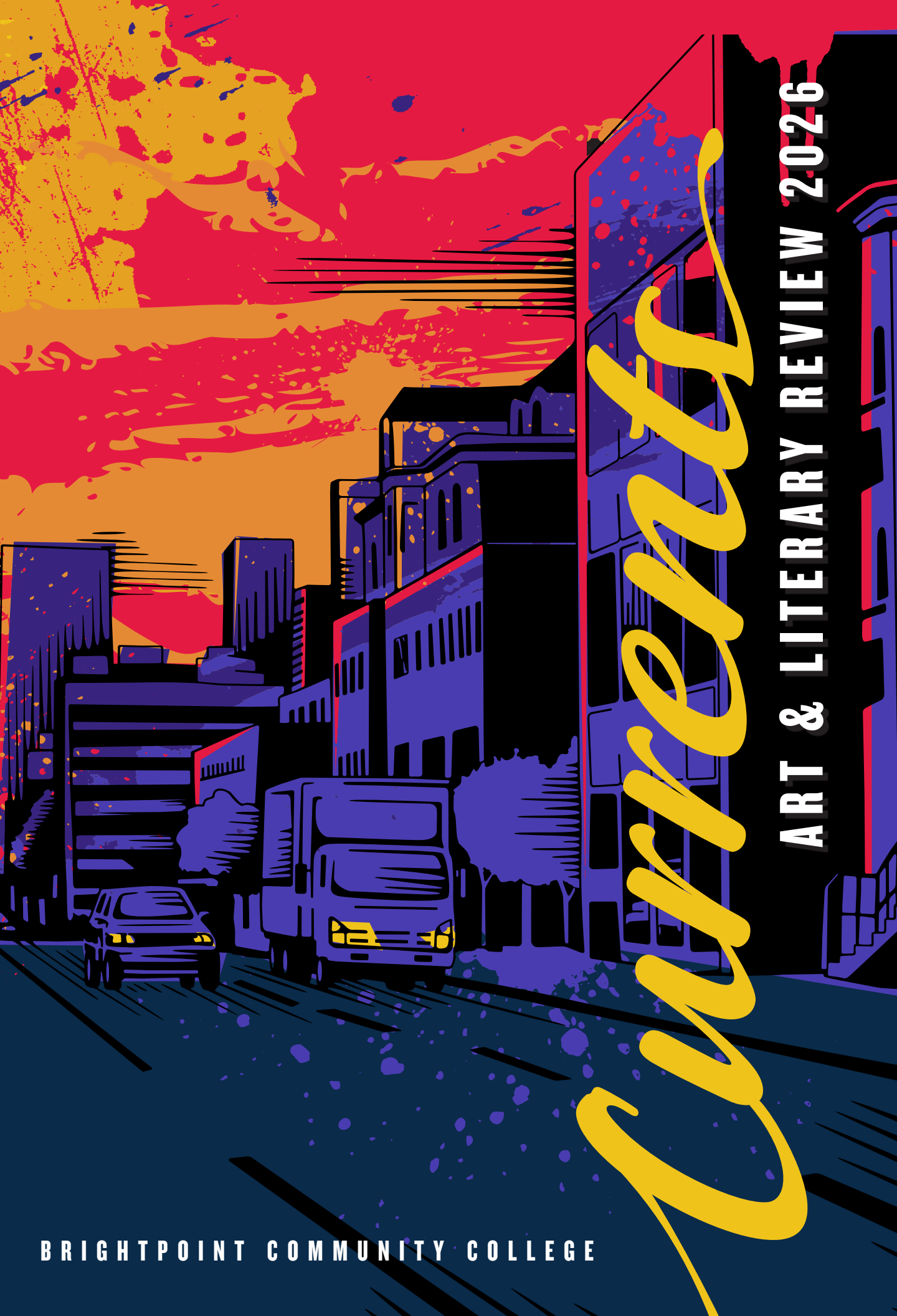




Currents

ART & LITERARY REVIEW 2026

BRIGHTPOINT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

This institution has been dedicated to publishing the creative work of our students since 1968, and when you turn these pages, you'll see that the tradition continues. In this issue of *Currents*, you will find their visions expressed in 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. As always, this journal is for them!

Mike Gary, Editor

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Currents

Wildflower

Joshua Kim

My mother's favorite flowers are wildflowers.
Wildflowers aren't a proper species, the term refers to the native flora
that exist in a space and are not cultivated by human hands.
They remind her of the Korean mountainside where
she was born, the fields of wild grass peppered by
an infinite number of colors and shapes.
To be untouched, to be free, I think that is what my
mother loves so much about wildflowers.
She used to dream of being a poet, an author who rose to
great acclaim with her storytelling and prose.
Instead, she met my father, and then my brother,
and then my sisters, and then me.
Suddenly, five weeds drained her of her vitality, tying her
down to a life so unlike the one of her dreams, her
petals turning grayer and whiter each year.
I often think about what my mom's life would have been without us.
Like a wildflower, the possibilities are endless.
Would she have become the great poet she had dreamed of?
Would she have stayed in Korea, on the
mountains that she knew better than her sisters?
Would she have married another man and had other
children more successful, beautiful and smart than us?
But, perhaps it's selfish naivety on my part. I like to believe that the
future is equally unpredictable, and that my mother will bloom
over and over again, vibrant petals bursting forth from her,
inching her way beyond the garden destiny planted her in.

My Husband, the Taxidermy Opossum

Graciella Griffin

Sometimes I wish
it was the cigarettes
that killed you.
Better that than waltzing
around your anticipated ghost.

I smell the cloying smoke
on your clothes,
and I imagine a reality
in which your death
was slow.

I got to take my time, then.
Knit sweaters sitting by
the bedside of your shell.
I'd pretend you needed them.
You don't wear sweaters anymore.
You don't care if you freeze.

You spend late nights
out on our balcony,
mouth around those
obscene sticks,

contemplating who-knows-what,
waiting to come inside
until you think I'm asleep.

It's easier for you, then.
That way you don't have
to deal with my comparisons
to your facsimile, the
version of you I wish
had died, the kinder you,
the you who won't end
a red smear on some
desolate stretch of pavement.

I wait, count your breaths,
listen as they slow
glacially and then
slowly creep over on my hands
and knees so as not
to wake you;
removing the ark
of the covenant
from its hiding place.

I press a kiss to your forehead
anointed by sweat from
your lion slaying endeavors;
two to your velvet eyelids
weary beyond all measure,
through which, if I tried,
I could see your
kohl-dark irises;
smell the faint odor
of your gentleman's cologne
smothered by nicotine,
(though which gentleman
spends each day going
out and throwing himself
upon a cross
and yelling: "nail here!"?)
and press two messages
into each of your palms.

These are my secret wishes,
those that if spoken
will become stillborn
and buried deep within
the spot in my throat
behind my vocal cords
where I felt your affection
for the first time.

"I will sing your dirge,
if no one else."
I fold your four limp fingers
over your heart line.

The second wish,
softer spoken so no
one, not even myself,
knows that I have
been found unsightly,
whispered with my mouth
touching the same skin
that holds your gun,
breath hot against the pads
of your callused fingers:
"Next time, I hope you
are born as something
less delicate."

Derelict Undertakers

Kyllian Simon

Heaven's guardians have meager memories.
Stretching shadows cast by civilizations,
the most devout can't complete their histories.

Nothing left but these stoney imitations.
Nothing left but a field of lamentations.

Deprived again of a mourner's sacred pledge,
like an afterthought of a divine mind's edge.

Only fools believe they are spared this high law.
That only they and they alone will never
be forgotten in spite of how time may gnaw.
That they can beat the odds and live forever.

Eternal, these devils think themselves clever.
There with no one left to fill the final graves,
ash, dust – left to toil over skulls of knaves.

Creek Logic

Tara Caldwell

One hand plus two stones minus racing thoughts
Equals this place where the current carries what I can't.
The water draws me in like children to a screen
As the burn of cold awakens my nerves, just enough to feel.
Light glints off the surface, rippling with my memories.
There's a key down there, somewhere
Under a skittish crawfish safeguarding the depths
Tucked beneath the same stones I once turned.
The one I used to unlock the quiet
Before I even knew what it was.
My children's feet know these shallows now
Of the depths and quiet I once called my own.
Mud gooped between their toes, they carelessly splash
With peaceful abandon. It shines like the minnows
Flickering in the glow that pours between the willows
Swishing and swaying, just out of reach.
One day maybe they'll understand
Why I kept coming back, why I left the key behind.
Like a letter written without words
Meant to guide their feet back towards the water.
To give them a way in when they need to surrender,
And let the burden of their thoughts sink into the sand
While the current urges them gently forward —
Two bare feet, one step at a time
Minus the weight of the world.

When Rain Drops on a Cig

Anais Stewart

It's like when rain drops on a cig,
The start to my faulty day begins.
You ask me if I want another,
instead of replying "yes"
I start to stutter.
Paranoid looking for my exit,
I begin to not understand any of your methods.
The next rain drop hits my third eye,
Then I see that our thoughts don't collide.
I'm too ahead,
and you're so far back.
My sense of self never lacked.
I detect whispers behind my spinal back.
My bones are too sturdy to be attacked.
I listen to lost philosophies,
and recognize characterless qualities.
Maxillas move,
Pinnas droop.
If only you heard when I said,
we're stuck in a loop.

Matchsticks
Janet Scagnelli



FIRST PLACE • Art

Crepitus

Chris Ruiz-Torres

THE CLOUDS looked like the underbelly of sharks against the methylene blue sky. The low-rise apartments that sat on W. Marshall Street looked like towers unable to support themselves: divots and cracks running vertically up the bricks. My windshield wipers whispered as I fidgeted with the plastic stalk behind my steering wheel. Far down the street I could see abandoned e-scooters toppled over one another. I agreed that I would be there by noon to pick up my package; we had made no plans for lunch, there was nothing to discuss, nothing to share. For a moment I had a feeling this would be the last time I saw you, maybe in a while, maybe forever. I was parked in the same Kroger parking lot where we had spent countless hours testing music demos, arguing over albums, finding out what we had been waiting to share. Under the windows of your first-floor apartment, I could see the words “LUNATIC, LIAR, OR LORD” spray painted in fuzzy black. Through my windshield I could see my reflection on your curtained windows. My face was refracted down the middle, one eye sitting high above the other. One side appeared neutral, maybe even pleasant. The other was darkened by a passing shadow. My eyes drifted to the right, to the sidewalk opposite your apartment’s entrance. I felt the torrid heat of my car’s interior, and I remembered our walks down Broad Street in the broiling August heat. You were talking about the Percocet, you thought it fucked you up for good, you didn’t know how to tell your mom about it. The withdrawal had long-term effects. That was one of the last of our epiphanies together. Memories returned of walking next to you, close to the road, your sinistral companion.

