



TAPESTRIES

Saint Francis University's Literary Arts Magazine
2023-2024

Each year the School of STEAM hosts the Gunard B. Carlson Creative Writing and Visual Arts Contest, a competition open to all Saint Francis University undergraduates. Students may submit written entries of up to 3,000 words in the following categories: (1) fiction, (2) creative nonfiction, including personal narratives and memoirs, (3) essay writing, and (4) poetry, with a minimum of five poems per submission. Students also may submit works of visual art, such as photographs, sculptures, paintings (oil, water, and acrylic), sketches, and collages.

The Department of English and World Languages also hosts the annual Father Callan Poetry Contest, which aims to celebrate Father Thomas Callan's love of literature. This contest, funded by the generous donations of SFU alumnus and published poet Paul Martin, is open to all undergraduate and graduate students.

The winners and honorable mentions of each contest are published in our annual edition of *Tapestries*, Saint Francis University's literary and visual arts magazine. This edition includes the winning entries and honorable mentions of our 2023-2024 contests. Opinions expressed in this magazine do not reflect those of the contest judges and magazine editor or those of the Saint Francis University community.

For more information about the Gunard B. Carlson and Fr. Callan Poetry contests, please contact:

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Tapestries

Weaving the Threads of Creativity and Innovation

Faculty Editor

Brennan Thomas

Cover Artwork by Annah Lovette

“The Beast of Gevaudan” (1st Place Winner in the Visual Arts Category)

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All students who submitted writing and artwork for the Gunard B. Carlson and Fr. Callan Poetry contests. Your stories, poetry, essays, creative nonfiction pieces, and visual creations were imaginative, incisive, and inspiring.

Gunard B. Carlson Writing Judges

Dr. Patrick Farabaugh, Professor of Communication Arts

Dr. Theresa Horner, Assistant Professor of Public Health

Dr. Art Remillard, Professor of Philosophy

Dr. Kent Tonkin, Associate Professor of Business

Gunard B. Carlson Visual Arts Judge

Ms. Carol Stoltz, Head of Library Access Services

Fr. Callan Poetry Judge

Mr. Paul Martin, SFU Alumnus and Published Poet

Contest Coordinator & Magazine Editor

Dr. Brennan Thomas, Professor of English and Writing Center Director

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Effectiveness of Telemedicine: A Quick Call to the Doctor

by Paige Kistner

Awakened by a stuffy nose, congested chest, and bad headache, my roommate, Gracie, and I look at each other dolefully. I make a quick call to the doctor, explain my symptoms, and I am prescribed medication for a sinus infection, which I pick up in a matter of two hours. Gracie, with mirroring symptoms, spends an hour on hold to make an appointment, drags herself out of bed to go to the doctor's office, waits a dreadful hour before even being seen by the practitioner, and after making a second trip, eventually picks up the same prescription the next day. The emergence of telemedicine within the past few years has developed many opportunities and room for advancement in the medical field. Skeptics worry over the level of accuracy that this method of healthcare holds; however, with support from medical professionals, patients, and hospitals, there is added validity to the use of new technology and telecommunication within healthcare. Healthcare providers should retain telemedicine practices in healthcare systems as a way to reduce the spread of infectious illnesses, give access to specialists who were before limited by geographical location, and advocate for the safety of those affected by chronic illnesses and/or those who are immunocompromised. As Gracie and I lay in our beds awaiting relief from the congestion, it is obvious who had the more convenient journey to get the healthcare she needed.

Whenever I sit in the waiting room of my doctor's office, I often find myself holding my breath to avoid the inhalation of the cloud of germs that pollutes the air. When someone walks through the doctor's office doors, sniffing and ready to be tested for the flu, I quickly cover my mouth due to the fact that everyone in the office, including myself, has now been exposed to the flu. Having the option to be seen virtually decreases this risk of contagion in the office. "Normally, doctors and other healthcare providers care for their patients in person at a facility such as a medical office, clinic, or hospital," explains editor of *Harvard Women's Health Watch* Stephanie Watson, "but thanks to computers, smartphones, and other new digital technologies, medical professionals can now diagnose, treat, and oversee their patients' care virtually" ("Telehealth"). The use of this technology spiked drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Patients were rightfully unwilling to enter a doctor's office, terrified by the thought of coming in contact with the virus that was hospitalizing so many. Maureen Polakowski, a family nurse practitioner, explains her experience with telemedicine during this time, stating, "At the start of the [COVID-19] pandemic in 2020, we spent at least one month exclusively doing telehealth visits" (Personal interview). In her experience, merely having the option of this technology

benefited many individuals and healthcare providers during the pandemic and is still extremely useful today. Oftentimes, like Gracie's and my experience, the reason for a doctor visit is for something simple such as a sinus infection that the doctor solely evaluates symptoms and makes a diagnosis based off of what the patient is telling them. Although some question the accuracy of remote evaluation and diagnosis, this can just as easily and accurately be done over a video call between the provider and patient. The accuracy of diagnosing patients through telemedicine is explained by *Johns Hopkins Medicine* contributor and physician John Hasselfeld. He believes there is an increase in accuracy in diagnosing due to the availability of better assessment of the patient's home environment, which becomes useful when making a diagnosis ("Benefits"). Therefore, the use of telemedicine in healthcare has several benefits, including safer and more convenient care for both patients and healthcare providers. I could see the conveniences of this care after being diagnosed over the phone for the sinus infection Gracie and I both experienced.

Beyond the conveniences and safety of these technologies, there is the advantage of quality of care through eliminating geographical barriers that once existed and an increase in availability of specialists. Individuals have the ability to access specialists and doctors practically worldwide through the internet. This technology leads to more knowledge, better care, and greater accessibility. Gracie and I, going to school in Loretto, PA, and secluded from access to a nearby urgent care or doctor's office, were prohibited from easy accessibility of care—the reason Gracie did not get a prescription until the next day. Technology, even in healthcare, is used to connect the world; furthermore, if a patient lives in a more remote or rural area with little contact to skilled specialists, that individual can still contact a number of specialists via telecommunications. As it can be inferred, rural health is a large problem, as most people who live in less active areas have restricted access to medical professionals. In her article "Rural Health" for *CQ Researcher*, Barbara Mantel advocates for the use of telemedicine in rural areas by stating, "Experts widely agree on what many rural communities need: greater access to broadband and telemedicine" (3). With telemedicine, there is far more care that can be provided and an increase in better health for rural communities. Greater accessibility does not just refer to geographical barriers, but also the accessibility to specialists in different areas. Doctors who are skilled in their craft and widely recognized can be better accessed through telemedicine. Rifat Latifi, author of *Telemedicine for Trauma, Emergencies, and Disaster Management*, explains the widespread effects of the implementation of telemedicine in trauma and emergency medicine:

