.

“So how does it work?” my dad asked.

I feel the anxious curiosity starting to build up in both of them.

“Well, after all arrangements are made, all of the required tests and paperwork are completed, Laura and I will complete a few more counseling sessions to be sure that she is of sound mind when making her decision. Then she will find a date that everyone can agree on and she will go home with you and your wife and she will spend however many days you all need to prepare and involve other family and friends if necessary. Once the final day comes, myself, Dr. Roberts, Dr. Chen and the both of you, if you decide to remain in the room, will begin setting things up and preparing for Laura to take her final walk in life. One of the doctors will administer the drug which is a high dose of barbiturates. At that point she

will close her eyes and drift into an eternal sleep.”

“And then what?” dad asks.

Then mom: “She dies?”

“Yes, mom. I will die. I will be free. I will no longer be in pain and you should be happy that I won’t have to continue to suffer.”

Dr. Roberts says, “Dr. Chen and I are both qualified and trained to perform physician assisted deaths. That is not something we go around announcing because, honestly, it’s hard for us too, but we do it because after seeing the things we have seen with terminally ill patients, we know what they go through is not easy. We watch people slowly die in agony. We see people take their last breath alone in dark rooms by themselves because there wasn’t enough time for the family to get here to say goodbye. We watch families fall apart in many different ways and all we have to offer them is a ‘sorry for your loss’ or ‘we did everything we could.’ At least this way we are giving people something that others don’t always get: closure.”

Did I just witness a Grey’s Anatomy episode?

My mom and dad look at each other and then they turn and stare at me.

Their eyes are melting.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Laura, I need you to know that if this was ultimately left up to us, we wouldn’t choose this for you. But we know that it’s not our choice. Though, regardless of how we feel about it, we want you to know that we support you. If this is really what you want to do then we will help you through this process but if at any point you start to regret your decision you have to let us know.”

What. In. The. Actual. Fuck?

Dr. Chen takes a deep breath and finally speaks. “From a professional and realistic point of view, Laura only has 6-8 weeks left. There will come a point where there is nothing else that we can do for her and her body will slowly shut down. It will be stressful, not only for her but for you as her parents also. It will be painful literally and mentally. Dying from a terminal illness is not a comfortable death. More than 40% of terminally ill patients are in serious pain during their last 3 days of life. If she really wants to do this,

then in my personal opinion, it’s the right thing to do.”

The right thing to do. You have no idea how comforting it is to hear that. Even when you believe your mind is completely made up, you still wonder if what you are doing is right.

Erica reaches over and grabs both of my parents’ hands and smiles. “I am here for you. I will continue to be here for you. You all are not alone in this.”

I pull my beanie over my bare head and my Afghan blanket up to my chin. It’s 70 degrees out, but everywhere feels like winter when you are dying.

Everyone stands up, shakes hands and heads for the automatic doors towards the lobby where the elevators are.

My dad walks behind me and starts to gently guide my wheelchair. “I love you, Ladybug.”

I can hear him holding back his tears. “I love you too, Dad.”

## ***Chapter 4***

Mom and dad are loading my things into the back of their Chevrolet SUV. It’s not a lot for someone who’s been in the hospital for going on 8 months now.

Mostly just a bag of get well cards and stuffed teddy bears from family and friends that showed up maybe once or twice and then never bothered to even



call after that. I'm sure they will post some sappy posts on Facebook about how much they loved me and how close we were along with a picture of us from high school.

I hate pictures. I swear to God if someone photoshops a pair of angel wings on my back, I will haunt them for the rest of my afterlife.

As we pull away from the hospital entry, I look out the window and flip my middle finger up.

I will never have to step foot in that place again. Goodbye stupid fucking bed and vomit-green curtains.

When we pull in the driveway there's a "Welcome home Laura" sign taped to the front door. I usually hate these types of things, but for some reason this one makes me smile. My dad rolls my wheelchair into the foyer and immediately my Pomeranian, Wrigley, jumps into my lap and begins licking my face. I give him the tightest hug that I can. Although his excitement is extremely painful for me, I don't care. I want to live in this moment for as long as I can.

Since I can no longer walk up the stairs by myself, my dad picks me up the way he used to when I was 5 and would fall asleep on the couch. He really is the best dad.

As soon as we make it to my room, I

immediately start to cry. I never thought I'd see it again. My dad puts me on the bed and then sits down at the end of it. I slowly sit up and look at him while grabbing his hand with both of mine.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"For what, Ladybug?"

"For being you. For being the strongest man that I know. For showing me how a man loves his family and how he is supposed to take care of them. I'm glad I never found anyone to be with. Nobody could ever compete with you because you took the gold."

A tear rolled his cheek. "I will always be your number one fan."

My mom walks in the room and can tell the moment is emotional. She crawls in bed beside me and pulls me to her while tracing my face with her finger tips. My dad crawls next to her, stretches his arm across her, across me. None of us says a word. None of us moves. We stay like this until the very next morning when my cell phone rings.

It's Erica.

My mom and dad are already making breakfast. I can smell the freshly brewed coffee with sausage and pancakes. I answer the phone: "Hello?"

"Good morning sunshine. How are you feeling?"

"To be honest, I'm okay."

"That's great to hear. Dr. Roberts, Dr. Chen, and I will be heading over to your house around 3:00pm. Is that ok?"