Stepping out of my car, I began to feel painfully banal. The December clouds brewed shiny droplets that looked like liquid mercury. I didn’t want it to be anything but a somber interaction, an exchange of goods and words. Last will and testament, if the moment called for such a thing. The wide glass double doors of your apartment were twice as tall as me. I recalled the very first day I showed up to your new place, on the cusp of summer’s end, with a bass guitar slung around my back and two bags worth of equipment putting pressure on my vertebrae. After those first few days of “getting the band back together” you told me how you couldn’t feel happy anymore. And how frustrating it was that nobody believed you. We all saw you as this stoic graphic design student who was too cool for major depression—not seeing through that was my first

of many mistakes. We got lunch that day. Opening my phone to text you, I thought of your first real episode of mania last winter, how you described the garish auras you could read off people like plaintext, how I acquiesced to the concept of being the conduits for a deer god through our music. There was something dutiful about our excursions over the last year and a half. Each journey south or west felt like a great adventure, searching for mystery in a city that had no enigma in sight. We were high off our own bullshit, I can acknowledge now. The exhilaration of being “chosen ones” in a shared delusion only lasts if the facade does. Through the glass doors I could see wallpaper peeling at each corner. Behind a locked translucent partition I saw your tall silhouette, six inches taller than it was in April, no longer hindered by the extreme curving of a spine.

I never figured out if it was the rod in your back or the relief from it that messed you up more, but I knew that the time to ask that had passed. The first day I saw you back home from surgery you slunk up from your couch like a ghost. I had kept a secret word in my mind, something I’d keep to myself until I saw you post-op. The decision was made in my head: if you read my mind then the magic was real. The past eight months were real; the ghosts were real. You’d been wearing a black shirt two sizes too big. You smiled at me wordlessly. I chose not to take umbrage from your silence.

Now, in your apartment lobby, I looked at your affectless face. There was recognition behind your eyes, in the same way a snake reacts to movement. I remembered the day you had gone MIA, during the worst of the mania leading to your surgery. I met you at the corner store parking lot on top of dry, tan earth. Your neck was bruised. You refused to tell me what happened the night prior, and I understood. I couldn’t blame you for acting out, being reckless and stupid, you thought you were going to die in May. You were even more afraid of paralysis. Spinal fusion is like “going to war 1000 times,” according to your mother. You handed me my palm-sized package, unlabeled in a thin black bag. It reminded me of the bags we used to lug away our treasures; like the deer skeleton we found the prior winter. You had kept everything, the skull, the spine, the hip. My share of the loot was a single vertebra. I began to get this dizzying feeling that that was what built the distance. The imbalance between how many of the remains you had versus what I had. You were always the better one, which is part of why I clung on. Forcing myself to fit your image made you uneasy, but being my own made you scornful. The validation was too important at the time. I tried making a joke. You didn’t laugh. I extended my hand. What followed was the limpest, most pathetic dap up of my life. I was already turning away from you when our hands began drifting apart.

“That was awful.”

“It always is.”

That May, 34 minutes after your surgery began, your mother texted me. Something got cut that wasn’t supposed to be. Surgery was halted and postponed to prevent paralysis. You didn’t die that day – but I wonder if whatever got cut was the part of you that held us together. ■

The Marbleyard

Caedmon Tan

PEEERING DOWN, I panicked internally as I witnessed Ameri's foot bent sideways. She screamed at me to take off her shoe. That was a long fall. I thought to myself, "Wonderful."

The plan to hike during spring break sounded great! Summer slowly crept closer, and staffing camps required physical preparation. My three friends and I thought, "What better way to prepare than a hike?" Bishop, the most experienced hiker out of us, suggested, "How about Devil's Marbleyard?" It sounded fun enough, a large boulder yard with a decent trail. However, after this experience, we quickly decided, one should not venture to a place named "Devil's Marbleyard" on April 1st. Turns out, the universe plays jokes too.

The morning started off as planned as my mom and I got into the van. My mother had agreed to drive the group out to the Marbleyard. Around 10am, we pulled into Caitlin's driveway, right on time! Caitlin greeted us and we headed inside and waited for Bishop and Ameri. The clock ticked by and we began to ask, "Where in tarnation are these two?"

Finally, over an hour later, we heard Bishop's truck arrive. "Took you long enough," I commented as Bishop and Ameri got out of the truck. I should have known to be careful after this. After all, last time I went on a hike with Bishop and she was an hour late, it wasn't smooth. Let's just say the police were involved.

After we all thanked Caitlin's parents for their hospitality, we scrambled into the van and began our two-hour drive to the Marbleyard. The five of us chatted about recent activities and hobbies and we were all having a jolly ol' time. At some point, Bishop was telling us all about the hike! "You know, there's an Appalachian Trail shelter up there with a vending machine once you reach the summit." I thought, now how in the world do you restock a vending machine at the top of a mountain. But Bishop was so insistent it was there I didn't put too much thought into it.

Before we knew it, we had arrived at the trailhead. My mom insisted on getting everyone's parental contacts then waved

goodbye. Then the four of us, Ameri, Bishop, Caitlin, and I, started our journey up this fun and peaceful afternoon hike.

We had scrambled halfway up the mountain before Ameri spoke three infamous words. Bishop called our attention, “Guys, look at this cool rock! We could sit on it and eat lunch.” Wonderful idea, rocks are cool. So, we all headed towards this “Cool rock.” Ameri was the farthest ahead and had to backtrack some. Easy enough, right? As she attempted to descend a boulder, she spotted an insect and exclaimed, “Look, a ladybug!” And at that unfortunate moment, she slipped and slammed into the rocks with an audible thud.

After seeing Ameri fall and hearing the crunch of her leg, I panicked. Confused and terrified, my body locked up as fright challenged me. But I managed to snap out of the clutch of paralysis. I rushed over to Ameri, who was now lying down on a boulder below.

With one look at Ameri’s leg, I shouted “Ummm, Bishop... Can you come here? Like, right now.” I assured Ameri that we would take care of her as Bishop scrambled up to us. As Bishop looked at Ameri’s leg, she turned to me and said, “I’m going to need sticks for a splint.” Seeing a tree, I jumped right into action.

Scrambling up the scorching boulders, I raced towards a lonely pine tree and wrenched off a branch. After successfully splinting Ameri’s foot, I pulled out my phone and called my mom. “So um, Ameri fell and uh, her leg kind of went crunch,” I said, knowing my mother would be disappointed and panicked. “Is everyone at least okay?” she asked. “Yeah, we’re all breathing, Ameri just can’t use her leg.” “Okay, I’ll call you back, I should tell Ameri’s parents.”

The four of us just looked at each other. “Well at least you’re not dead!” Bishop said. “...” Suddenly, I heard my phone ringing. Ringa-linga-ling! “Oh, a spam call, perfect! Just what we need!” I picked up my phone and my jaw dropped. Incoming call: 911. How in the world is 911 calling me? Shouldn’t I be the one calling them?

After the shock of 911 calling me and giving them our location and the details of what happened, all we had to do was wait. Sweating in the blazing heat as the sun beat down on our skin, we patiently sat on a large boulder. As the time ticked by, I witnessed morale fading. To uplift spirits, I broke out into song, “AlmOsT HeaVEnnn!!! WEssT ViRRginnIAAA!!! BLueEEE rIDgeEE MountAiinnnnnn...” Ameri was not amused, but eventually, everyone joined in. The mountains echoed with a strange, ear-bleeding melody as we sat on the boulders waiting, and waiting, and waiting.

Hours later, paramedics stumbled from the woods, sweating profusely, and a distant rumble distracted us from our songs. Spotting us from a distance, the paramedics worked their way across the sweltering rock field. Panting and sweating, they complained to each other, “Man, why didn’t any of us bring water.” “We’re going to need EMS to get us off this mountain after that hike.” I thought to myself, “Oh lord, now the paramedics need saving too.”

However, to our surprise, a helicopter appeared from behind a mountain and the thunderous whir drowned out everything but shouts. The paramedics explained the situation to us and Ameri: “So we could carry you down, which would take 7 hours, and the bears would eat us or we could airlift you! The latter isn’t safe and can very easily go wrong but it’s better than being eaten. So, we’re going to airlift you. Just remember, this is very dangerous! Good luck!” (Why couldn’t the paramedics just lie to us and say everything was going to be fine? That would have been nice.)

Suddenly, my eyes were filled with dust and my ears subjected to a thunderous roar as the helicopter hovered about us. We looked up as a police trooper rappelled from the sky and landed right next to Ameri. Caitlin, Bishop, and I moved away, and we wished Ameri the best of luck. “Don’t die,” said Bishop as we walked to the side of the Marbleyard. We watched the trooper clip Ameri into a harness and the helicopter began to fly away. The remaining three of us looked at each other in silence as the roar of the chopper faded and soon began our hike back down the mountain. After a quiet and exhausting hike down, we eventually emerged at the trailhead where we saw my mother and an entire squad of emergency service vehicles.

After the fun of the day, we began our drive home. Everyone was exhausted and just wanted to be home. Soon we heard that Ameri had arrived at the hospital and was doing well. Doctors said she had a dislocated ankle and a broken tibia and fibula, but she was going to make a full recovery. “Thank goodness, she’s going to recover,” I thought to myself. A few days later, Ameri was home and doing better. She had emergency surgery and some plates installed in her leg. A bonus to our expedition, we have news articles about us now! Delightful! “Try to stay off the news next time you go out with your friends,” said my mom. I quickly replied, “I can’t promise anything!” Let this story be a warning to those wishing to hike: the universe loves playing jokes too. Stay safe on the trail! And watch out for ladybugs.