By adopting teletrauma, we will enhance the surgical skills of those less experienced and enable them to perform complex surgical techniques, popularize advanced surgical procedures, create uniform surgical standards, and bring expertise to developing countries. This will greatly reduce and minimize potential surgical errors and provide timely care in the most austere conditions. (Latifi xxii)

The importance of telemedicine is clear when it is understood how many fields of study this evolving technology pertains to. Telemedicine goes beyond just family medicine and can be expanded to being used in emergency and operating rooms. The thought of having no surgeon in the room may make individuals apprehensive by merely picturing themselves lying in the ER while being administered care through telecommunications; however, many times, specialists available through telemedicine are far more skilled than those physically in the hospital and can provide better care. Critical care specialist Atif Zeeshan, who had initial speculation of the use of telemedicine, shows his new support of telemedicine in the ICU and is quoted as saying, “There have been cases where lives were saved with eCare intervention” (qtd. in Rubin). Furthermore, the implementation of telemedicine greatly broadens the capabilities of accessible healthcare to many. Where geographical isolation and lack of specialists once acted as barriers to better healthcare, telemedicine has opened up new doors and led to better widespread care. Without telemedicine, I would have been waiting days to access a doctor near the university, just as Gracie had.

Apart from the safety and conveniences of telemedicine and the greater availability to healthcare, telemedicine serves as a way to protect those chronically ill or immunocompromised. A majority of the time, the most common visitors in medical offices are those getting treatment for long-term or chronic illnesses. For example, chronically ill patients can suffer from illnesses such as cancer, cystic fibrosis, ALS, and diabetes. The common visits these patients undergo put them at a higher risk for other health complications with the exposure to others in the office. “Certain types of clinical encounters may be better suited for the telemedicine platform.... Visits regarding follow-up for patients’ chronic conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure with their established primary care physician may be conducted remotely with less chance of clinical error compared with a visit involving an unknown patient-clinician dyad with acute symptoms (i.e., shortness of breath or chest pain),” explains Joel Willis, doctor and contributor to *The American Journal of Medicine* (1102). As explained by Willis, there could be room for error in the diagnosis of illnesses through this method of evaluation; however, if being used to check up on chronically ill patients, it proves to be very useful and with little room for error. When chronically ill patients are infected with what seem like common illnesses to most, such as the sinus infection that affected my roommate and me, it is far more detrimental to the health of the chronically ill rather than to someone such as myself. Immunocompromised individuals have a hard time fighting off common infections and often suffer far worse symptoms and consequences than most. Protecting the immunocompromised is something Lawrence Eron, an infectious disease specialist, promotes by suggesting the implementation of telemedicine as a substitute for stays in hospitals and at home care. Telemedicine can be used as a bridge between receiving care from physicians and limiting time in hospitals and doctor’s offices. Such virtual visits prove effective in protecting immunocompromised, elderly, and certain at-risk patients. Doctors are able to treat and monitor patients that are sick without physically touching

them and risking not only the patient's health but others in the area as well (Eron 225). Personally, I feel a sense of responsibility in protecting individuals who are more susceptible to illnesses, so, as a future healthcare provider, I see a huge advantage to these technologies being continued.

The next time Gracie and I wake up congested, coughing, or with a headache, both of us will reach for our laptops to attend our telemedicine visits with the doctor. After the initial uprising of telemedicine during the COVID-19 pandemic, medical professionals, hospitals, and patients saw the large opportunity these technologies held. The germ-infested waiting rooms of the doctor's offices will become less congested, more people will get the care they need with access to a wider range of specialists, and the chronically ill and immunocompromised will become safer getting their necessary care. The rise of technology and use of telemedicine in all forms of healthcare show promise for the future of medicine.

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Anthill: Chapter One

by Jakob Sherman

“And when Ulysses was beset on his journey,
He must have thought it quite a pity,
That in the naked sight of evil,
He had no equal.”

—Excerpt from the *Journal of William Wendicott*, 1979

In man’s darkest ages, there is always a deliverance to be had—an act of free will that, even while stepped and spat upon by Satan’s finest creations, stands insoluble in testament to the perfect design of life.

So says the Priests and Bishops; Cardinals and Popes and God himself—the origin of all thought and Word. And what is man to take away from such claims? What is he to do when in the midst of suffering but to put hope in what he sees affront him, even when he knows that hope in the world is an act of assured misinvestment?

And just as every soul is familiar with the depths of the uncaring mind, so is every reader knowledgeable of the novel—a thousand crevices filled halfway with disconnected ramblings, all in vain attempt—hope—that someone might descend deep enough to touch these words. No one ever will, of course; and as the author lets his final scratches of ink dry, he draws away as distant as the rest.

I could fill a library with meditations, but that would not be a story.

The truest of stories start with the dreams of man, for they are mere recollections of the afterlife. And as such, the story of my youth is one that begins after my death—a moment of meditation without precognition and suicide without inhibition.

That night, I imagined myself lying on the sofa of my grandfather’s home. I could feel so vividly the scratch of the fabric on the back of my neck—the smell of cigar smoke and sawdust that served as much of an object of nostalgia as it did abrasion.

“Why do you lie there?” I heard a voice ask.

“It’s comfortable,” I answered quietly.

“Is it?”

“No. It itches.”

“Then sit up.”

“I can’t.”

“Of course, you can.”

I covered my eyes with the length of my arm. “Who are you to tell me? You don’t know me. If I were to sit up, someone would just knock me down, again.”

“Who? Who would knock you down?”

“I can’t recall. I can’t recall much at all.”

“Should I remind you?”

“I would rather you not.”

“Then you relish forgetting. The next step is your own death. Do you want that?”

I rolled over to face the back cushion of the couch. “Yes. Give me death.”

“That is not of my nature; nor is it of yours. You will live.”

“Why?”

“Because you want to.”

I began to cry into the cushion—lightly at first, though I soon capitulated to further griefs.

“I’m not here to hurt you, William. I will be beside you; now until the end of your days.”