"Um, yeah that's fine."

"Perfect. We will see you soon. Bye."

"Bye."

My mom comes in with a tray. A plate of pancakes cut into very small pieces to make it easier for me to chew, a glass of orange juice, and a side of mixed fruit.

"Erica called. She said she and the doctors would be here around 3:00pm."

"Oh." She sounds disappointed.

"It's okay mom. Just remember that this is something that I need to do. It's not something that we can avoid. It will happen one way or another and at least this way we can all be together."

"I know, honey. Go ahead and eat."

It's 2:45pm and I just heard the doorbell ring. My mom opens the door and I can tell it was Erica by the sound of her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. "She's just upstairs," I heard my mom say. Two minutes later, Erica's standing in my doorway smiling while holding a large black leather tote bag with a folder sticking out from the top. She comes and sits down on my bed.

"Where's Dr. Roberts and Dr. Chen?" I asked.

"They should be here shortly. Like

I told you. This is a very well-regulated process and they have to make sure all of our ducks are in a row before proceeding."

I hear the doorbell ring again. This time there's the muffled sound of men's voices before the footsteps come up the stairs.

"Speak of the devil, or devils I should say," Erica jokes. She tries to, at least.

It's strange to think that on a Saturday afternoon, two doctors that should be at home with their families, watching college football while drinking cold beer, their children running through the house laughing and playing, their wives cooking some type of casserole that she found on Pinterest, are instead here with me. Helping me die. Helping my family to say goodbye.

Dr. Chen is explaining how things are going to go from here. Dr. Roberts is putting down waterproof medical padding for me to lay on in case I defecate after passing. I'm already wearing the clothes that I chose. Pink, green, and white sleeping pants with one of my dad's oversized work shirts and an Oregon Ducks beanie on my head. I'm comfortable, finally. I crawl into my bed with my big oversized duvet and my 1800 thread count sheets. Just like I had hoped for.

Dr. Chen comes over and takes my vitals. As he's listening to my heart, my

mom and dad walk to the other side of the bed and sit down in the chairs that Erica had put beside me earlier.

It's now 3:23 and I know the time is coming soon.

I'm nervous but in an excited way. Is that crazy?

I'm excited to die, to be out of this prison of a body.

Dr. Roberts is standing over me. He's holding a plastic cup, again with some type of pill that I can't pronounce. I don't even care. He could hand me rat poison right now and I still would not care. I'm ready.

I reach for the plastic cup and I hold it in front of me. I look over to my parents and through their heartbroken tears, I see them force smiles. My mom reaches over to my nightstand and hands me a glass of water.

"Take as long as you need Laura. You're not in any rush." Erica says.

I look back over at my parents and then back at Dr. Roberts, Dr. Chen, and Erica. "Thank you. All of you. For giving me this. For letting me make this choice and for not letting me suffer. Do not ever think that I will regret this. Today you all are my heroes. You've set me free. I love

you. To the moon and back, past the last wishing star."

My mom and dad lean in and kiss my forehead.

I put the plastic cup to my mouth and take a deep breath before swallowing the pill.

I take a couple of sips of water, then let my head sink into the pillow. I hold my mom and dad's hands until there's nothing.

Silence. Peace.

God there is so much peace.

Ten minutes go by and Dr. Chen checks my pulse. He looks down at his watch and in a soft tone of voice says, "Time of death, 3:54pm." ■



**HONORABLE MENTION • Art**

***Ladybug*** Vivian Plante



# ***The Long Death of Asif in the Garden***

Abu B. Rafique

**T**HERE WERE PALE BUDS showing at the tips of some branches on the old peach tree in the garden. Asif could see them quite clearly. For some reason they stood out to him more than anything else; in just a few weeks, spring would arrive and cause the tree to blossom with flowers and fruit. Years ago, Asif and his wife would give the extra fruit to their neighbors, saving the lion's share for themselves. They would freeze it so that they could use it long after the season for things like homemade jams and pastries, various sharbats to cool them through the summer, and syrups and candies to have for sweets in the fall and winter. But Asif had not bothered to collect the fruit in years. He could vaguely recall picking from the tree the first spring after the divorce and the fruit had tasted so bitter to him that he'd never bothered touching it again.

Every year, the tree blossomed and the air in the garden was sweetened by the smell. Eventually the fruit would fall from the tree into the garden where it would remain on the ground until it rotted away. Asif did not bother interfering in any part of this process. He felt pangs of guilt at the thought of wasted food, something he felt certain he'd have to answer for in the hereafter. "But at least the birds and other little animals get to eat some of it," he'd say to himself in an attempt to ease the guilt.

He wondered who would collect the fruit now, or if they'd even keep the tree at all. Asif glanced around the garden; it had been Farishta's favorite part of their home. Decades before, they'd gone to see an American film on their first date. Asif could no longer recall the name of the film, but it had featured a famous Italian actor as the star and there was a scene

in the film where the man had been sitting in his garden. His new neighbour, a woman, had looked over the fence to tell him that she liked his garden and he'd responded to the compliment by asking, "You know what they say, don't you? If you love a man's garden, you gotta love the man."

Every spring when the garden bloomed, Farishta would remark on how beautiful it looked and how much she loved it. Asif would always repeat the line to her, and she would always roll her eyes at the reference.