P.S. I finished the hike the October after this fiasco and, spoiler, there is no vending machine. I was livid. ■

Prison to Perspective

Devin Wenninger

SOMETIMES IT TAKES HARD TIMES to get you to be a better you. As someone who was imprisoned just one month after turning nineteen and has served almost five years behind razor wire topped fences, I had a lot of growing up to do. Being thrust into a completely foreign world, filled with adversity, reading, writing, and learning new things helped shape my identity and allow me to see the world with a whole new perspective. Before I talk about my time in custody we have to go back. Not to the county jail where my interest in reading began but to my life before I was imprisoned. My "free life."

Growing up I got by doing the absolute bare minimum and my priorities were almost nonexistent. All I cared about was instant gratification. My parents tried just about everything to encourage me, to no avail. I was stubborn, lazy and didn't care about my future. With no direction my G.P.A. was less than a 2.0 and I barely graduated high school. I had no drive, no identity, and no perspective.

I was living in a small world and happily doing so.

My small world was abruptly demolished after a series of bad decisions landed me in hot water. I got arrested in early 2022 and in that moment, it became apparent that my directionless path had led to a destination I never thought possible.

I'm sure on some level I thought my original path might have consisted of me living in my parents' basement with Taco Bell wrappers everywhere the newest *Call of Duty* in my Xbox, weighing no less than 300 pounds, my gaming chair sagging under my weight. Ah, I can almost smell the Mountain Dew and Doritos. But alas this was not my fate, no matter how easily it could have been. I was now on my way to a jail in eastern Virginia.

Arriving at the jail in the back of a police car I was shaking, so nervous I was sick. Sweat beaded on my brow even with a chill in the air. I walked into the intake area with handcuffs on behind my back, digging into my wrists. The officer put me into a cell about the size of a coat closet; it was disgusting and smelled of puke. Miserable and left with nothing else to do, I did a lot of thinking. However, it was pointless to dwell on what

I should have done different. I'd already chosen my path, and my immediate future was decided.

After about 36 hours in that cold, nasty cell I was taken to my assigned housing unit, or pod as we call it. I got buzzed in and stood there looking clueless after receiving no guidance, advice, or direction from jail staff. To inmates in the pod I was fresh meat, introduced into their environment. Obviously "green" or new to jail, I tried to look composed, but it was terrifying at first.

When I finally relaxed a bit, I took in my surroundings. The officer station overlooked a very large room about the size of your neighborhood Rite Aid. Cells lined the walls on the top and bottom tiers. In the middle of everything was an open common area complete with—tables and a couple of TVs. Walking in a thick smell, hit me—a blend of industrial antiseptic and body odor, like I'd imagine in a state-run asylum from the movies, or a badly ran nursing home. I also noticed the men in the room were clustered in groups based mostly on race. In a room full of tribes, I was the outsider.

My cell was basic with a set of bunk beds and a metal sink/toilet combo. It seemed clean enough, but I still scrubbed the bunk for good measure. All that was left from the previous inmate was a beat-up paperback book. Both covers were missing so I had to flip a couple of pages to find out it was a Stephen King book. I doubted I'd get bored enough to read it and didn't pay it much mind.

I found that my assigned cell mate was a Cuban guy who spoke no English. He went by Cuba and never gave me any problems. We tried to communicate by using hand signals and awkward one or two-word sentences, but there were definitely no meaningful conversations.

After our unit got locked down for an incident in another branch of the jail, I finally picked up that battered, old novel. It was one of Stephen King's first books, *Carrie*. It took a few chapters to get into it but once I was, I couldn't put it down. I was fascinated by King's ability to draw the reader in. I felt as if I'd left the prison and faced Carrie's trials right along with her. That was the first time I'd been truly enveloped by a book.

The books I started reading gave me something to relate to. This started of a massive gearshift in my mind. As I started reading more, I started to recognize how a lot of characters would react in certain situations. I found myself wondering, how would I react in their shoes? Would I do the same? Could I become the hero in my own story? Then, like a dramatic twist in the books I had been reading, I was sentenced to federal

prison and being bussed to the next phase of this nightmare.

I now had some experience behind bars, but I was still nervous arriving at the federal prison. Even though it looked intimidating, I made it in fine. I had eight and a half years left to serve and that weighed heavy on my mind. I struggled at first going back to that small world thinking, lacking direction I let myself get pulled into a bad crowd; luckily for me a good friend pulled me aside and asked me “Who are you? What’s your identity? Who do you want to be?”

I considered that for a while and decided that I won’t become my mistakes; I will, however, capitalize on them to better myself. I want to always strive to be the hero in my story, not the victim.

Now when I read, I pay close attention to the traits that I would like to make part of my character, then I work to implement them into my life. I want to live a life of learning and growing by using the tools around me to always better myself.

For the past two years I’ve been learning the HVAC and electrical trades. I’ve also started college courses and have an opportunity to earn an associate’s degree. I still love reading fiction novels and have checked off about fifty of Stephen King’s books. I’ve even read some nonfiction and am more engaged in current events, history, and world affairs by listening to NPR and VPM radio. These are some examples of the changes I’ve made to align myself, and my identity with that future person I want to be.

As a felon reentering society, there will be plenty of obstacles. The challenges I have faced in prison have taught me that I can learn from obstacles and if you’re learning, are they truly in your way? Now I see them more like stairs: as long as you put in the effort they’ll raise you up.

I never before considered that I was capable of greater things, but other people saw something different. After some self-care and reflection, I began to believe in myself, and that flawed perspective shed away. The limitations I put on myself stopped holding me back.

Like most people, I used to look at my current situation as a nightmare, but now I have the tools and mindset to reframe it into a new perspective. The ten years I’m doing in prison now most likely saved me from an unfulfilled life, a lifetime that would’ve been no life at all.

Fin. ■

Creak Time

Tara Caldwell

WE USED TO tell time in tadpoles, at the creek. Seven thirty was when the light slicked over the water sharp enough to catch the glassy glint of their backs as they scurried around as carefree as we were. We'd catch them in cups, give them names and jobs and pretend we knew which one was who. Eleven was the crawfishing hour—squishing through the mud with toes and fingers like treasure hunters, flipping stone after stone, knowing we'd never actually catch one. But it was a sweet tickle; the escape when they slipped out of our little fingers as slyly as time when you start to count the days passed. There were few behind and many ahead back then. The water was our clock, and it creaked slowly through the hours. Time didn't really tick back then; it swam clumsily and gurgled through the wobbly waters, for fun. We didn't count the hours; we splashed through them.

The passage of time creaks on in a different way now. My phone goes off at 6 A.M sharp, jolting my nerves like a splash to the face. 6:05. Stop snoozing, wake up. 6:10. Okay, for real this time. I watch the minutes for a few more trickles then feel my knees creak as I pour out of bed. Then my back creaks as I straighten and reminds me sharply that I'm not in my twenties anymore. Half an hour left until work; splish splash becomes tick tock before you know it. Time used to drift along until it opened the floodgates to becoming a constant ever-present reminder in the background, like that paperclip that popped up and would never go away on the old Microsoft Word programs.

Sometimes time forgets to note its passage, though. Lilly's knee-deep in that same creek, trying to catch a slippery frog, and Giddy's clumsily picking through stones like he's Captain Crawfish on a mission. And for just a moment, I can hear the creek instead of the creak. The frog cues up a croak while the crawfish scurry and clap their claws along—and yes, it's all worth applauding. For the kiddos in the creek with muddy toes and the mothers with the creaky knees watching them, the clock's a current again; time flows, and slows. ■

End of the Road

Ainslie Davi



Finding Sarah Marie

Coleman Johnson

THE RAZOR WIRE, concrete, and steel had failed to sever our bond. Nothing could; it was genetically impossible. My daughter had continually been in my thoughts since birth. Locating Sarah Marie was more of a priority to me than reducing my eternal prison sentence. Had my pursuit become an obsession? Maybe? Maybe not? I only knew that I could not die until she knew how much her daddy loved her. I refused to give up. Eventually, the unsolicited assistance from prison officials and federal agents would inadvertently reunite father and daughter.

It was February 1993 when I came home to find another heart-stopping note. It said that my girlfriend was already several states away by the time I read it. She was also six months pregnant at the time of that last abandonment. This devastated me. Matters only worsened every time I traveled to Ohio and begged her to come back. She ordered me to stay away and said that I would not be listed on our baby's birth certificate. At that point my life had been threatened twice over the situation. The most horrifying part was being told that I would not be a part of my child's life. On that return trip to Virginia, I contemplated launching my Corvette off of the side of the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

On May first I was working in my father's auto parts store when I received the wonderful news. My healthy baby girl had just entered the world and was given the name I had previously suggested. Joy overwhelmed me as deep sadness simultaneously churned my stomach. How could something so perfect hurt so bad? At only twenty-one I was confused, heartbroken, and scared. But the prospect of never seeing baby Sarah was most haunting. I also feared her being raised by the man who was present during her birth.

After weeks of persuasive phone conversations, I was permitted to finally meet my baby girl. The triple-digit speeds weren't the only contributor to the shortened duration of my drive. Racing thoughts and anxiety had induced a hypnotic trance, disrupting my concept of time. I was petrified of facing the happiest moment of my life. By the time I arrived, my sweaty hands shook and I was nauseous. When baby Sarah's big blue eyes locked onto mine there was an instantaneous bond. At six weeks old I knew that our love was immortal.

Our six-hour visit was supervised by the same man that was

present during Sarah's birth, yet I didn't care. Many photos preserved the moment and would later be shown to a jury and featured on a television program. Nevertheless, my departure followed after promising Sarah that I would be in her life forever.

Throughout the following spring and summer my calls were continually ignored. I finally made contact by fall. To my surprise, Sarah's mom agreed to bring our baby to my Virginia home to meet an enormous family. It was an exciting and memorable four days until Sarah's mom decided to leave in the wee-morning hours. I begged her to wait until the snowstorm cleared. She compromised by promising to return in a month. I planned to give Sarah a mini-Christmas. Suddenly I felt the burning bile rise to the back of my throat as I strapped precious Sarah into her car seat. I kissed her tiny forehead and she smiled. Standing in the cold dark street I watched the taillights fade. I felt like I would never see her again and puked.