Suddenly I was no longer on the couch. I could feel wind whipping against me in cold lashes, rain heaving upon me from a gray sky backlit by the moon’s radiance. I was standing in place of what might have been a scarecrow—alone in a wheat field underlaid with mud, soon to be scabbed over with the rising of the sun. And yet in the present absence of the sun, it was but a monochromatic world. The only light besides that of the moon and stars came from a radio tower—miles away and several hundred feet stretched and silhouetted across the sky. In perfectly timed patterns, its scarlet lights would blink their hues. They looked pairs of neon eyes—industrious, electrical eyes of the all-perceiving, never-seeing witness to suffering.

I wasn’t sure why I was there, and so I stayed still, foolishly so, as if someone cared enough to come and tell me to move. Soon, I lost the feeling in my fingers. Then so, too, my toes grew numb, and I could stand no longer. I was awakened by my fall.

Say what you will about the nature of dreams, but when I awoke, I was still crying. It was dark in my room, and as I came to know my own consciousness, I glanced over at my bedside clock and realized it was a new day—the last of days, in fact.

Hours later, I was standing on the platform of Baltimore’s Penn station, my backpack wrapped around my shoulder and the handle of two suitcases tightly bound in either of my palms. It was nearing the end of August—just cool enough so that I could wear a sweater without being chastised by man or nature.

"Call me when you get the chance," Maisie said. "You'll be back for Thanksgiving, won't you?"

"Should be." I could hear the train coming around the bend, and so I knew I only had a minute or two left. I scratched at the end of my eyebrow in a habit born of my infantile anxiety.

"I'll miss you," Maisie said.

"*We'll* miss you," my grandfather corrected.

"I know," I said. "I'll miss you guys, too." As the train peeled around the corner, regular commuters began to gather their things for the ride. My grandfather stepped forward and wrapped his arms around me, cradling my head into the shoulder of his jacket. It was unlike him, in most respects. He was a man who valued his solitude—I had always prescribed the origin of such characteristics to his childhood, or perhaps his career in the carpenters' union—perhaps such qualities are contracted by anyone who lives in Baltimore long enough.

"Stay safe," he said. Then he paused, as though any word held the risk of catching fire. "I'll be praying for you." Then he pulled away from me and adjusted the end of his tie.

The train's brakes hissed as wind breathed into the fresh vacuum. Doors opened and passengers shuffled shoulder-bound into the cabins. It was still early in the morning, and yet it felt like the end of days. I suppose it was, in a sense. Though I did not know it then, one can scarcely return home once they've left. You can physically occupy the same space, of course, but there will be naught awaiting your arrival.

"I'll see you two soon enough," I said. And with the parting sympathies of two smiles, I rolled my suitcases onto the train. There was a window seat waiting for me, and after retiring my luggage to their compartments, I reached for my ticket. The pocket in which I had thought it present was empty, as was the opposite, and soon I began to panic. Just before I was about to get up, Maisie stepped into the car. She slipped past the other passengers until she was leaning over me.

"You dropped this," she smirked, and pulled a ticket from her coat pocket.

"Did I?"

Maisie looked back for a moment to all the commuters finding their seats, and then once more to me. She had rosy cheeks, and a small nose that would scrunch whenever she smiled. Then she bent over, laid her head on my shoulder, and wrapped her arms about my neck.

"Stay safe down there," she said muffled into my sweater. "I'll be waiting for you."

I rested a hand on the back of her head. "And I'll be thinking of you."

Then she lifted her head, kissed me on the cheek, and turned back for the doors. For a moment, I was still. Then I found the courage to lean over the back of my seat.

“Maisie!” I called.

She turned.

“Look after Grandfather.”

She understood. More than that, she prescribed passion to her understanding. Watching her exit the train was thus an eclectic experience—as sorrowing as it was comforting and wise as it was stunted.

I used to take great pleasure in riding the train. I enjoyed driving well enough, but willing yourself down a road of scabby tar is hardly the same as being led by the curve of a rail or being rocked by the sway of the cabin. It was infantilizing, dependent. I was halfway asleep when someone took the seat next to me.

He was a young man—a few years older than me perhaps, with long brown hair and a leather jacket over turtleneck. He had a backpack in his lap and was bent over the seat looking back down the aisle.

“Sorry,” he said. I didn’t know he was speaking to me until he turned back around. “The man beside me was sick, I think. I can’t risk a cold right before classes.”

“Are you in college?” I asked.

He nodded. “Senior at Georgetown.” He reached out his hand. “My name’s Elliot.”

“William,” I said. “It’s nice to meet you.” He had a firm shake.

“Where are you headed, William?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Georgetown.”

“Oh?”

“I’m a Freshman.”

Elliot smiled. “Odd chance, huh? It’s rare to find someone else from Baltimore. I’m from Butcher’s Hill, you?”

“Bolton Hill.”

“Which part?”

“Just by the park.”

“Are your parents rich?”

I thought that an odd question to be posed in the infancy of a relationship, let alone that of a conversation. “Something like that,” I answered.

Then he laughed. When he was finished, his face settled on an aggravated, depressed riddle of contortions. “Do you love them?”

For once, I thought myself lucky to be invalidated by such topics. “I live with my grandfather.”

Elliot nodded in slow motions before pulling a pack of chewing gum from his jacket. "Do you want a piece?"

"No, thank you."

He shrugged and began chewing. "What will you be studying?"

I recognized then the dynamism of his character. And so suddenly he was understandable to me—a man fitted in an archetype befitting of all natural forces. "English."

"Do you read much?"

"Some."

Elliot went digging in his backpack and showed me his collection. "Nietzsche," he began. "Kafka; Oscar Wilde; Dostoevsky; Melville. What do you think?"

"Which about?"

"All of them—any of them."

In truth, I only knew half of those names. Mostly, I derived my literary knowledge from my own writings' trials and errors—the errors of which I came to know through Maisie's palette.

"I've heard good things of Melville," I said. "*Moby Dick*, right?"

"Sure. Have you read 'The Piazza'?"

"No."

"Well, you ought to. It's not so much the substance as it is the flourishings. That's real art, too, you know? Not everything has to be some sort of exploration."

"Well—"

"Maybe you don't agree. Maybe you think art ought to give you something to take away. You want a haircut, not just a mirror."

I didn't know what to say. Elliot didn't mind—he filled the air all the same. "I'm studying architecture. I never wanted to, but it's my father's business, so I suppose I should be thankful. It's mostly mathematics, but I try to inject some art."