He shook his head to snap himself out of these thoughts. He had spent the last couple of weeks thinking about her quite a lot, the early years together. He had even considered reaching out to her but did not act on these impulses. Their final year together had been too strained, and Asif figured that the wounds were and would always be a little too raw for them to ever reconcile. Atiya's death had turned them against each other and Asif knew that Farishta had spent the final months of their marriage blaming him for it.

He did not fault her for this, he should have been more attentive. After all, he was the father, and Atiya had been his beautiful child. Her light brown eyes used to light up every night when he would come home from work and she would clamber up into his arms. The gold and black bracelet he'd gotten for her would shimmer against the rolls of baby-fat on her little wrist and she would rest her soft head against his collarbone, remaining there until it was time for bed, when she would finally go back into Farishta's gentle hands.

For months after her death, and after the divorce, and even now Asif felt he was going mad from the loss of his daughter. Many nights would pass with him in bed on his back, convinced that he could feel the warmth of his daughter's weight on his chest, the tiny body resting against him as it had always done in life. If he looked at his own hands, he could sometimes swear that the ten little fingers and ten little toes he'd counted at her birth were still there, twitching sleepily in his palm. In those moments, his fascination and love for this life that he



and Farishta had created together had always threatened to capsize and overtake him. He was convinced some nights that he could clearly see Atiya in some other place; she had grown into the woman she would have been, and she was safe. She was waiting now for her mother and her father to catch up to her; she hadn't waited before and they'd fallen behind but now it was their job to close the gap.

At these thoughts Asif would feel a tremendous wave of guilt and longing for Farishta. Despite all of his own suffering, he knew he could not imagine how she had felt at Atiya's passing or even how she felt now, years later. Some of the pain was shared between them both, but Farishta had lost something unidentifiable at the passing of their daughter. And in the process of trying to build herself back up she had walked right into a cloud of anger and something close to hate that was directed entirely towards Asif. The fights in those days had been horrific, oftentimes they'd end with the two of them in tears. Sometimes they'd fall into each other, other times they'd

isolate themselves in different parts of the house for days. Asif had not known how to console her and he hadn't known what to do with his own grief. Their pain had warped them into strangers.

There had been a time when Asif would know Farishta was nearby without her having to make a sound. One night after an argument, she had gone to the backyard to try and make amends. Asif had been sitting with his back to the door, entirely unaware of the fact that she was there. She stood there for a moment, waiting for him to turn as he always did, but this time there was no movement. And in that moment Farishta knew that they had lost something between them that they would never be able to find again.

She left the next morning. Asif did not put up a fight. He simply sat at the kitchen table while she packed her things. And when she was finished, he held the door open for her as she walked out. He watched as her brother helped her load her luggage into his car and he remained standing in the doorway as the car turned onto the road going down the

hill and drove away. It wasn't until the cloud of dust and dirt settled back onto the ground that Asif turned away and closed the door.

He had heard a number of years ago that Farishta had remarried. The person telling him had been an old mutual friend who had been kind enough to ask if Asif wanted to know more. He had considered a great number of questions but settled on just one; "How does she seem?"

"Happier," the friend had said with a sad smile.

That was all Asif had needed to know, all that he cared about. He was glad Farishta had found something to hold close again and he did not dare to ever intrude on that.

But still the desire to speak to her one last time had come to him recently and he had to do everything he could not to give into it. Over the years, he had become the kind but reclusive old man in the neighborhood. People left him alone for the most part. A boy from up the street sometimes ran little errands for him in the harsher winter and summer days when he couldn't handle going

outdoors and he would pay the boy a hundred rupees for every task. All of his friends had either passed away by now or he had fallen out of touch with them on purpose. Asif knew that this would work to both his advantage and his detriment now. It would be a while before anyone found him.

He had only ever been around two dead bodies before. The first had been when Asif was only sixteen years old—he had taken part in the ghusl of a neighborhood man that had been killed in a car accident. He remembered clearly that the body had still been warm when they'd washed it and he had felt a bit of embarrassment at the realization that the man had soiled himself when he'd died. Nobody said a word about this; in fact nobody made any noise whatsoever. They simply cleaned the man, cleaned every part of him before wrapping him in clean white cloth, placing him inside a wooden box, and lowering him into the ground. Parting prayers and wishes were recited and dirt was tossed in handfuls over the body and that had been the end of it.

Asif could not remember Atiya's funeral very well; it had passed by in a blur for him. He could vaguely recall holding the little shroud that contained her body. His hands had trembled and for a moment he'd had the wild thought that his trembling hands would jolt his baby back to life. But she had remained still and lifeless as a neighbor had gently taken his hands to help him lower her into the box. Farishta's prayers mingled with her sobs as they threw dirt into the grave; he knew only that at some point he had taken her into his arms and helped her back to their home.

He had taken great care not to eat for the past three days and not to drink for the past twenty four hours, this was how scared he was at the thought of humiliating himself and losing control of his bowels or his bladder as he left his own body. Asif had dressed himself that morning in a plain cotton kurta and trousers. They were a crisp white color and he had trimmed his white beard and hair down close to his face and scalp. He had taken a knife from the kitchen, a broad blade

that Farishta had favoured when cutting large amounts of meat for Eid preparations. It had not been used in years but the steel was still flawless and the blade still balanced.