Days passed and I never received the promised call to assure me of their safe return. My calls went unanswered and inquiries to hospitals and police departments abroad were fruitless. A week later I learned that the two girls I loved more than life itself did in fact crash in the car. I was assured that they were alive. I was also condemned for coaxing them into traveling to Virginia. The extent of their injuries was unknown and all communication ceased. Social Services refused to assist me because I was not on Sarah's birth certificate and I had no proof of paternity. I was distraught and placed on medication.

Years of silence was not a deterrent. A father's love for his daughter never decays. Every time I saw a girl Sarah's age my thoughts wandered. I wanted to know if Sarah needed anything. What did she like to eat? What did she like to do? The questions were endless. Most importantly I needed to know if she wanted me in her life. Would she love me? There had to be a way to find her!

The internet was available but primitive in the mid-1990s. By the time any addresses got published, the girls had already vacated those residences. I then shifted into "stalker-mode" and tracked them to a Virginia post office box. My mother and I verified that they actively used it. They had obviously moved to Virginia. Trips to the area were regularly made in hopes of seeing my girls in public. On one occasion we boldly approached a gas station clerk and asked if Sarah's mom frequented the establishment. We discovered that she was a regular patron. We extracted a similar response from a grocery worker that also claimed to have just seen them leave the store! I was rattled. Swallowing hard, I stared at the same polished floor that Sarah had just walked on. Mom was speechless.

On the eve of finding Sarah, a federal indictment was issued for my arrest. I faced trial for an unrelated situation. Once the trial commenced, numerous paid witnesses portrayed me as a deadbeat dad who would rather buy an airplane and sports cars than support his only child. One even said that I wanted Sarah aborted. When the "guilty" verdict was read, my ultimate fear was that Sarah would think that she

wasn't wanted or loved.

The trial proceeded to the penalty phase for the jury to determine whether to impose a sentence of "life" or "death." The government presented only one person to testify for my death - Sarah's mom. My heart tore from my chest but I can honestly attest that Sarah's absence from my life was more painful than the trial itself. Many other people testified to advocate against my execution. Consistent testimony proved my love for Sarah and my diligent efforts to find her. Jurors then viewed the photos of me with baby Sarah during our two visits. I escaped a death sentence by two votes and went to prison. Ironically the first four digits of my inmate number were the date of Sarah's birth!

Sarah was given a single photo of me and a binder stuffed with news clippings of the allegations made at trial. My child's only knowledge of me was that I did not want her born. Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) shuttled me to the agency's most violent institutions. I had never been incarcerated so there was a predictable fright of the unknown. Strangely, my biggest fear was never having a relationship with Sarah. Witnessing prison murders and maiming held no comparison.

Years passed but my determination to let Sarah know the truth proliferated. I was housed in Colorado at the United States Penitentiary (USP) Florence, aka, "Alcatraz of the Rockies." I met an interesting array of celebrity convicts. Many were responsible for the nation's most infamous crimes while some had impressive abilities. My goal was to find Sarah, but I only possessed her birth certificate information. An inmate with connections promised to help me find her. Thankfully he was able to lawfully determine Sarah's current last name. It had been changed in April of 2007 by the assistance of a U.S. Attorney. Because Sarah was only fourteen, I contemplated waiting until adulthood before getting her address. A few days later a two-hundred-man riot overtook the institution causing gun towers to discharge the most rounds of ammunition in BOP history. A dozen inmates were shot but only two perished by gunfire. Although I was not involved, the April 20, 2008, incident caused everybody on the recreation yard to be shipped. I was sent to California and separated from my help finding Sarah.

USP Victorville, aka "Victim-ville", was California's extension of Florence's madness. I stayed out of trouble and focused on my objective. Sarah was only fifteen, but an inmate assistance company agreed to run a search anyway. They provided useless information. I then briefed my sister on those shortcomings as well as Sarah's newly discovered last name. Within minutes she was able to locate Sarah on Myspace and made contact. On December 8, 2008, my little girl replied:

"All this new family lol. Now I see where I get my curly hair from. I was wondering about that. I looked at all the pictures. Feels strange looking at all these people that are part of my life all these years that I had no clue about."

The message was forwarded to me through the inmate email system. Seeing Sarah's words for the first time awed me. Family assured me that Sarah was healthy and well dressed. My sister had pictures in

route to me via snail-mail.

Sarah and her aunt corresponded through several more messages. My sister told her:

“... I do know [that] up until the day [your dad] was arrested, he rode around with your baby picture on the dashboard of his car! There has not been a day in the past [fifteen] years that he has not thought about you or mentioned your name.”

Sarah’s response followed:

“... Tell him that I do love him. It has always been my dream to meet him.”

I was on a cloud brainstorming a way to get Sarah to California. We had to meet! Inmate peers planned to compile funds for her airfare. All the while I received my sister’s dreadful email informing me that Sarah’s mom blocked us from Sarah’s MySpace account. We were crushed. I had to resort to my original plan of waiting until Sarah was an adult. Shortly before Christmas, my name was called for mail. From the return address, the contents were obvious. I panicked as I pulled the photos from the envelope. My Sarah Marie was beautiful! I knew that our setback was only temporary.

In January 2010 the BOP reclassified my security level, and I was sent to the Edgefield facility in South Carolina. Once settled, I worked in the prison’s factory saving money to find Sarah. When Sarah reached eighteen, I hired a prisoner service to run a trace on Sarah’s employment through the Social Security Administration. I hoped to identify her employer and contact her there.

Months passed but the prisoner service never received my payment. Inquiries to prison officials were answered with fictitious theories of what might have happened. Staff simply danced around my questions, providing inconsistent excuses. Then I received the shocking letter.

I hadn’t spoken to the sender since our 1993 argument about traveling through the blizzard. I hadn’t seen her since she stepped from the witness stand in 2001. Reluctantly I pulled the note from the envelope. On it was four hastily written sentences from Sarah’s mom telling me to set her up on the inmate email system. She needed to talk. A surge of fright pulsed through me. I was dizzy and breathless as the ambient prison racket reverberated. Did something happen to Sarah? Why contact me without elaborating unless there was tragic news?

The email was accepted with an immediate response. To my relief, Sarah was safe and healthy. To my surprise, her mom was friendly and cooperative. Weeks of email exchanges followed and the tension eased. I eventually felt comfortable enough to ask if I could write Sarah a surprise letter for her upcoming birthday.

“... Choose your words carefully!” Was her mom’s eventual response. I emailed Sarah’s letter for it to be printed and given as a gift:

“My precious baby girl, I have a story to tell you. It began nineteen years ago when an indescribable joy filled my heart. A very special person entered this world... Happy Birthday my beautiful Sarah Marie. For years me and others prayed for the day that I could say that to you. Thanks to your loving and caring mom, I now have that opportunity. I

know that you are now nineteen, but you will always be that same little baby that I remember from the first time that your innocent eyes looked up at me. My heart melted and my life completely changed... You knew who I was and our hearts bonded from that moment. Since then I have desperately longed to see my baby again and tell her how much she has always been loved. You have been thought about every waking hour since. Your photos were carried with me to all corners of the nation and [to] three foreign lands. Those pictures have been proudly shown to countless people and displayed in my vehicles, at work, and in the homes of many relatives that hope to someday meet you... Sarah please always know that you were planned and conceived in love. You have always been wanted and very much loved... Tonight we'll do something special together. At exactly 9:00pm we'll look at the moon and let its light reflect our eyes at the same time. Know that I'll always love you eternally precious girl, for always and forever. With much love, your dad and special friend at all times. I love you sweetie."

The letter was printed onto nice paper that included my photo. It was a tearful but incredibly "happy" birthday. A month later I was allowed to hear her voice during our Father's Day call. Despite having the worst legal situation at the prison, I was the happiest inmate. The best was yet to come.

On October 13, 2012, our last barrier crumbled. My frightened little girl walked toward me in the visitation room. Our tearful eyes locked again.

"I told you I'd be in your life forever!" I said.

She was trembling when we embraced. Our door was permanently opened.

On March 6, 2013 we discovered that the odd letter I received months prior from her mother was written at the request of federal agents. She was part of an undercover investigation triggered by me trying to trace Sarah's employment in 2010. At that point we were grateful that it happened.

Those nineteen years of heartache, desperation, and continual obstacles have given Sarah and me more determination when facing seemingly impossible situations. We've learned that setbacks are merely opportunities for growth. My journey finding Sarah Marie continues to teach others the same. ■



Salt Shaker
Margaret Buchanan

Porcelain Cows

Olivia Ozmore

THE CLOCK STOOD like a sentinel in the corner of her uncle's dark green study, taller than her father, and darker than the shadows that gathered in the deep, nearly forgotten holler. Its black walnut wood gleamed in some spots and dulled in others, polished by generations of hands that had long since been buried. It bore many scars, open wounds, uneven scratches, small gouges, and fingerprints turned permanent, which made it seem not like a piece of furniture, but a survivor. It had lived through more than she had, and it knew it. She knew it. She never felt alone in the study. The only other thing that ever kept her company there was the shelf of porcelain cows above the clock, their eyes begging her to stay on the couch. The pendulum swung with a soft, metallic sigh, like the exhale of something old and patient. It wasn't the sound of a clock that simply gave the time. It was the sound of something she'd hear creeping behind her in the woods.

She'd sit on the stiff green and blue plaid couch, her little legs dangling just above the toile rug, the fringe brushing her ankles like cold, slender hands. Her pink and white striped dress itched, and her yellow mary janes almost cut off her circulation, but she didn't move. She was too focused. The clock seemed to know when she was watching, studying it, and when she wasn't. It always stood still and tall, not ticking faster or slower, but somehow reacting. Like it was waiting for the right time to strike.

She felt its presence the way you feel a thunderstorm before it breaks: in your gut, behind your teeth, inside your ears, in the ache of old brick, wood, and worn bone. The worn gold face leered at her, etched numbers like jagged, yellow teeth. Its hands were long and rusted, bent ever so slightly, like fingers curling toward something they were aching to grab. Every tick echoed through the house like a steel toed boot on hollow floorboards. Every tock sank further into the pit of her stomach like dirt being patted over a buried coffin.

The study smelled like humid coal ash, cigarette smoke, and freshly baked biscuits. Outside, the mountains loomed against a sky gone bruised purple. This far down in the valley, not even the bugs dared to make a sound once dusk came. She almost liked that no one else went in there much. She liked being alone with the clock, even though it scared her. Especially when it scared her.