As Elliot kept talking, his words seemed to dry out into the hum of the rest of the train. I felt suddenly uncomfortable—the same discomfort one contracts when waking up in the bowels of an unfamiliar home. Just then the train pulled out of Baltimore proper and into the endless sprawl of farms and suburbs that made up the stretched ligaments of the Northeast corridor. It was then that I realized I wasn't home. It was sickening.

"Look up there," Elliot said, and pointed out the window. "Do you see them?" The train was just about to pass into the dark of a tunnel, and on the curve of the overpass, I could see painted in gray and gold a set of eyes.

The eyes of God looking down upon me. Us; they looked upon us, for it is all of creation that shall receive judgment. That train could have stayed in the tunnel's darkness for eternity, and still the eyes would see. It matters not where; Washington or Baltimore, train car or the bedroom of one's childhood. They are ever-present and ever-piercing. Many times since that day, I have questioned those eyes. Did I truly see them? Did they truly see me?

"I'm a fan of street art," Elliot mused. Just then our car was swallowed into the belly of a mountain I knew not the name of. The lights within the train showed their presence in contrast alone. "There's this building near my house—abandoned—covered in murals. What of? Let me think."

"On Federal Street?"

"Yeah."

"The one with the sunflowers?"

"That's it, the sunflowers!" Elliot threw his arm around me and shook me about like a brother might. That's what I figure, anyway. I was an only child. "I can tell you'll fit in, William."

"At Georgetown?"

"Sure. You seem like a good kid. Handsome, too."

"Thanks."

"Have you thought about joining a fraternity yet?" I was going to open my mouth and speak, but Elliot wouldn't let me. "I guess it doesn't matter. You'd have to wait 'til next year, anyways. A lot can happen in a year, yeah?"

"Yeah." Just then the train passed out of the other side of the tunnel, and the scenery returned to that of expansive farms, dotted with patches of trees and ponds. "I've always wanted to live somewhere like here."

"On a farm, you mean?"

"Yeah." I could feel a smile creeping onto my face. "Don't you figure it would be nice? Raising a bunch of sheep with someone—going birdwatching on the weekends?"

Elliot looked past me out the window and began to laugh.

"I take it back," he said. "You're a horrid fit for Georgetown. That's all right—I'll introduce you to some folks when we get down there."

I reasoned to myself that I didn't need to be a good fit. I wasn't in high school, after all. But then my mind argued that I had been with Maisie in high school. The most I had for college was a train's acquaintance.

I don't have so much to say about the rest of the train ride. That's not to say Elliot wasn't interesting company—he possessed a certain hardness unmatched by even the

starkest of youth. It was I who was the death of our talks. After an hour or so, I grew so exhausted keeping up with him that I gave him dominion over the air. Just after he gave up talking and pulled out a book.

“Welcome to Washington,” I heard the conductor say over the intercom. There was more to the message, but I missed it over the business that followed. People rose from their seats before the train had even slowed, nearly stepping over each other to be first onto the platform.

“Busy city?” I asked. Elliot nodded and slid his book back into his backpack. I think it was something by Camus, but certain memories are lost to age.

“It used to be a swamp.”

I wasn’t quite sure how that related to what I said, but I didn’t mind much.

“It’s an inorganic city even by a city’s standards—planned from start to finish.”

“Is that bad?”

“Not necessarily. Makes it easy to navigate, technically speaking—perfectly situated between North and South, too.”

“Not East and West, though.”

“No.”

Soon enough the brakes of the train hissed, and people began stepping over each other in breaks for the doors. Once the clot had thinned enough for the two of us to rise, we pressed ourselves into the aisle and began shuffling down with the rest. I counted myself lucky to be behind Elliot—he moved with such purpose that I figured being affronted by him would have carried a certain anxiety.

When I finally exited the cavernous halls of the train and could see Washington’s stunted spires stretched beneath the summer sun, I felt near hopeful. That is not to say I did not have misgivings about my future—anyone with true intent so, too, possesses fear. However, it was an undeniable observation upon the reflection of the self that I was alive. For eighteen years I had lived, and I would live another half if it meant I got to return home to Maisie. The warmth of the sun reminded me of her. I held a hand to my cheek.



Gabby Gogh

by José Garcia Ortega

Cardboard Castles

by Julianne Dee

2nd Place Winner, Father Callan Poetry Contest

Cardboard castles beneath city lights,
A backdrop to hurried, averted gazes.
They see shadows, not souls in the night.

Empty eyes cast in judgment's harsh glare,
"Lazy," they whisper, "weak, failures outright."
Cardboard castles beneath city lights.

Their stories untold, hidden in threadbare sights,
Twisted by whispers, lost in the city's might.
But compassion ignites a beacon so bright,
Warmth melts the frost where the cold wind bites.

A shared smile, a moment, a helping hand,
Breaching the walls where prejudice takes flight.
Cardboard castles beneath city lights.

Hope flickers, hesitant, then takes a stand,
Breaking the silence, the darkness, the fright.
They see faces, not shadows in the night.

Compassion's embrace, a gentle, healing might,
Transforms castles of cardboard to dreams in flight.
Cardboard castles beneath city lights,
They see shadows no more, but souls in the night.

Sex. Drugs. Rock & Roll

by Nathaniel Scritchfield

4th Place Winner, Gunard Carlson Contest

The cool air hit as the producer entered the doors of the building; the thought of sweat made him squirm in discomfort.

His teeth were an unnatural white akin to the wings that might be seen on an angel. Yet, every morning when he flossed, his gums would bleed, a deep crimson staining the pure white smile that he would flash at others as the day went on. He hated this fact, that his image of wealth and success could be tarnished by the simple act of smiling, but it is a human act, something that he does not know much about.

“Hello, Janet. Remember, we have a meeting today with The Blues. That record is too experimental for radio-play.”

“I will see you then, sir. Have a good day,” she answered. She had seen the blood-stained teeth, the deep red of fakeness showing. The scent of his Valentino cologne suffocated her as he walked past, filling the entrance with the smells of money, power, and fabrication.

Welcome to the music world of Los Angeles, California, the city of dreams.

The man’s name was Mark Morningstar, senior producer at Iris Records, a multi-platinum company that had churned out more money than any other label in California. They were the 1% of the music world, the VIP party attendees, the low-emotion, creative-sucking parasites of L.A.