A breeze passed through the garden, lifting the corners of his sleeves and knocking a few loose buds out from the tree. They cascaded around him, a few landing near his hands. Asif tapped the tip of the knife lightly against one and he was nearly choked by a wave of sadness at the thought that he would never get to touch these buds again. How strange it was now, to say a silent goodbye to these things he had never thought about before. But there was nothing else he could say goodbye to, nothing else that he could hang on to for very long.

Asif turned the knife towards his own belly, clutching the handle tightly and steadying himself. He muttered a quick prayer and stared past the knife to a spot in the barren flower bed across from him. He blinked once and then pulled the knife towards himself. A gasp of pain escaped his lips as the blade pierced his

stomach. The pain had come in a sudden burst and Asif had halted his motion at the feeling. The knife was halfway in his belly, so he took a breath and pushed it in until the hilt.

His head fell forward onto the table and he let out a groan, his blood bright red and spilling out over his hands slowly. Asif knew he couldn't stay like this, he had to be done with it. He drew in a pained breath and used all his strength to pull the knife from his body. Another gasp of pain escaped him and now the blood rushed out of his stomach, spilling out of him and forming a sticky veil over his legs and lap and then coming out so dark it was nearly black. He watched as the deepest drops of life fell out of him, touching the light of day and oxygen for the first and last time.

The pain dulled and suddenly he felt exhausted. Asif wanted to lift his head up to look around the garden one last time but his head felt so heavy. Someone was running their fingers through his hair, he could feel their touch atop his head. Everything around him felt so soft it

made him want to cry, but his body was so focused on pushing out his blood that he couldn't muster up the strength it would take for tears.

But that was fine with him. He was headed somewhere where he would have enough strength for anything. Perhaps he could find someone who would direct him to where his daughter was.

At this thought, Atiya's face swam in front of him, bright and clear and beautiful, as new and full of life as it had been on the day she was born. Asif did not want to close his eyes now, he wanted to keep looking at her.

But he had to. It would only be for a moment, she would understand.

Asif let out a content sigh and his eyes flickered once.

Twice.

Three times.

And finally, they closed. ■

# ***The Four Miler***

Emma McClain

## ***The First Mile***

**“G**ET UP” Trisha yells as she stands in the doorway. She tosses a light blue pillow at me. I sit up and face her, moving my tangled hair out of my eyes. “Morning” she snickers. “Brush your hair and get dressed, mom needs us at the elementary school in 20.” I rub my eyes and look around my bedroom. When did I fall asleep last night? I sit up and grab my phone, unplugging it from its charger. I read the time. 4:17. What? How is it light outside? Is it afternoon? Did I read that wrong? I turn my head towards my sister. “I thought the four-miler started at 9:00—”

Another pillow hits me. “Ellie...” Trisha says. A weird look passes across her face. She recovers and rolls her eyes at me. “Just get dressed, mom says we can’t be late.”

“Fine” I say. I glance to the foot of my bed to pick up the first pillow she tossed, but it’s not there. “Wait, Trish didn’t you—”

“NOW!” she yells.

I begrudgingly put on my running clothes and lace up my sneakers. “Any day now!”

Trisha yells from downstairs. I ignore her. It’s too early for this. I’m so sick of mom and Trish dragging me to these races. I knew that being the daughter of an elementary school principal meant lots of dumb school events, but I figured that my sister and I could roll our eyes and participate, annoyed, together. Instead, she actually enjoys these races. I mean, come on, she’s excited to get up and go run a four-miler for an elementary school. That’s not normal. I bet she’s just excited for people to notice how beautiful she is without any makeup on. I am not excited. I may be the athlete between the two of us, but boy am I ugly when I run.

I make sure to double check one more time that I’ve double knotted my shoes before I run downstairs and meet my sister at the front door. “I

could've run three four-milers while you were getting dressed." she says. "Please, we both know you're the slow one. You probably won't even be able to run this one," I say as we head out the door.

When we get there, I see my mom waiting for us behind the registration table in her hot pink joggers and high ponytail. She's surrounded by impatient and whiny children. She waves us over to the registration table. "Grab your numbers girls!" She smiles as she starts handing out juice boxes to some of the kids. "Trish, help me out here," she beckons as Trisha skips over to the swarm of children and starts working her wrangling magic. My mom laughs at something Trisha says and starts sashaying towards me. "Have you tried sedating them? I bet that'll calm them down." I tease. I wait for my mom to respond, but she just holds that joyful smirk on her face as she walks towards me. "What? I'm not a kid person." I shrug. I grab a running number off of the table and go to pin it on my shirt, but my mom grabs my wrist. She squeezes it tight.

"Mom, what?" I look up at her. She looks at me with a horrified stare.

"Where are you?" she whispers.

"What?" I say, trying to laugh it off, though my mom isn't usually one

for elaborate jokes. She grips my wrist tighter and leans in closer. "Ellie, why can't you just...." her face falls into a defeated expression. She lets go of my wrist and drops her head to the ground. I think I see a tear slide down her cheek. "Mom, what is going on? Am I not supposed to be here? I thought you wanted Trisha and I to—"

"NO!" she yells. She cups her hands around her ears and starts to sob. "I can't....she isn't....it's not working...." her speech trails off. She pants as she stares at my shoes. But then her hands fall back to her sides, she fixes her posture, and then stares at me. She wipes the tear off of her cheek. "Sweetie, how many times have I told you to double knot your shoes!" she smiles as she jogs away. I watch her high ponytail bounce back to the crowd of children surrounding my sister.