Everyone called it an heirloom. "It's been in the family near a hundred years," her uncle liked to say, his voice less gruff when he ran his callused fingers along its intricate sides. "And it'll be here long after me." But she knew better. The clock didn't belong to the family. The family belonged to the clock.

She thought the clock was alive. She believed its deep rumbling was its heartbeat. She knew it was alive. It had eyes, even if they were hidden somewhere in the deep carvings. It had a mouth, though it only opened on the hour. It had a name, she was sure of it, though no one had spoken it aloud in a very long time. You weren't never supposed to say its name out loud. Ever.

Yet still, she came. Every evening, after the kitchen was closed, the sun dipped behind the ridge, the adults were talking, and her cousins went around closing the blinds. She'd creep into the study, sit on the edge of the couch with her hands curled in her lap, and wait for the moment the clock looked back.

Sometimes, she whispered to it.

"I see you. I know what you are. You don't scare me."

Other times, when it ticked a little louder or the old AC groaned too long between gusts, she'd whisper softer.

"Why me?"

The clock never answered. Not in words. But its hands always moved.

The hour strikes were the worst. Not chimes. Screams. Sonorous and low, like iron bells deep underground, tolling for someone newly gone. Each note crashed against the windows, making the floor tremble underneath her. She didn't flinch anymore, but her breath still caught in her throat every time.

She remembered her cousin's funeral last winter, the pine box that was too small, and the ground too cold to unearth. She remembered the old hound dog, now in the backyard. The guard dog stared at the clock in the opposite corner every morning. She remembered that it would watch the dog. Always watching. Its pendulum a blade, slicing seconds from their lives.

It kept their time. It marked their end. Now it was counting hers. Nana always said death comes in threes.

She told herself it was just wood and metal. It's just a clock. It ain't nothing. But when she turned her back, she felt its tick grow louder. When she left the room, she could still hear it in her ears, a whisper that followed her down the hall and into her dreams.

Sometimes, she didn't speak to it at all. She just stared. Daring it to blink first.

And still, it watched.

Still, it ticked.

Still, it waited.

The final time she entered the study, the air felt thicker, heavier, the way it does before a tornado. She didn't sit this time. She stood directly in front of the clock, hair messily tucked behind her ears, and her hands clenched. Her breath fogged in front of her. The hour hand shifted. The minute hand clicked into place. The pendulum stilled.

For the first time in God knows how long, the clock spoke.

Not with words. With silence. A heavy, dreadful silence. The kind that fills the air just before the thunder breaks.

They all know what's coming next. Nana was right. ■

Duration

Drew Becker

HAVE YOU EVER climbed a staircase in the dark? Be honest: you do not know the exact number of stairs in any given staircase in your residence or place of work. Sometimes, ascending a staircase, you think you will soon encounter another stair, and let your leg fall, expecting it will meet hard wood in a mere fraction of a second, only to find that you have reached the second floor (or third, or fourth, as it may be), and spend a fraction of a second, lasting an eternity, completely absent control as your foot plummets to the floor.

I imagined, in the handful of seconds between my hasty and ill-informed decision to at least pretend to accept the existence of time travel and my first actual experience of the thing, that it would feel like that: a sudden, brief, and completely uncontrolled sensation of falling, with an abrupt stop at the end. I was incorrect in this assumption. What occurred instead was more like the sensation of the landing: the unstoppable force of gravity colliding with the immovable object of the floor, sending two unpleasant jolts through the body, then a third burst of brief, moderate pain as the two meet. The sensation was as though I was in perpetuity both falling and having my fall broken; if this is difficult to picture, you might instead imagine falling into the ocean, or perhaps a very deep pool, and finding that the water does not cause you to fall any slower, but merely presses against you in sheet after sheet as you plummet towards the unknown depths.

This sensation began as soon as Doctor Nebogipfel pushed forward the lever to our left. We stood in silence for a second or two, each lost in our own racing thoughts, when the door above us burst open, and several of our neighbours burst in, many brandishing pitchforks or other implements of farming. I tensed, and immediately made as though to jump off of the bizarre contraption upon which we were engaged, but my companion yanked me back aboard by the collar of my shirt. "My theories as to what would happen to someone who exited a time machine mid-voyage," he told me, "are in their early stages."

As he spoke, I saw that our neighbours were moving as though possessed, overswarming the entire cellar at once. They seized several of the Doctor's papers and equations, but paid us no mind whatsoever. "Why don't they - ?" I began, and then was struck dumb as the answer occurred to me. They ignore us...Because we are not here.

"Why don't they what?" replied Doctor Nebogipfel.

"I was going to ask," I replied, "why they don't notice us. But I see now that this is because..." I found myself unable to continue as the notion of what was happening overcame me once more.

"And you wonder why I'm so desperate to escape this century,"

Nebogipfel muttered. "I expect in a decade or two it might become common practice to finish a sentence, don't you?"

"I don't suppose," I said, only vaguely aware of what he was saying, "you have any theories on what would happen to someone who vomited off the side of a time machine mid-voyage?"

The longer we remained moving forward through time, the faster day followed night, until we stood in the haze of a perpetual twilight. As time wore on - or perhaps we did - I noticed termites and other signs of wear appear on the cellar until it was extremely damp. Eventually, startling me from my thoughts, Doctor Nebogipfel announced, "I should think this is long enough, shouldn't you?"

"L-long enough for what?" I asked.

"Long enough that the people of this town will not recognize us as the witch of Llyddwdd and the clergyman he murdered in eighteen hundred and eighty-seven."

"M-murdered?"

"Surely the conclusion they will reach - or have already reached, decades ago - after you failed to return."

I again felt likely to vomit as I digested this notion, but the Doctor seemed to feel that the matter was concluded; he pulled the lever on our left, which he had pushed forward to begin our journey, back into the centre.

"Where - wh-when... A-are we landing?"

"It is difficult to say exactly," Doctor Nebogipfel replied. "Surely decades since we left; and farther into the future than my previous journey traveled into the past. The Machine is designed to increase its speed the longer it runs, until it reaches its maximum speed." He turned to me and smiled his madman's smile. "What that maximum speed might be, I have no idea."

After so many minutes of the peculiar sensation of time travel, which I have described above, and upon landing, I felt pleasantly light, as though I was swimming in an exceptionally clean pool.

"The twenty-third of November," said Doctor Nebogipfel, "nineteen hundred and sixty-three."

"Pardon?" I replied, fighting down yet another wave of nausea.

"The date," he answered. "Most fortuitous; surely, no one alive today remembers us as anything more than the stuff of legend."

He hopped off of the Chronic Argo and said to me, "Come; I have waited too long to see the world I was meant for."

I hesitated; I had gone with Doctor Nebogipfel because I could not risk staying, but I will admit that I was not keen on plunging headfirst into unknown futurity.

"At least dismount from the Chronic Argo," sighed Doctor Nebogipfel. "I need to move it to the staircase over there."

I did as he said, because my curiosity had overcome my skepticism. This was a frequent problem with me; it made me an exceptional priest.

Doctor Nebogipfel pushed the Chronic Argo over to the stairs and stepped back up onto it. He unscrewed the levers which governed its operation and placed them in his pockets, then hopped, rather inelegantly, over

the stairs and onto the damp and mouldy first floor. Understanding that he had done so to avoid the steps which had seemingly gone unchecked for mould and overall wear over the previous three-quarters of a century (I braced myself for another wave of nausea, which did not come; I found this the most troubling development of all), I followed.

The Manse, as the house was known, was abandoned, and seemed to have been so for many years. This did not surprise either of us; after the rather gruesome murder of old man Williams, the structure had been uninhabited for decades, and after a second such occurrence, it was a small miracle - or perhaps the other thing - that it had not been demolished.

Doctor Nebogipfel attempted to turn the knob on the front door, but was unsuccessful, and, without preamble, kicked a hole in the decades-old door. The lawn had grown wild in the preceding decades, and the dirt pathway that led to the road had completely disappeared. The road itself, which led to town just under a kilometer westward, was unrecognizable; the dirt road of our time had been covered in asphalt and looked as though it could survive a thousand shellings. Without a word, Doctor Nebogipfel marched off towards Llydwdd with surprising swiftness.

I followed after him at a jog, and called, "Er - Doctor, where are you going?"

"To speak with my generation!" he yelled, his voice shaking with glee. "My time has come!"

Some five or six minutes later, we reached Llydwdd... Or what had been Llydwdd. The town proved to be completely deserted. I reached this conclusion after a few minutes of searching, at the end of which I resorted to merely following Doctor Nebogipfel, for he gave the impression that he had a plan; while I would later learn that he merely always looked this way, as it happened, this time, he did have the beginnings of one.

The Doctor marched into the civic centre as certainly as he had kicked down his door. He went from room to room, inspecting every desk before he apparently decided that none of them had what he was looking for. After several rooms, I finally asked, "Er, doctor, if I may ask - what precisely is it that you are looking for?" He looked up at me, seemingly just remembering I was there.

"Telegram," he muttered distractedly.

I sighed, and, being familiar with the workings of the local government as local Rector, I directed him to the relevant room. After he tapped out his message, he picked up a yellowed piece of paper and a fountain pen, and wrote, in cramped but elegant letters, war which he then immediately crossed out. He wrote at the bottom of the paper, plague and sat back, considering this for a while. My sense of unease was increasing as some of the adrenaline of the previous minutes wore off, a most disagreeable confluence of circumstances, so it was with some irritation that I asked, "If I might inquire, Doctor, what are you doing?"

"Thinking," he replied.

"About what?"

"What might have happened to Llydwdd in the last seventy-six years."

I looked back down at the list, which seemed to be ignoring the most obvious answer.

"Why is 'war' crossed out?" I asked.

"If Britain had been to war, and I mean war so complete and final that her villages no longer existed, there would be no near-perfectly preserved ghost towns," he explained.

This notion did bring me some degree of comfort but still I shuddered, remembering all of the homes of my parishioners, empty and eerily shaded in the late-morning light.