Mark was a tall man, standing at 6 foot 2. He kept his hair in a short crew cut style with enough gel to fashion two bricks together. He was known as the angel, the one who brought in talent and made them stars, doing everything possible to get their songs on the streaming platforms and playing on the radio. He was originally raised in a lower-class family, his father being an alcoholic. Driven by the idea of wealth from a young age, he scraped his way to where he is now, never wanting to fall back down to the low he was in. Today was no different in this path as he entered the recording booth labeled The Blues.

“Morning, gentlemen. How is the record going?” Mark inquired.

“Coming along. We’re experimenting with a different sound, something that speaks more with the message of the album,” said the guitarist, Johnny Moon.

“What do you mean, ‘experimenting’? Experimenting doesn’t bring radio play or streams. This needs to be a clean-cut normal record, none of that weird bullshit. This needs to make money, not change the world.”

“You’re never open to any new ideas,” Johnny began. “You—”

“New ideas do not make money,” Mark said with such finality that he cut off Johnny’s short-lived protest. He lowered his voice and continued. “I can and will cut your deal short if you do not abide by what you’re here to do. You are here to write songs that are so shallow that every Tom, Dick, Sherry, and Jenny in the world can listen to them and bring in revenue. If you don’t want to make money, then I will be more than happy to throw you all back on the street where I found you, where I made you, gave you the utilities to party and live in the penthouses you all love.”

The band sat in silence, not knowing what to say. There was nothing they could do. The angel had given his orders, and they had no choice but to follow or be put back on the hard asphalt of Los Angeles.

“Now, I won’t keep you, gentlemen. Get back to work and remember, don’t experiment.”

Mark left the booth, sternly walking toward the next to go through this entire conversation once again. Don’t experiment, threaten to cut a contract, and leave before hearing from the artists, the people who were making him as powerful as he had become. Mark would do this daily, almost to condition the artists to make what he wanted, like a group of androids doing the bidding of their overlord.

Opening the door, Mark entered his office and began getting things ready for the day. There was still much for him to do, especially his favorite thing, cocaine. It was a little habit he picked up when he moved to L.A. and now, he couldn’t get enough of it. Mark took a small bag from his desk and began cutting a line, snorting it through a \$100 bill, throwing the money in the trash after. Now it was time for work. Picking up the phone, he dialed an unusual number; it rang and rang before finally being picked up by the other line.

“Hello?” the voice answered.

Mark had two phones, his normal cell phone and a burner phone used to conduct other “business” affairs.

“Hello, Bill! How’s your morning going? Gotta love that California sunshine!” Mark chirped in a phony tone, his unnaturally white teeth showing as his smile nearly reached his eyes, a small amount of coke still on his upper lip.

“Look, Mark,” the voice replied, “I can’t keep doing this. The people at Billboard are starting to get suspicious. Frankly, I’m risking losing my job.”

“Oh, Bill, don’t you remember our little deal? You keep the songs my artists put out on the Hot 100, and I don’t let loose the little secret about what you’ve been doing at those ‘company events.’”

“Mark, you can’t keep doing this, it’s not right—”

“WHO ARE YOU TO TELL ME WHAT IS NOT RIGHT, BILL?!” Mark gripped the phone so hard he began to shake with rage. “I am not the one who continually sleeps with the sleazes of L.A. and does coke off their bodies instead of going home to my wife and kids.”

“I’ve made mistakes, Mark. I know this, but if any of that gets out, my career, my family—hell *everything*—will be over.” Bill’s voice began to quiver.

“We won’t have that issue, Bill. I’ll keep this quiet if you keep my songs on the charts.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can do. Bye.” Bill hung up the phone before Mark could respond, leaving silence to fill the office.

Putting down the burner, Mark began to do the monotonous work that was on the schedule for the day. He replied to different emails, checked the charts and created graphs of the most popular sounds, listened to new artists who wanted to sign to the label, and, of course, did a few more lines in between everything. Mark would throw away around \$400 each day from the bills he used to get the high he always desired. The day kept going until the evening, the time when all the elites of the music world banded together and engaged in all forms of excess. Drinking large quantities, having sex with people who wanted favors, and, of course, doing copious amounts of drugs. They all met at Pink Skull, the most elite club in all of Los Angeles.

Walking into the club, Mark immediately noticed Bill, making out with one of the dancers at the club in between his efforts to cut lines of cocaine for them to snort. Bill didn’t care about Mark’s threat. He was too busy living in his world of excess and riches to notice or care about Mark or his wife and kids. Pink Skull was where the rich felt the most at home, where they could live out any desire. If they were willing to pay, nothing would be off the table.

Mark walked up to an empty table and sat down. Not long after, another man in a silver suit joined him.

“Mark, how are you doing today?” The voice was deep, and Mark immediately recognized its owner: Barnabas Spider, the CEO of Iris.

“Mr. Spider, I didn’t think that I would see you tonight. Isn’t your daughter’s piano recital this evening?”

Barnabas laughed. “You know how I feel about those events. Besides, I’ll just buy her something new and it’ll all be forgiven.” He leaned in toward Mark and lowered his voice. “Now, there is an important discussion we need to have about The Blues. Their ratings are down, and we cannot have that ruin Iris’s strong reputation.”

“I just spoke with them today, sir. I had let them know that if this new record is not getting good radio play and streaming, it would be back to the street with their asses.” Mark pulled out a small baggie filled with cocaine and poured out a small amount for them both.

“Good. We can’t have them ruin profits for the month just because of some artistic vision.” Barnabas smiled. “Now, let’s stop thinking of business and begin the real part of the day.”

Both men laughed before beginning to snort the coke that Mark had taken out of his pocket. The night was just starting for them. The next four hours were a rush of drugs and drinks; shots were given, more lines were snorted, and, of course, there were affairs happening all around. Mr. Spider led one of the club's dancers to a back section of the club, leaving Mark alone at the table as he continued drinking excessively and pulling out more cocaine. It had all become a blur for him. Mark didn’t know where he was, and he loved every second of it. This was what he had worked for. This was why he made different artists conform to his ideals. He needed that money to fuel his nights, something he could not and would not live without.

He had snorted 25 lines throughout the whole night when he began to feel a sense of panic rush over him. Mark felt the need to escape. He had to run away and get out of this place. Sprinting, he slammed into the chair of a table and collapsed.

Mark lay on the ground of the club, having zero clue where he was or who he was; the blood from his nose flowed down to his teeth, staining them once again of crimson red. Something felt wrong. The party was beginning to slow, but he was ready for another line. People walked over his limp body, not having a care for how or why he was facedown on a disgusting club floor. Before he could get up and move, the speakers kicked back on and started playing the new song by The Blues. He listened to it and wondered why they didn't listen to him. The song didn’t sound right at all. He already planned on cutting their contract in the morning. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

The angel had fallen.