What was that?

I figure the race is about to start soon, so I walk over to the starting line. My mom goes right back to giggling and laughing with Trisha. What is wrong with her and Trish today? I look around at the crowd, but it's just a mixture of students and family members conversing about their own problems. Nobody noticed a hot pink woman having a mental episode? Whatever. I guess I should do some half-assed stretches to look



like I'm doing something other than just standing around. I go to check my watch to pass the time. 3:43.

Huh?

"GOOOO RACERS!" my mom yells over the megaphone.

"What?! I thought there were still a few minutes left-" I look up and see everyone start running, including Trisha, who is somehow way ahead of me at the front of the pack. I glance at my grinning mom, who is watching everyone start the race as she cues up the bluetooth speaker.

I watch her eyes pass over each and every runner until she gets to me. She holds up that same smile she held when looking at every other runner, except this time, she doesn't move onto the

next one. She just....keeps staring at me. Unmoving. Unchanging. I break our stare when I realize that I'm just about left in the dust by the mob of runners, and I start sprinting down the hill. I turn back to my mom and watch her until I reach the bottom of the hill and she disappears from my sightline. I look ahead at the mob of runners, hoping to find Trisha so I can question her about mom's behavior, but everyone has disappeared. It's just an empty street.

As of right now, I know three things:

1. There is something wrong with time
2. There is something wrong with this race
3. That is not my mom.

## ***The Second Mile***

NOW THAT I'm at the bottom of the hill, out of the sightline of every eerie pair of eyes I've seen today, I dart into the forest behind one of the houses we're supposed to run past. I need to catch my breath. I need to figure out what is going on. I need to figure out where everyone went.

I glance at my watch again. 3:29.

I have to get out of here.

There's a shortcut to the high school if I take the trail behind these houses. I

figure the quicker I get to the high school, the quicker I can cross the finish line, and then maybe all of this will end. Maybe I will win some lame prize like a cotton candy machine or a box of donuts and mom will drive Trish and I home and this will all be over. Either that or I will get to the high school and complete my objective and wake up from whatever hell I'm living in. Whatever option that can take me out of what's happening right now.

I glance down at my shoes. They're both untied. I know I double knotted them this morning, I double checked! I kneel down in the dirt and tie my shoes again, making sure to double knot them this time. Not that it matters, though, because I was sure I had double knotted them last time. Who knows, maybe I should just leave them untied. Then I can trip on a shoelace and hit my head and wake up back in Kansas with Toto and Auntie Em.

I stand back up and examine my surroundings. I see trees and weeds and flowers and dirt.

The trees have green leaves, a few starting to turn brown. The weeds are all green, the flowers are starting to wilt (but that's normal in the fall), the dirt is.... well, dirt. Nothing out of the ordinary, so I guess I'm safe here (whatever logic that is). I start running.

I run with caution at first, but then pick up speed. The trail in the woods is pretty much a straight shot to the roads outside the high school. There's barely an incline, and ever since the great boy scouts of America paved a clean path, disrupting the ecosystems of plants and bugs alike, it's been a very smooth journey. I try to pay very close attention to my surroundings as I run, but everything appears to be normal. I finally reach the

edge of the woods after about 20 minutes of sprinting, and I feel a small amount of victory. I just need to take a left onto the road and ride my victory wave straight to the high school. I glance down the road to the right to make sure no other runner is coming, and I notice a car driving up the road. This is a four-miler for an elementary school. The roads should be closed. I glance to the left, and see that the intersection right in front of the high school is blocked off by cones and a sign that reads, "ROAD CLOSED. SCHOOL EVENT. GET OUT EMPTY"

What does get out empty mean?

I run a little closer along the edge of the woods to get a better view of the sign, cautious to stay out of view of the car. "ROAD CLOSED. SCHOOL EVENT. GET OUT ELLIE."

Uh oh.

A loud honk blares from the road, and I immediately dart behind a tree to hide. I close my eyes. I hear the tires of the car approaching, accelerating as it gets closer and closer. Why did that sign say my name? Wait, did it say my name? Do I just think it said my name? Why is there a car driving towards the high school if the roads have been closed all morning? And why is it honking at me?

The sound of the tires starts to quiet, until it slows to a complete stop. I hear a

car door open and then slam shut after a few seconds. I hold my breath. Don't. Move. I hear footsteps crunch on the rocks and dirt behind me, inching closer.

I open my eyes and look up to the sky in a last-ditch effort to appease whatever god is angry with me. That's when I see them.

The two moons.

### ***The Third Mile***

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, my mom read me a book called, *Molly Golly and The Two Moons*. It was about a little girl who lived on Mars. She really wanted a pair of pink diamond slippers for her birthday, so one night, she made a wish on Mars's two moons. She stared up at the sky and said "I wish for my birthday wish to come true." Little did she know, on her birthday, she would not receive those pink slippers. Instead, her mother got her a book about princesses.

She was so upset with her mother that she yelled, "I wish I had another mom!"