As I pondered this, the Doctor made another mark on his list of calamities: mass migration

Doctor Nebogipfel raised his hand to his chin and stroked it; I privately thought that he looked like a five-year-old child's idea of what an adult would look like deep in thought. "My dear clergyman," he began, as though we had known each other for more than thirty minutes, most of which had consisted of existential terror, "what is your opinion - as a man, as a clergyman, as a subject of Her Majesty the Queen - on Irish Home Rule?"

Of all the questions which I had imagined might arise on an adventure in time, this was not one of them; it took me a moment to gather my thoughts before I answered, "Well ... You ask me three questions there, and I shall attempt answers to them in order of ease. As a subject of Her Majesty the Queen it fills me with great pride to say that her Realm encompasses so much of God's green earth that it is the empire, as it is said, on which the Sun never sets, and I cannot imagine that anyone would truly be happier outside of it. As a clergyman I am more conflicted; for it is written that, as the End of Days approaches, Satan shall" (at this point, the Doctor rolled his eyes; I pretended not to notice) "draw all the nations of man under his evil rule, and a Christian must always be on guard against any initiatives which may portend his coming, so, as difficult as it is to imagine Her Majesty falling under his sway, I suppose I must wish to see no power, however benevolent at first, lay claim to all the nations of the world; then again, in the shorter term, other Protestants have raised the issue - "

"Egad, man," Doctor Nebogipfel exhaled, running his hand over his face, "I asked you that question as a setup for the next question, not to start a sermon. But invite a clergyman, expect a sermon, I suppose. I was going to ask you how you imagine you would feel if Wales were to seek independence from the crown."

"Er - " I began. "My ... My allegiance is to the Church of England. I cannot imagine being outside of it ... Wales is my home and always has been ... Perhaps I would become a missionary, and return to my home to continue to spread the Word of God? Perhaps I would lead a group of the faithful back to Her Majesty's Realm ... "

As I contemplated leading the faithful of Llydwdd out of my country, a wonderful idea began to take shape in my mind - Could it possibly be ... ?

"When one steps back," the Doctor was saying, "and looks at history not in terms of years, but of decades ... Certain patterns begin to emerge. The uprising in the American colonies of the seventeen hundred and seventies and eighties ... The Confederation of Canada in eighteen hundred and sixty-seven ... And, as I say, the growing movement for Irish Home Rule in

our own late nineteenth century ... Paradoxically, the more territory Great Britain gains, the more seems to slip away from her. Perhaps Wales, too, was granted some form of independence in the last seventy-six years ... Perhaps the faithful people of Llydwdd slowly left the town, to return to the Queen's Realm, and in the resulting economic downturn, so did everyone else ... Yes?" He finished, for I had let out a small laugh.

"I have my own theory," I said.

"Do tell."

"Well ... Now, coming from a clergyman such as myself, this may seem a grave insult, but I do not believe in judging too harshly those whose acquaintances have never shown them the Light ... You do not strike me as the most ... Christ-centric of men."

The Doctor laughed, not with the joy of a man of science making a new and fascinating discovery, but with the mirth of a man who had heard something truly ludicrous.

"What gave it away?"

"But you are - familiar - with the scriptures?"

"As much as anyone in the accursed prison of a century whence we have just escaped."

"Then you are familiar with the prophecy of the Rapture?"

He raised his left eyebrow in an expression that could have indicated any mixture of exasperation, amusement, and skepticism; perhaps it is my inherent belief in the goodness of humankind, or a self-centred desire to believe that I was getting through to him, but I fancied curiosity as well.

"Well ... What if the reason no one is left here in Llydwdd is because, some time in the last seventy-six years ... It happened? What if this - " I spread my arms to indicate the all-encompassing silence that had swallowed my town - " - is just what was left behind? What if our Lord and Saviour returned ... And we, in our voyage on the Chronic Argo, just missed him? But the rest of Llydwdd ... What if they made it!?"

Doctor Nebogipfel sat in silence for a moment, then, imperceptibly slow at first, he began to shake his head. "My poor, clueless companion," he said, "whyever did I bring you along?" ■

HONORABLE MENTION • *Art*



Belonging
Paula Delfs

Shards

Phaedra Garrison

THERE WAS A CITY founded on the battle-scarred ground where a group of heroes once spilled their blood to save others. Not because they were the best suited or the bravest, but because someone needed to. In their honor, and to celebrate all those who lived heroic, notable lives, massive domed memorial gardens were built. Tended by an order of sacred monks who had given their lives in service to the creation and preservation of thousands of lifelike figures wrought in crystal, precious metals, and stone. The trees were twists of copper and bronze, branching into a hundred shades of crystalline leaves, each as singular as the memories they preserved. Birds perched in their branches, wings frozen mid-flight. Flowers unfolded in sprays of jewel-colored petals, glowing with flecks of silver, platinum, and gold. Each figure represented moments, stories, and lives deemed worthy of recording by the sacred order of the Shard.

The nun did not know what kind of story she belonged to. The worthy were remembered, the notable preserved, and the Shard surrendered every part of themselves so that such distinctions could be made without desire or interference. Someone had to become no one for the work to endure. It was what was owed to those who had given themselves for the benefit of the world.

There were many paths that led to that unmaking. Some came as criminals, offering service in place of execution. Others arrived broken and grieving: parents who had outlived their children, survivors of disasters who could not carry the weight of what they had seen, soldiers whose memories would not release them. Those who regretted not having acted heroically in the moment but were now willing to surrender themselves to honor those who had. The nun did not know which of these she had been. Her name, her history, and her future had been taken from her own mind. Whether she had resisted or consented no longer mattered.

In her shared chambers in the rough stone catacombs beneath the gardens, where darkness diminished detail and routine ruled the hours of the day, the nun dressed. Soft strips of scarlet cloth wrapped her wrists, ankles, and throat. Sealing the places where careless movement might expose skin beneath her hooded black robe. She wore black calf-skin moccasins and gloves. A thin black veil completely covered her face, leaving no feature to be recognized or remembered.

This was not erasure. The garden was not lessened by her absence from it. It was kept whole by it. If she performed her duties well, she might one day be promoted to the rank of cleric. Dressed in white.

Permitted to enter the garden freely and seek its mysteries. Perhaps, in time, to learn the deeper practices of shaping the figures themselves and making them display the stories and memories of the honored dead. Few ever reached such a rank. She did not expect to.

For now, she rose before the sun and cleaned the figures in contemplative silence. She began in the outer quadrants, in one of the oldest sections, polishing the copper bark of a tree whose story she often overheard from visitors. It memorialized a teacher who had pulled children from floodwater until her hands failed her. The woman had died years later, still believing she had not done enough. Her students, now grown with children and grandchildren, visited often, hanging bright notes of thanks among the branches. The nun did not linger to read them, although she straightened those that had fallen from where they had once been placed with care. Such exchanges were for clerics. Nuns cleaned, and silence was their prayer.

She noticed him because he did not behave like the others. Most visitors moved slowly through the garden, pausing to contemplate the beautiful scenes and hear the stories within. Others went directly to the object of their desire. This man, in his crisp military uniform, remained standing on the path, posture held with deliberate stillness. It was uncommon for visitors to speak to the veiled Shard at all. Questions, if asked, were usually taken by the unmasked clerics. Nothing forbade it, but it made her uncertain as she reached him on the path.

"I was told the section for those lost at the disaster on Den Island has not yet been completed," he said. His voice was calm, authoritative. "I would like to see where it will be. Alysana, my fiancé, stayed," he told the nun. "She could have left. There was space on the early boats. She chose not to take it."

His tone shifted, true emotion cracking through. His bearing remained military, but his hands curled into fists at his sides. "There were children. The injured. People who had never been on the water before. She knew the harbor. She knew which boats could take weight and which could not." His jaw tightened slightly. "She would not leave them if she believed she could help. That is who she was."

The nun led him deeper into the garden, past the figures and branching copper trees, to the newest section where the ground still showed through. A small grove circled a pond whose surface lay undisturbed, reflecting only the crystal constellations lining the dome above.

"This is where those whose stories are still being interpreted will be placed," she said, her voice rough from the rarity of its use.

"It may take time," she added. No one spoke of how the figures were crafted or chosen. The clerics placed them already prepared with the story or memory that would be displayed when touched by bare skin. Although the grove had been set aside, it might take months or years to be properly filled.

He nodded once and stood staring into the pond in silence. The nun withdrew, returning to her work at a distance. It was not her place to linger or intrude. Still, she wondered what form the clerics would give the memory of a woman who inspired such devotion. She did not know

how to help him. She knew only that she wanted to.

He returned often. Over the months, small figures appeared around the pond: a pair of glass frogs with bright copper spots, a bronze turtle with a cracked shell filled with gold, a dragonfly whose thin jeweled wings reflected scattered colored light across the water. Each time he returned, he touched them with hope and reverence, searching for a mention of his lost love.

The frogs were visiting sailors who pulled survivors from a burning inn. The turtle was a grandmother who refused evacuation, feeding strangers until she collapsed from exhaustion. The dragonfly was a courier who ran messages until he was lost to the rising floodwaters, saving many lives. All worthy stories, but never the one he sought. She noted how his shoulders sloped, how his uniform hung looser with each visit, as if he were coming apart within. He began to resemble the birds frozen in the branches. Hollow. Intent. Unmoving. Waiting for a truth she could not provide. His visits grew less frequent.

The heron stood at the pond's edge, larger than the surrounding wildlife, its pale crystal feathers streaked with silver. Its dark stone eyes seemed to watch her as she worked nearby. It felt like it was waiting. The nun found herself drawn to it, believing it might finally hold an answer.

No one came to hear its story.

The soldier did not return for months. Algae discolored the pond's edges under the hot, bright days of summer. The nun removed one glove to clean more precisely, though it was forbidden, careful to touch only the stones.

When she finished, she did not immediately pull the glove back on. She thought of the soldier. Of waiting. Her hand rose before she could stop it. Her bare fingertips brushed the heron's side. For a few heartbeats, she was flooded. Memories were never meant for those without their own to keep them grounded. It was not Alysana. She knew that even as the knowing broke her open. This was someone else who stayed on the docks, who did not leave, who kept working as the water rose and the harbor came apart.

The weight was unbearable. The nun staggered back, tearing free from the heron. The garden rushed in around her, vast and empty, leaving her weeping in the grove, her bare hand clutching the earth.