Gloomy Days

by Hailey Selvage

Cold

Sometimes the feeling of the cold seeps in;
Sometimes I miss that cold and dark feeling.
I even start to forget where I've been;
Like I'm falling up into the ceiling.

My eyes start watering; my skin goes numb.
But the best part is when the pain exists.
I can feel the singeing pain in my thumb.
That burning pain that will only persist.

Exhausted

I am tired
Of fighting for my life
Against myself and everyone else.
I am tired
Of being ignored
And wanting to be heard.
I am tired
Of feeling the pressure
That I will never be good enough.
I am tired
Of being tired
And only wanting to sleep.
I am tired
Because sleep is peaceful
And pushes my problems away.
I am tired
Because I have given up
On fighting only for me.
I am tired
Because I am too young
To feel like I am suffocating.
I am just tired.

Focus

Sometimes to better yourself,
You must lose the people near.
They may hold you on a shelf;
Not to help throughout the year.

And they aren't interested
In the help you are seeking.
Their visits are limited
While you sit lost and shrieking.

They hold you down in the dirt,
Never wanting you to grow.
Suffocating you with hurt,
It is time to let them go.

Firsts

How are you doing?
Everyone's reaching out.
Look what I'm pursuing!
Peace waits for me, I doubt.

It's dark out and I can't sleep.

Cold and wet loneliness is
All that my future holds.
Now, warm, I am His
Threatened, no longer, by the Cold.

Don't underestimate it,
Oh, not like that hypocrite.

I think I can start counting sheep
The sun's still up, though

Open your eyes

Look

The sun is so bright and warm;
I want to sit outside now.

Look

I see the rain from my dorm,
Beauty is all I can allow.

Look

I'm asking you to help.
Can you even hear me?

Look

I'm being held down by kelp;
It's got me by the knee.

Look

Am I just disappearing,
Can't you see me drowning?

Look

Does my coffin need veneering
While you're looking at me frowning.

Look

I think it's time we part ways;
Things will never be the same.

Please

Just

Look

when numbers became more than numbers

by Ava Dzurenda

2nd Place Winner, Gunard Carlson Contest

As a young child, I despised math and numbers. The infinite range compiled of ten contrasting digits almost made my insides overflow and erupt with frustration and rage daily. I vividly remember many times where I sat at the dinner table, crying over my math homework that seemed impossible. As I grew up, however, I became ambitious, disciplined, eager for control, and a total perfectionist—one that was now conditioned to structure her life towards turning her goals into reality. Starting to run cross country and track in middle school changed my life entirely. Numbers, for the first time, suddenly turned into more than digits on a math worksheet—they started to unreservedly define my success both on and off the track.

I became serious about running in eighth grade. I loved the euphoric feeling that the sport provided, and as I started to train more, my times improved. From that point, I set various goals: some attainable, and a few more far-fetched. Being ambitious, I knew that if I wanted to achieve these goals, I needed to be completely dialed-in on running and do whatever it would take to achieve success. This mindset, one composed of purely concentrating on my goals, managed to lead me into a spiral downfall.

During my sophomore year, I faced a very disappointing cross-country season. I trained nonstop in the summer, but something that I neglected was treating my body correctly. As a result, I felt my body slowly deteriorate as the season progressed. My times suffered, and the numbers on the clock soon defined my worth. To me, my times had to be exactly what I wanted them to be, and if not, I deemed myself unworthy of eating and being happy, and that's the thing about numbers.

Between numbers lie empty space, which is the ideal opportunity for minuscule decimal points, fractions of digits, and to some, failure—complete, utter failure. The last race of my season was filled with fatigue, weakness, and downright exhaustion. Worst of all, it physically showed. I was unable to realize how much weight I had lost until I stepped on the scale. As the season wrapped up, I felt as if I was at a total loss of control.

No matter what I did, it seemed like nothing would help me reach fast times again. Therefore, I decided that if I wanted to get faster, I needed to start lifting weights again, running more, and eating a *perfect* diet, so I quickly started eliminating certain foods and ingredients from my diet. What seemed a rather innocent and healthy idea soon turned into orthorexia, an eating disorder marked by obsession over clean eating. At first, I thought what I was doing was helping. Besides, my indoor track times were phenomenal. What I failed to realize, however, was that the way I was treating my body was far from

sustainable. I contracted mononucleosis and started to feel weak, my days were constantly filled with thoughts about food, and numbers suddenly became more than numbers.

Calories had a valuable meaning in my life, and so did the numbers on the scale—they were used as a measuring scale for my success. By the end of my indoor track season, one of my worst fears had come true—I was injured. The next few weeks were filled with devastation, tears, and havoc, as I had sustained stress reactions to both of my tibias at the same time and was in constant pain. To make matters even worse, I fell down a flight of steps a week later, breaking my ankle. Suddenly, my life, which had been one consumed by running, was now stripped of that passion. Rather than on the track, I now lived in the pool, the doctor's office, and on the stationary bike.

Returning to running after injury was a nightmare. I found myself in a constant injury cycle. My junior year was filled with only a handful of good races, while the rest of the season was filled with pain, iron deficiency, and genuine misery. I wanted to return to running with enjoyment so badly, but I was trapped. Still struggling with eating, I decided to start going to therapy, where I was diagnosed with atypical anorexia and avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID).

Recovery is probably the hardest thing I've done, and I still am getting through it day by day. To continue, I also chose to start lifting at a new gym with new coaches. Overall, that is one of the best decisions I've made. Lifting gave me a new sense of empowerment, and for the first time in my life, I finally felt strong—both mentally and physically. My senior year track season was the first time when numbers became just numbers again. Calories didn't mean as much; neither did the time on the clock. Sure, I have my goals, but I have learned to enjoy the journey of running more, rather than just solely focusing on these goals. Although never linear, my eating disorder recovery got easier overall, my mood was lifted little by little every day, and I learned to genuinely have fun with running once again. Failure is still difficult to fathom, but all humans fail. Even with failure comes valuable lessons, and life is about learning and growing.

Now, the infinite range compiled of ten contrasting digits makes my body calm, knowing that *numbers are just numbers*.