Unfortunately, that night, as the moons had promised, she got her wish. She woke up the day after her birthday to find a new mom in her house. At first, she thought it was awesome, but as time went on, she grew to miss her old mom. She noticed all the things her new mom did differently, such as not cutting the crusts off of her PB&Js, not tucking her in at night, and not brushing her hair with that gentle touch every morning. She became

so upset a week later, that she ran to the same spot where she made her original wish. She began to sob, and begged the moons for her to redo her birthday with her old mom, and they granted her wish one more time.

She woke up after that night to discover it was the morning of her birthday again, but this time, she didn't yell at her mom when she received the book. Instead, she thanked her, and discovered that her mom actually wrote the book herself, and it was titled, *Molly Golly: The Adventures of The Birthday Princess*. Molly smiled as she realized that the book was an even greater gift than the slippers would've been.

I hated that story.

I thought Molly Golly was a selfish little brat who didn't deserve the love and effort that her mother put into her gift. But most of all, I couldn't get over the two moons. How could there be two moons, coexisting with each other so peacefully? How could two celestial beings exist at the same time and never be compared?

How could they thrive equally from the sun's light, one never receiving more light than the other? They were appreciated separately and together, beautiful and unique, and neither was ever viewed as better than the other. There was no "pretty moon" and "ugly moon." They were just "The Two Moons."

Maybe there's a metaphor in there somewhere. I don't know.

What I do know is this:

1. There is something wrong with time
2. There is something wrong with this race
3. I don't know where my mom is, or why there's a crazy woman that looks just like her
4. There is someone walking towards me as I stand vulnerable, alone, and afraid at the edge of a forest, blanketed by the light of two moons

### ***The Fourth Mile***

I COULD make a break for it. I'm the faster twin, after all. I could bolt back to the elementary school and hug my not-mom and drive us home and throw all of our clocks away and never look at the sky for the rest of my life. But that would be a life lived in fear. That would be taking the easy way out.

So I don't run. I wait for the footsteps to find me. I watch the two moons in the sky, their beauty mesmerizing me, but neither of them capturing my gaze more than the other. Maybe two moons can exist at once.

"Elizabeth?" I hear a voice call. "Elizabeth Peters?"

I come out from behind the tree and see a man in a white coat standing there, smiling at me.

"You've been running for quite a while. Are you tired yet?"

I nod.

"Good, come with me." He smiles and extends his hand. I walk towards him and take it, squeezing it tight, as I glance up at the sky and watch the two moons fade away.

I hear monitored beeping in the distance. Maybe this is it. Or maybe I'm finally waking up. ■

# ***A Poet and A Stargazer***

W. Connor Wallace

I OPENED THE DOOR to the closet-sized bedroom. I stood in the light of the large singular window for a moment. Looking up I saw the planets hung from the coned ceiling, the stars painted against it, the shelves that were lined with stones and fossils and other curios. Left of the door was a desk covered with papers, a small twin bed on the right, and a telescope pointed out the window. A small wooden chair sat behind the telescope and the stool beside it with an open notebook resting on its seat. Although my legs carried me towards it, my arms could not be willed to pick it up, nor my eyes to read it. Instead, I sat at the old desk, our old desk. I shuffled around some of the papers, found a pen, an envelope, and a clean sheet of paper.

“I hope you have been well since the rain. It feels like I’ve been to a hundred sites since that night.”

She was brilliant. In truth, she was far too brilliant for the likes of me. Yet we still made quite the pair, if only for a short time. I like to tell myself that for that time it had been magical, near perfect, and everything I had ever wanted from life... from love. If it hadn’t been for a misplaced love of our own toils, then maybe it could have lasted. I drove her away; from the moment we met I gave her the catalyst for our demise. In the end, I too brought it down upon us.

For that I am and always will be nothing less than a fool.

“I still remember the way you were glued to that telescope. In the distance I heard thunder but still you searched the sky. I had my back to you, hunched over the final draft of my first study when I heard the first drops of rain. That’s when you told me, ‘It’s just too far away’”

She was an astronomer. We met on a bus to Mexico when she was 23, and I was 22. A year before I had accompanied my professor to an excavation site on the Yucatan Peninsula, I had been dreaming for months of uncovering long forgotten villages and pulling pieces of pottery and ancient tools from the ground. Instead, we found a nearly completed excavation, with a few artifacts still intact. We spent a week or so helping to wrap up at the site before taking everything we found to the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. Once there, my professor and I helped the staff catalogue the artifacts for several weeks before returning to the states. While I had another excavation later that summer when I met her, I had wanted to return to Mexico for a while. One of the staff members had told me about an observatory in the north, where light pollution wasn’t allowed for nearly a hundred miles around it. So, I figured I’d rest.

I’d pitch a tent, and star gaze every night. I even considered picking up poetry. Only, I met her instead.

“You just walked out after saying that and although I was never sure what you meant, I was sure that I would never see you again.”