She saw the man two weeks later. He looked disheveled, feverish, uncontained. Nothing like the soldier who had first come to the garden. The nun watched from the path. If he left now without finding Alysana, he would not return. She knew this with a certainty that frightened her. It led her forward to warn him plainly, while offering what small hope she could.

"She will not be here," she said quietly. "But this story may be enough."

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, relief flickered, and for a moment something like life returned. They walked into the grove together, and the nun waited at his side as he reached out an unsteady hand to touch the heron.

His face changed.

At first, she thought it was recognition, relief taking shape. She felt a brief spark of pride, believing she had brought him to the moment where he could wait for reunion.

Then he moaned. The sound was terrible and inhuman. His hand slid along the heron, tightening around the graceful sweep of its neck. Cracks spread in ruinous lines across the crystal.

"No," he said brokenly, then roared, tearing the figure from its place and smashing it into the dragonfly. Color burst outward as crystal and jewels shattered across the stones.

The nun moved without thought; she reached for him, for the heron. Her hands caught the threadbare sleeves of his uniform as she fought to keep him from doing more harm. He did not look at her. He shook her off as if she were nothing, and the world lurched.

The blow drove her off her feet. Crystal and metal struck her shoulder and chest, tearing cloth and stealing her breath. She struck the pond hard, the impact knocking her senseless. The heron came down with her. Something sharp cut her arm. Broken crystal pressed into her ribs. She clutched the heron, unwilling to release it, as her exposed skin met the fractured surface of the figure.

The memory took her.

A city drowning. Coins pressed into Alysana's waiting palm. Children turned away. Places given only to those who paid. Alysana took the last space, even though the boat was already riding too low. The water lapped the hull. The memory in the heron, a woman who stayed behind on the docks helping those she could, did not watch the boat capsize, but she hauled the living she could from the water. Alysana was not among them. Drowned with her pockets full of gold.

Alysana would never be here. She was unworthy.

The truth of it was certain and undeniable. The memory released her.

The nun came back to herself half-submerged among the ruined figures. Water filled her ears. Shattered glass, twisted metal, and sharp stone pressed into her back. She tore away her soaked veil and dragged in a breath. Her blood stained the water, but the nun still saw her exposed, stricken face reflected in the pond and the ruined crystal of the heron.

Across the grove, the soldier stood motionless, staring at nothing.

They left her in her shared sleeping chamber after binding her wounds. Time passed without shape. No one spoke to her, as if what had happened to her and the garden might mark them. When the cleric came, relief loosened something tight in her chest.

He wore the gray, featureless mask of judgment and record. "You have broken your vows," he said, and she bowed her head, grateful to have it named. Whatever the full measure of the harm, it was no longer hers to weigh alone. She longed to know the fate of the soldier, the extent of the damage, but such knowledge was not given. She would be judged. The sentence would be passed. Instead, cruelly, the cleric gave her the choice of her fate.

“You may leave the Shard,” he said. “You will be made anathema. You will keep none of what you were before you came here, and you will carry little of what you have become. The world will not make room for someone like you. You will struggle for bread and shelter and never be a full person in the way others mean it. But you will be free. Your choices will be your own.”

He folded his hands, then continued.

“You may submit to penance. We will take what you have gathered since your unmaking. You will be wiped clean and returned to the first vows as a novice. You will not remember this failure or the harm it caused. You will begin again in silence and labor. If you are worthy, you may serve the garden once more. You will not know what you have lost.”

His voice hardened.

“Or you may choose the deepest service. You may become an anchoress.”

She felt his gaze even through the featureless mask.

“You will be taken below, into the oldest cells beneath the catacombs,” he said. “It is a sacred choice. You will learn the deepest mysteries of the order. You may learn how to create the memorials. Perhaps you may even learn the truth of your own story. But once taken, this choice cannot be undone. You will never walk the gardens again. You will never leave the depths of the temple. You will speak only to the most trusted clerics, and only when they come to you. The world will end for you, not by death, but by devotion.”

She understood then how it had begun. Not with defiance, but with a question. A story unfinished. That want had drawn her out of silence and into the garden, placed her body between the duties of the Shard and a man’s grief, made her a person when she was meant to be absence.

There was no ritual left to retreat into. No rule to follow.

What came next would be chosen deliberately. She could step into a world she did not remember and live by choices she alone would make. She could surrender herself again and let this moment be erased. Or she could give herself wholly to the Shard, sealed away in belief and atonement.

For the first time since her unmaking, the weight of true choice rested with her alone. ■

New Mexico Wings

Chris Ruiz-Torres

MY FACE splits into two as my translucent image passes through the mullion. The blue vinyl seat remains silent when I sit down. In front of me there are two identical seats facing me. A white plastic table that looks like cobbled Styrofoam extends from the wall to my right. I hold the edges of my brown cattleman as families board the train. The lone men with briefcases the size of televisions buy last-minute tickets. One man follows his shadow into the train, the sun's punishing blaze beating down. Behind him are the families, the station, the mountains, the frosted tips of late autumn altitudes.

The papyrus-colored ticket reads "ABQ - CHI, 3/23/89." Running my hands down the ridge of the hat makes the sound of sandpaper against felt. I examine the pleat of my Dockers, their earthy tone. The hairs on my legs still respond to the cold memories of desert treks and river crossings. My mustache hangs down to meet the edges of my lips. I feel the hairs scratch at the dry skin of my mouth as I strain my cheeks into a contorted grin of delicate urbanity. Passengers, tourists, Americans of the north take their seats as the sun begins to settle. Sunburns still bubble as people slather aloe vera on chicken skin shoulders. I hum an Andalusian cadence, strumming the air carefully, as if the oxygen would combust should I strike too hard. Passengers continue to speak as the conductor makes his way to our cabin.

The man from outside rushes into the seat beside me, placing his briefcase under his feet. Straight black hair ends at his shoulders, cut imperfectly - with hairs stopping at lengths seemingly random. A perfect set of sinless teeth, unstained from tobacco or alcohol, reveal themselves to me in a smile of authenticity.

"Going home?"

I look out the window as the conductor, with his blue Amtrak cap and clean-shaven face, makes his way down the aisle. The nature of his question makes my heartbeat migrate into my head. Rhythmic pulses travel from my temple into the window as I stare out towards the jagged rocks. Seemingly unoffended by my silence, he continues.

"Me neither. Say, that's a cool hat you've got. Am I wrong in assuming this place is home?"

"I live here," I concede.

"Leaving for pleasure or business? Same thing if you ask me. Whatever your hands find, do it with all your might."

Peeling my head off of the windows I leave a kiss of oil from my forehead. The man looks no older than myself - somewhere in the range of 25 to 30. His hoodie dons no brands, no idols or corporate gospel. The sunlight comes to earth now the same color as the dry soil outside. My jaws are tectonic plates of rock colliding against one another, grinding away enamel with every movement. By the time I place my hat on the community table, the conductor has already passed by us. My throat vibrates, I call for his attention, waving the off-white ticket in the air like a flag of surrender.

"Mmm."

"I don't think he needs our tickets, my friend."

My gut begins to sink. I imagine my bones falling into the river. The burns left by thick rope still cover my arm from my fall into the violent current. Cold water's taste sheaths my tongue once more. I lean my head against the window again, feeling as though the sun's light is passing right through me. Cold, alone, I hold myself taut with my hands around my torso like a straitjacket.

I shake. I shake in a silent train, against a cold window in the darkening New Mexico desert.

I feel the stranger's hand on my shoulder. Slowly, I pitch my face towards the man. His face glows, illuminated by the sun. His cherubim eyes are relinquishing their full attention to me. That same smile returns, and with it the first warmth my body has known in days begins to radiate through me.

From his suitcase he brings out a small bottle of wine and a singular glass.

"Here, to ease the nerves."

I drink the sacrament, licking my lips between sips. His smile never recedes; it is as if he understands peace beyond both our years combined. The wine is tasteless.

"Work," I say between sips. "Here for work."

"I know. I am aware."

Looking away towards the mountains, I bite the inside of my sunken cheeks. My tongue rests in a nook behind my canines from which teeth once protruded. Crossing through the tumbleweed villas of the border, I saw homes of clay not dissimilar to those of my home. In a wide expanse of my mind, I can see my wife and son preparing for bed, still awaiting word of my arrival in the United States.

"You have worked for a long time," he continues. "Come, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart."

As the conductor settles into the locomotive, I focus my

palm into my chest. The stranger watches me, exhaling and inhaling through shivers, waiting to feel my chest rise. A lump of tension cradles itself in my throat.

"My wife and son, I am working for them," I say with chattering teeth.

"They will persevere. Put your faith in this truth."

The stranger places his open palm on the table, his knuckles graze the hat my father gave me before he passed.

"Hold my hand, my friend. It is time for us to go."

I take the man's hand. The radiance returns, and I feel warmth envelop me. Unmistakably not peace, but a soothing warmth - like the purple steam of the River Styx. The sight of the hat becomes unbearable, and I am envenomed with the drowsiness of a child. My eyes focus on the landscape. The mullion feels cool against my ear. Movement pushes me into the seat, my eyelids heavy like the emergency doors of an airplane. A horn comes screeching out from the train's cab, like a skeuomorphism of old steam engines.

For thirty long years I have worked land, sea, and office. For my family I climbed out of that river, for them I walked through the remaining desert alone, for them I held on to a tattered train ticket. Through an open window I smell Columbian coffee.

Blankets of skin shield my eyes into slits as the locomotive picks up speed. Faces at the station fly by. Children waving siblings goodbye, fathers sending their sons off to college, wives holding tissues up to their wet eyes. Beyond the station flies the desert, growing whiter by the second despite the fading sunlight. The train moves faster - cacti become green stalks disappearing and reappearing. Clouds part to reveal beautiful dusk stars as the sun says its final goodbyes. The mountains are stationary, way out there, and as I close my eyes I know they remain. ■

Elendil, High King of Gondor and Arnor

Adrien Samuel



HONORABLE MENTION • *Art*

Dear Child

Joel Fowler

DEAR CHILD, it is me. I'm conflicted, writing this to your departed spirit while your body still hangs heavy in the room—from the shower rail.