Vacation Eyes

by Cassidy Bezek

Fallen from Autumn

by Madison Soellner

3rd Place Winner, Gunard Carlson Contest

Fall is my favorite season. The way the leaves changed color, and the air felt cool. The weather was just right for jeans and a sweatshirt. It was the perfect time of year for fires and being outside. My family spent every weekend outside, and my dad taught me about the stars.

Fall was my favorite season, until September of 2022. The diagnosis came, but this wasn't my family's first time going to war. However, this was our first time facing this opponent. The phone call came after hours. My mom stood in the kitchen, and the rest of us silently sat on the couch. We stared as the first tear fell. Cancer. This time it wasn't melanoma, but instead, a rare cancer only a few women get a year. How lucky my mom was to be picked by the demon now inside of her.

Chemotherapy and radiation treatments started shortly after. Every Monday I would miss my classes, and I would take my mom to her chemo appointments. We started at the top of the hill for radiation, and we ended at the bottom for chemo. I left halfway through to get lunch. My mom would nap through most of her treatment, but I needed to be there just in case.

After six weeks, they stopped treatment. The tumor shrunk so much that they thought it was gone entirely. My mom got to enjoy Thanksgiving and Christmas in 2022. She told everyone she was cancer free. There was a slight hesitation because a single PET scan stood in the way of that label, but she was confident. If the results came back as cancer, it was a "minor surgery" and she'd be fine.

Christmas passed, and it was time for the results. Another late-night phone call from the doctor, and this time we knew what that meant. Cancer, again. We knew the plan of action, though. My mom prepared for surgery in March, and it all went well.

Until it wasn't. Two weeks post-op, my mom was in extreme pain. My dad rushed her to the hospital. She had an infection at the incision site. A two-night stay in Pittsburgh, and a lot of antibiotics later, my mom finally got to come home.

By the time summer came, my mom was still miserable. We started the summer with an exam under anesthesia. The doctor took biopsies while she examined my mom, and we waited again. About a week later, my mom got yet another phone call. The cancer was back, and it had spread. When my mom was originally diagnosed, the tumor was on her left side. Now, the cancer was on the right.

They caught the tumor early, though. Unfortunately, that did mean another surgery for my mom. Her surgery happened in June, and we all thought that she would be better when it was over. That was what happened last time. Except she came home still miserable.

July was our family vacation, and my mom hid inside the hotel room the entire week. The pattern really began from that week. She began not leaving the house, and she was less likely to attend events. She had been out of work since March when she worked for approximately a week. The cancer was taking my mom.

They tried every option they could for her pain. They gave her pills, but they didn't work. They tried a nerve-block, but that didn't work. They tried numbing creams, but they didn't work. Nothing was working, and her health was declining.

That puts us back at fall again. And fall looks different this year. This year the leaves don't look as pretty as they change colors, but instead mock death. No one is spending time outside, and I don't know the last time I sat around a fire.

As August was ending, my mom was going for another exam under anesthesia. They took six biopsies while examining her, but promised my dad she looked good. The doctor said she would be shocked if they came back as cancer.

It took two weeks this time to get the results back, and unfortunately my mom was in the middle of another hospital visit while the results were pending. They found a mass in her lungs that was again promised not to be cancer. The results of the biopsies came back, and five of the six were cancer. The next step was a PET scan to determine if the lungs were cancer, and how much it had spread.

September came and went. October began with a PET scan. The results came a week later, paired with yet another hospital stay. The results came back as cancer in her lungs. She has cancer in three of her lymph nodes. The original biopsy locations are now just a big, general area instead of one localized point.

The treatment plan is still in the works, but my mom finally came home after 5 days in the hospital. As of right now, my mom will begin chemotherapy treatments again. She will not be receiving any radiation. Her chemo will be 30-minute sessions every two weeks.

On October 23, 2023, my mom was headed to the hospital again. She was at her worst, and it was quickly becoming real that something more was going on. She was taken to the Tyrone Hospital for observations. They believed she had an infection, and she was to be transported to Pittsburgh. Two days later, my mom would be transported by her father-in-law rather than AMED.

Upon arriving at the hospital, everyone's lives would soon change. October 26, 2023, we got the news. My mom was dying. All of the sudden, we were hearing the news. *It's in the lymph nodes of the abdomen. It's in her pelvic bone. It's in her spinal cord.* She did not get

to enjoy the fall that she loved. The chilly air. The leaves changing. Decorating the house. Instead, my mom spent two and a half weeks in a hospital bed.

When I got the phone call, I was at Starbucks. I sat on the patio because the weather was perfect fall weather. There was a slight breeze, and it felt extra cold on my face as the tears went down my face. My final question to my dad was simple. *Is she going to die?* His answer was honest. *Yes.*

We drove out to Pittsburgh that night. We spent the entire time with her in the hospital. We slept in the room after the news was official. Someone was always by her side.

November 7, 2023, we got to bring my mom home. Her wish was to come home on hospice care. My mom got to be surrounded by her family and loved ones. Every day we had on Hallmark Christmas movies. She got to look out the window and see the leaves changing and slowly falling, one by one.

November 12, 2023, at 1:07pm, time stopped. The world stopped turning. Fall was officially over. My mom left this world, and unfortunately the world kept turning. A part of me went with her that day, and every day since then I have been trying to find a way to live without that.

The leaves on the ground looked mundane, and the air was colder than before. Fall no longer felt like a season of warmth and fond memories. But rather, fall feels like a chilly walk through an abandoned graveyard.

To Young Caroline: And Other Fellow Graduates of Mine

by Mary Katharine McCann

1st Place Winner, Father Callan Poetry Contest

I knew the young Caroline
Before she graduated, before she went on
Congratulated, and alarmed awake at dawn
To offer her professional expertise to the hurting corners of humanity
Before she was a wife or a mother, a badge-wearer, a house-owner
And to all who know her for the rest of this life, fine
But I knew the young Caroline.

I knew her when her cheeks were bright and soft
And when she told me uncertain, undefined dreams about the future, and her hopes
And we once laughed at the absurdity of life together
In these sleep-deprived classrooms, in these raging booths at the bars
In these tree-branches from which we both learned to take flight
And when she reminisces, years down the line
I will be a character there, in those tales with the young Caroline.

I know the girl that some will only know from picture-frames of old
Sons, daughters, coworkers
New skies await us, the gods that made us
In many ways I'm bound to be gone and irrelevant
In many ways I'm just the sideline
And onwards she's no longer mine
But I had the young Caroline.