As it turned out, she had also heard of this observatory, and it just so happened that they’d heard of her too. She’d been invited to intern there full time all summer and it was an offer she couldn’t refuse. So, we met on a bus bound for Mexico and brought together by the stars and some dreams. It was a long



trip; I started in the North-East and she was picked up somewhere South of Virginia. From the moment she boarded the bus we stuck together and hardly stopped talking for a moment. Before we even crossed into Mexico, numbers were exchanged, and I was sure to get a mailing address for the observatory. Inevitably the bus ride came to an end, we had to part ways, but I promised we'd be in touch. For a week I camped out alone, watching stars at night and scribbling down what passed as poetry until one night I was rained out. It seemed like it would never end, keeping me up for hours until I finally looked outside my tent. I was shocked to still see the moon piercing through the clouds. I stared for what felt like a century until I saw it, what looked like a ring wrapping around it. I fell asleep before the rain stopped and wrote a half finished poem about what I saw the next morning. I couldn't help it any longer; I made my way into town and mailed her the poems and a letter.

"I went back to the house the other day. Our old room was just the way we left it."

I stayed in that tent three weeks longer than I had planned. She convinced me to wait for her only break before I went home. We spent two nights together, alone with a sky packed full of stars. I mused about the indigenous peoples who must have looked up in wonder at the same sky as us while they made their way across these plains hundreds of years ago. She pointed out all the constellations she could find, then the planets dotted between them. I barely made it to back home in time for that summer's excavation, although I didn't mind a single bit for those two nights together.

"I'd been waiting weeks for a full moon and a storm to come in. I thought I finally understood."

Eventually her internship ended, and she too returned to the states. We spoke often, writing to each other daily as if we

hadn't been calling between classes. As often as we could, we'd take trips to see each other, though the distance was anything but easy. It came as little surprise when we moved in together after we both graduated. We found an old Victorian house on the edge of town, with one of those spires with a single large window facing the front yard. The owners were renting out the room at the very top of the spire and she convinced me that it was perfect. We bought a twin bed and a single desk for us to share, and a telescope for her. Quickly, we got to work. I found a job at her old university's museum, cataloging artifacts that were recently donated. She continued working with her old professors, occasionally lecturing, writing studies, and we both took part in countless peer reviews for extra work. We fancied ourselves a couple of real intellectuals.

"Your notebook was still open to its last page. I wanted to be sure about what I read so I waited till after dark and looked out your telescope at the same hour you had when you left. I saw what you saw."

One day we got the bright idea to paint as many constellations onto the ceiling as we could fit. Slowly we'd add more and more to our ceiling of curios. She hung planets by fishing lines, and I'd make shelves to hold fossils and pieces of pottery I could fish out of the stream nearby. It felt like a home, and we were happy. We'd wander into town on weekends and walk the chilly streets, glued together to keep warm. We became discoverers, searching for new adventures and mapping out a world together. I'd take her to streams to search for fossils and she'd drive me out to the middle of nowhere to star gaze. After work we'd curl up in bed talking for hours until the world around us finally fell asleep. Through the nights we shared this warm embrace until the morning came when we would wake to sweet kisses and the promise of love.

But it wouldn't last.

"I wish I never wrote that godforsaken poem. Maybe then you'd still be here."

My work consumed me. Eventually I ran out of artifacts to catalogue so I ran out of work. My professor, as well as some colleagues at the university museum, helped me find several shorter jobs at excavation sites across the country. It paid, but it kept me away for weeks at a time. We wrote like old times, but I became worn and weary. I'd turn cold upon my return home and drove a stake between us. She dove into her own work, trying to ride out the storm. I got lucky and found a job at a lab in state. So, I was home far more often, but the damage had been done. She too grew cold, and I became bitter. I'd stay later at the lab, and she'd be fast asleep by the time I came home, long gone for work by the time I woke. On a particularly cloudy day I decided to come home early. I found her glued to the telescope already, her notebook open beside her with scrap paper stuffed between pages. I just set my bags down and started working at the desk. I heard thunder roll in the distance and a raindrop fall onto the windowsill.

"It's just too far away."

It was dark now. The rain had been pouring for nearly an hour, a puddle was forming under the window but I didn't care. I didn't know what was left to say. At some point I'd lit a candle, now I stared at its flame for a moment. I looked down at the notebook I'd pulled from the stool beside her telescope. In it were dozens of sketches of the moon. At first, they were pretty standard for a moon. Full of craters, hanging alone in the night sky, sometimes obscured by clouds. Sometimes surrounded by stars. It was the final sketches that caught my eye. It was an up-close perspective, as if floating in front of it. Cutting it perfectly in half was a ring, wound tightly around its axis. The next sketch was from the ground. A moon pierced through storm

clouds for all to see, with a perfect ring around it. Between these pages was a loose piece of paper with a half-written poem on it. It was this piece I stared at now. The handwriting was my own, the words were my own.

That moon and her rings in the rain  
she pierces clouds to pull at my heart  
her ring of angels pour tears upon my cheek  
she pierces my heart and pulls you to her  
That galvanized moon with her rings in the rain  
stole you from my arms to join her ring of angels  
now your tears stain my cheeks  
you're just too far away.

I folded the letter and tucked it neatly into an envelope. For a moment I was stumped, I didn't know what to do with it. Then it hit me.

I addressed the letter to the moon.

I smiled for a moment, I smiled at my own childishness, my own nature, my own pitiful habit of making jokes out of things that scare me and shake me to my soul. Then I stood up, taking one last look at the room we shared, forever untouched from this day on. Then I put the sealed envelope to the candle's flame, and I let it burn ■



**HONORABLE MENTION • Art**

***Silence Is Golden*** Elay'Ja Howell



# Complaint

Hannah Weatherford

**C**ARRIE'S NEVER BEEN one to complain.

She goes to her boring, stuffy office job, does her work, handles the occasional angry customer, and gets home in time to watch that week's trashy reality TV show. She eats the food her mom makes her—packaged cutely in little tupperware containers that her mom never wants back— even though her mom isn't the greatest cook, and sneaks something as dessert later. She doesn't cause problems when things don't go her way, even though her sister might, and even though, usually, it means she's dealing with the brunt of everything.