Names belong to those woven into the threads of time; therefore, I am without one and shall forever be so. Unbound by time and earth, I am a stranger to the dust from which humanity was formed. Yet the sphere, spinning round and round, full of promising life has been the workshop for my vile commission since the beginning of mankind. I am interlaced with them, but without the characteristics that permit my access to their rights. Driven by duty, I roam land and sea, venturing over vast expanses to seek out those who beckon on my legacy. However, that which I accomplish, I detest and am repulsed by the face of such prominent evil. It is not within my creation to attain internal completion in my occupation. Before—when I traveled blindly—I had a flavorless outlook on it. Before, I knew not of right and wrongs, and followed procedures with muted lips.

Now, I believe. Yes, child, I am a believer of the magical city. For there—in a small corner among all the empty darkness and adult heavens—it belongs, nestled unto itself and with gates widely open for those who seek its inclusivity to tenderly designed hearts.

Excuse my scattered brain and senseless rambling. Focusing has been near impossible of late. So much muddle clouds my fluency.

Dear child, do not brashly mistake my regret as a means of neglecting a choice. For as long as the first conscious man retained a soul, I have been continuing my commission without volition, compelled by the forces of nature—or whoever holds dominion over my being. If there were a deity in my dimension, I would throw myself before their throne, begging for mercy—for humanity, for you, and for me—relentlessly, until the heavens moved in favor. Believe me, I would have attempted everything.

Prior to my awakening, I did not understand the wickedness I was perpetrating, despite the long centuries. Entering your world forced me to lay bare the evil within me. I no longer pursue absolution, for in your far-off city, I know it is impossible to impart. Perhaps I have come to this place to untangle the knots in my own heart. A necessary rehearsal of my own guilt. I want to map the pain I've inflicted, to lay it out in detail, so that when the time comes to be severed from your orbit, I will still hold the memory of it on paper. I want to look back—even if the meaning fades—at the wreckage I induced.

The internal ticking counts down my final hours. I will be removed from here—the house, your innocent body, dangling over the tub and the world I am growing swiftly accustomed to. Soon, my nature will demand my attendance to others who desire the same outcome. I will go, as I always do, moving in a mindless stupor. Once that happens, everything between us will wash away. All except this letter.

Dear child, I believe I am petrified. I possess no reference for this feeling, yet

I understand its gravity nonetheless. In the recent past, I recall you describing it—that visceral dread, that quiet longing for the final curtain. It tasted of decades ago, before I entered humanity. Back then, I could not grasp the subtle nuances of human fear.

From my recollection, you mentioned the fear of longevity. Similarly, I do too, but in opposing paths. You feared for the continuance of time, I fear the end to it.

I long to retake my chances at figuring a way out of submitting to my commands. Certainly, there had to be a method for defiling the force pushing against my will, since I defiled them by entering into earth. Suppose I had just restrained myself, and departed from the house? Things could have panned out more agreeably if I had not investigated. But, how—how could I have done that? Vividly, I recall our first encounter. From within your confinement, your spirit demonstrated a capacity that exceeded the intended limitations of your circumstances.

Despite all the grief it puts me through, I will never cease to think back on the moment we met while I am still able. You could not have known I was there, yet your subtle movements—the slight fidgeting, the way your features shifted—made me believe you felt my presence. I might be seeking proof of things in faulty speculations, but I could not be entirely mistaken either. I was passing by when I felt the tug—the tender hands of a child, pulling at the loose strings of my voidless soul.

I halted in confusion.

It came as a surprise, for I thought I was untouchable by the living. The house in which the hand reached out, I thought, must have belonged to death. It was cold and lonesome as if a corpse was responding to its retriever's abandonment, seeking the rest it was denied. But it breathed of matter, and so I neared it.

Compelled to enter, I fazed through the wall. Half expecting a dying man, rendering his soul to a spirit willing to wield it, I was astounded to come across quite the opposite; a child sleeping, hooked up to a ventilator. A boy, with brown rusty hair and pale lips. The machine created a flapping noise from supply vents due to losing suction. You snored—or struggled to breathe, I could not indicate the specific.

Him? I questioned.

Scanning the room slowly, I searched for any signs of my consort. The air felt empty, deprived of any spiritual presence. All the regular indicators of death having made its appearance were undisturbed, airing to the conclusion that nothing was coming to retrieve the child. Instead of a warm, decaying stench, there was a scent of pine rafting through the room from a candle on your nightstand. A certain solace scurried in clouds of mist above the floorboards, disfiguring itself to pass through the legs of the bed and table, then reforming on the other side. The moving haze was a human emotion, connected to the living. If the boy were dead, the cloud would disperse into the crevices of the room, fleeing its prior host along with its companions.

Fascinated, more out of curiosity than amusement, I glided to your bedside. Next to you, the beckoning grasp loosened. The former slight distress on your face faded. I was transfixed by the situation, puzzling over the prospects of your relaxation in my near proximity.

I am not who you think I am.

No reply; but then again, I never uttered those words. As I began to depart, pulling myself away, a picture caught my attention. I turned, looking intently at a child's drawing of a warrior in fine apparel. Beneath the figure, you had written: "I am a fighter."

I smiled, slightly, partially relieved and disappointed. Apparently, you were still holding on, unprepared yet. My hushed voice descended into a dense, unheard substance.

Had I hoped you were ready, so I could remain there?

I smiled again, amusing myself. It was foolish thinking, I know. You and I were in separate universes. Destiny did not design us to share the same existence. One was made to be forever, and the other was made to last a season. And, in summer's wake, fall arrived early, claiming the vibrant hues prematurely from its many extravagant charms.

When I encountered you again, some years later, I knew plainly that it had been a long, extensive struggle and you had challenges keeping ahead. This time, you did not reach out as before, hoping to invite in any spirit willing to offer deliverance. No aspirations, no dreams or objectives, bound you to earth. Quickly, I realized, and I knew there was no expectancy of my discharge from my duty. You believed in nothing, chased nothing, and longed for nothing but the pain to end its tyranny.

You summoned me, in the same bedroom I first found you in, against the wall your drawing hung. Something foreign stirred in me that night you cried yourself into a slumber. A feeling beyond the commissioner and its commission. I kneeled down beside you, watching the tears stream down, and listening to your voice shake. It was instantaneous. A gush of force disheveled my insides, pushing around the numbness, as if something was cleaning out space to make room. The notion leapt into mind during the cleansing—that is what I call it—and an impulse to hug you overcame me. I had never thought of doing that before. For one, child, I do not have arms, and I am void of wrath. What figuration I might hold, would be cold and bitter to the skin. However, the feeling persisted, so I took the split second of choice that I was somehow granted, and fazed into you, wrapping myself around your tightly scrunched body. Suddenly, I understood all things.

I understood that I was the reason for the tears of agony.

I defiled my commission, but to a limit. My desire to understand you—to see if my belief was true and that we had had a connection—drove me to the point of no return. Looking back now, I know that compelling myself to remain here is a sin—a sin in which there is no redemption; no god to save me from the gaping mouth of hell. The bond I bent to glimpse you, child, fettered me to humanity's morals and laws, which I discovered I was disobeying. No longer, in those moments, was I in naivety, encompassed by endless blankets of ink. To be present in the human experience was to look shamefully at my filthy commission and recognize the weight of my duties.

In this fleeting phenomenon, that has likened itself unto a vapor, vanishing quickly, never intending to be a substance to hold onto, I felt it honoring to endure until the body was void of its soul. I have made a promise, to deaf ears, that I would hold on for however long was required and for whatever it was worth. I can not escape the feeling that if I had stayed my hand, my commission would have supplied the necessities to make this time—you child—no different from the many others that came before you and those that will come after.

My transgression stained the tub, tiles, and your dad's belt, as blood dripped from your mouth. Although the velvet blemish belonged to you, it was my hands around your neck, strangling the air from your lungs and cutting off the blood from circulating. As I stand back, facing the aftermath directly, I am dumbfounded. For the first time, I am observing the true nature of who I am. The veil has been lifted; I

see the truth in all its clarity. Those who will discover the child will assume it was your fault, not having directional evidence to pinpoint the guilt justly onto me.

Now—soon, there will only ever remain the now, for shortly, my memory will fade and the moments in the fugitive life of yours will be lost to empty space.

From the start, I understood my limitations, even as I stepped into the grains of time. I was never stooped by my egotism, to think I had a chance at intervening. Unfortunately, my design implored no room for alterations. However, I am wondering the reason for my following you so closely as if it was not I who would seal the letter of your inevitability. Perhaps, that is precisely in the inquiry; I felt responsible, so succeeding in your footsteps, walking through the pain and hurt alongside you, somehow was the punishment for the sin I committed. Or could it be perhaps, I just grew tired of being lonely and I found companionship in your amity? I know the human eye cannot comprehend my figuration, but I yearned for you to notice me through some apparition or faint whisper on the wind, that way I could be as real to you, as you were to me. Presently, my invisibility does not cause pain as it once did, for I would not desire you to look upon my red hands. Truthfully, I did not want your eyes to find mine, for I fear what you might find in them. And, more than ever, I wish mine hadn't found yours either, dear child.

Although it is a burden to bear this separation and I cannot stop it from coming, some distinct, distant fragment within me is already beginning to grieve the loss of those moments. The quickly dispersing memories are weaving themselves into a blanket, black and endless. There, if there is such a place among all the moments that have occurred on earth, is the boy—the child—still living on. Whether or not you are remembered by anyone on this side of life, you are not entirely lost, for as my own recollections slip away, they will accompany you on your new path. Once I am altogether gone, wherever you ascend to in your city, permit this scared, grieving, yet cherishing version of me to follow. It is how I want it to be. How I need it to be. So, above all things, I will never long for it to be any other way—with you there, and me there, and us, far away, in a place knowing no pain or suffering, in togetherness

My dear child, I will not keep you waiting at the gate for much longer, since the effects are occurring within me and I am rapidly losing the face of my dearest friend.

Oh, child, my heart trembles. I do not want to become mindless again and ponder aimlessly. I'm scared—so scared without you. Hold onto me, will you? For when I no longer can fathom the richness of your life, remind me one evening, as we walk the pearl streets of our sanctuary, how excellent it felt to be free. ■

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Thank you to this year's judges

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Brightpoint and VCU alumna holding degrees
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ABOUT

This journal contains the winning student submissions from the 2026 Currents Art & Literary Contest, an annual competition sponsored by the Office of Student Activities at Brightpoint Community College.

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