And yes, she might sometimes hate it, but for the most part, she's fine with this. Her meals are made for her by a doting mother, her job could be stressful but it paid for the classes she took in the evenings and her rent. She always had her family around at her apartment, like it was their own, and she was doing decently in all of her classes. And yeah,

maybe she dreamed of being famous at this point, twenty years old with a big name attached to her, but everyone has dreams when they're younger of doing something big, of being something meaningful. Carrie had wanted to be a dancer when she was younger, a singer, an astronaut, even a chef after a week at her grandmother's house, only to realize she also really sucks at cooking. But working in a marketing firm isn't all bad. Her therapist likes to tell her to see the good in things, that she can stand her job, so it can't be all bad.

This Monday morning, however, Carrie is full of complaints.

Despite it being 8 AM, there're already people in line at her local bank, waiting to deposit or withdraw cash and checks, just like her. She'd honestly thought it'd have been quieter to do it this morning, rather than on her way home from work the day before, but it's too early and she can't help the irritation seeping in. A girl in front of her has a bag



full of cash— a lot of one dollar bills, it looks like, bent from the amount of hands they've been through, which makes it worse because they're going to have to count all of that.

Carrie should have gotten her coffee before coming here. Then she could have had something in hand, but now she just shoves her hands into the pockets of her neatly pressed cardigan, folds her arms together like that, and curses the early hour for being so busy.

The man behind Carrie doesn't seem too bothered. Carrie looks around the space for the third time, trying to see if anyone else is getting in line but only seeing what she saw the last two times: the doors behind her, shut tightly; the security guard standing in the corner, drooping off; the coffee machine dripping silently. When she looks at him, directly behind her in line, their eyes accidentally meet. He smiles at her, pleasantly, looking awfully like a morning person, and Carrie smiles back, though much weaker. He's handsome— tall, with dark hair and dark eyes, a nice button down underneath a freshly ironed blue suit jacket and tie. Not extremely memorable, though— Carrie's sure she'll forget his face as soon as she leaves.

"Didn't think it'd be so busy," he says

to her when her gaze lingers a little too long.

"Yeah," she agrees, and wraps the cardigan around her a little tighter. "Thought it'd be pretty empty."

The guy laughs, and Carrie smiles a bit to herself.

"Everyone else probably thought that, too." He hums and the line moves forward by one person, but there are still three ahead of Carrie. She and the guy behind her are the last ones in line. "Nice necklace."

Carrie's hand goes to the base of her throat— it's a silver heart outline, and in the middle is a tiny picture that's barely visible. "Thanks— it's, uh, one of those projection necklaces. When you shine a light on it, it projects an image."

He seems amused by the information that he didn't ask for or probably care for, and Carrie's heart has kind of picked up its pace, but his laugh is nice, so she doesn't care too much.

"And what's your image?"

"Me and my dog," she says, fiddling with it. "Her name's Brizzie."

The guy nods, appreciative. "Brizzie. That's a cute name."

The conversation fizzles, and Carrie doesn't want it to. She wants to talk to him more— he seems nice, and his

laugh is just as nice, and it's been awhile since she's actually talked to someone who isn't a coworker or family. Her best friend, Angela, would scold her if she didn't try harder to talk, to get to know him. She tries to find something to talk about, but there's nothing really remarkable to comment on, as bad as that is. He looks like he was trying to be the most unmemorable he could be, looking like any generic businessman would. Carrie wouldn't be able to pick him out in a line up if she had to.

Just when she's about to ask him where he's headed after this, he takes a step forward and reaches into his pocket.

"Mind holding on to this for me?"

That's when things start to happen all at once.

He steps forward, and Carrie is taken aback for a moment by his cologne, strong, but generic, and for a quick second Carrie thinks that he's taking out a business card— like he's going to hand it to her and say hey, you should call me sometime, or tell her if she ever needs some service, he's her guy.

When his hand comes out of his pocket, it's holding something black. Something solid and a lot bigger than a business card, and it isn't until he presses it into her side that she realizes what it is,

and everything in her body screams at her to run.

He has a gun.

All of the muscles in her body tense— survival instincts tell her not to move, but her own nerves trigger the squeak she lets out. He presses the gun sharply into her side, and Carrie forces herself to smother the second squeak.

"Be good," he says, pressed up against her to conceal the weapon between them. "Just listen to my voice and do as I say, and no one will get hurt."

No one is paying attention, and the girl in front of them is wrapping up at the front counter. No one is coming in, either, which is strange, Carrie thinks, because of how busy it was before. She glances at the doors behind them— and then notices the lock. And everything makes sense.

This is a robbery. ■

THIS JOURNAL CONTAINS the winning  
student submissions from the 2023 Currents  
Art & Literary Contest, an annual competition  
sponsored by the Office of Student Activities  
at Brightpoint Community College.

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## THANK YOU TO THIS YEAR'S JUDGES

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