O,' my Body, O,' my Sorrow

by Annah Lovette

A stranger had entered the forest that morning.

Heavy footfalls crunched through the brush at a languid pace, steps that could only belong to something heaving and monstrous—something with hunger at the center of its foggy mind. Its front paws—hands, more like—scraped at the base of a fallen oak. A scent had piqued its interest. Whether it was food or a threat, it was unsure, but it was desperate for answers.

Sniffing, the creature pressed its nose against the area in question and inhaled.

A man.

A *human* man.

The smell was unique, blended with body odor and stale booze. It flared its nostrils. The man must have been here recently. The beast's sharp ears rotated left, then right, pausing as they registered the distant call of a bird.

Its head swung towards the source, overjoyed to find that the patch of scent it had discovered fell in the same direction. The beast dipped low, tentative, letting its chest scrape against the forest floor. The hackles on its back raised alongside the sharpness of its shoulder blades, almost sticking through its shaggy, blonde hide.

As its ears flattened against the back of its neck, it began to move.

It passed the tree, circled a rotting stump, and ignored a hare that darted in front of it—the stranger was far more important. Far more *interesting*.

The smell was stronger now—closer. The beast flashed its teeth for just a moment, a reflex that it couldn't help in times of such excitement. Far ahead, framed by the firm trunks of trees, stood its target.

Clinking armor. Creaking leather. The ever-present stench of sweat.

The man was unaware of its presence, mumbling to himself as people so often did. Even from a distance, the monster could sense the blood pounding beneath the man's skin. It spiraled through veins and muscles, between sinew and fat and cartilage that would crunch between its jaws. He knew little of the boon he held. Saliva, thick and oxygenated, dripped from the beast's black lips. It licked its chops, tongue sliding across its dry nose. With cold, calculated caution, it began to advance.

Its stomach lurched as a branch snapped beneath its weight.

The man's reaction was immediate. Wide-eyed, he spun to face it. Leaves flew—birds fluttered away—as the monster attacked. Teeth punctured through the leather exterior of his armor. A scream rang out, mingling with the animalistic growls that rumbled from the beast's throat. It bit down harder, teeth sinking into something tender. Foam accumulated at the edges of its mouth, colored a pink that impersonated the gentle colors of the sunrise.

An armored fist smashed into the side of the monster's skull. It could barely feel the thing, with claws far too dull to rip, maim, or tear. Anchored into the flesh of his forearm, its teeth had degloved arm muscle from bone—the ulna and radius, it thought it remembered.

As soon as it had appeared, the man's hammer-like fist vanished. The beast was left with an opportunity. Its massive hands reached out, tipped with claws that were closer to daggers than the fingernails that they had once born. These claws would tear off his limbs, push themselves between ribs, and pry outwards, revealing the hallowed undulation of life that willed all creatures to breathe. His entrails would steam in the crisp morning air. Warm. Welcoming in comparison to the rest of the world. Perhaps the monster could crawl inside of his ribcage.

Burrow into alveolar tissue. Make a home of it.

Redness would permeate its surroundings. Like the floor that it had been reminded of—the floorboards that had once separated its feet from the dirt. The sound of liquid pouring onto them, leaving stains that branched throughout the woodwork like lightning. Someone was crying, it knew. Everything blurred, these taunting sensations and the man before it, the tastes and the smells that assaulted its sinuses, as fog overtakes all that can be perceived.

The beast could not find it in itself to forgive this terrible fog. Someone passed through the front door, fastened to the wall by a single hinge. The forest—the wild world that prowled with creatures such as itself—had been welcomed inside.

“Callisto?”

A woman's voice.

She knew that voice.

The name that the voice spoke oozed with fear. Each syllable quivered more than the last as if the act of saying it was enough to bring its speaker to her knees.

What was that?

Quickly, the beast shook the thought from its mind and finished the job.

* * *

There were four moons in the sky that night.

Aellur, Forthungr, Myrkiv, and Vulfmani: bright, taunting things that seemed to waver with each of Callisto's steps. The toe of her boot pressed down on a patch of dry brambles. It disintegrated with a crunch that silenced the hooting owl a few trees away. Her eyes, frozen in an upward glance, reflected the planetary quadruplets that staked their claim to the night sky. Myrkiv was halfway gone, swallowed by the midpoint of its lunar cycle, with Vulfmani and Forthungr close behind.

Aellur was full.

Before her, the woodland stretched endlessly, an expanse of deciduous limbs that seemed to tangle the higher they reached. Spring was marked by heavy rainfall and fog, both of which created an environment that was equal parts damp and sticky. The mist had retreated for now, though. Visibility was high. The air—while not as crisp as she would have preferred—was cooler.

Setting her jaw, Callisto decided that she would make do with what the gods had given her.

A band of crickets chirped as she passed the bush they hid in, a noisy, high-pitched drone that overwhelmed the forest's silent hush. Fireflies drifted through the air, seeking refuge in the trees as their bodies glowed in tandem.

The broadsword on her hip clinked as she moved. It usually bothered her—that incessant sound—but there were more pressing matters to concern herself with. Father had sent her out to hunt not long ago, on the notion that Mother would be home sometime in the evening. She was not a fan of returning to a barren table, and frankly, neither was Callisto. Surely, Mother had completed her journey home from the Hunter's Convocation.

She was probably at the table now: hungry, impatient, and disappointed. She'd rather starve than reappear with empty hands—a stain on the Mardagayl family.

She rolled her eyes and, yet, trod on.

An hour passed, filled with the screeching birds and a blatant lack of success in her hunt. The rocks in Callisto's boots were starting to become more painful than irritating, the mosquitos had taken to eating her alive, and the damned sword on her back had yet to silence itself.

Fine, she thought. *Have it your way.*

Gloved hands reached towards the sword's scabbard on her hip. She was half tempted to abandon it in favor of the crossbow that dangled across her back. No need for swords when hunting *deer* of all things. "Useless," she hissed. "You are *useless*."

"It is foolish to travel these woods alone."

A voice.

A *man's* voice.

"Terribly dark out here," it continued. "Terribly *dangerous*."

Callisto glanced behind her shoulder, hand fixed to the sword's pommel. Several paces away stood a man dressed in a black cloak, just long enough to hide his ankles. A matching cowl covered his head, though his face was exposed. A smile curved the corners of his mouth, creating wrinkles in his olive skin.

"Identify yourself," Callisto demanded. She longed for the security of her crossbow. The last thing she wanted to do was get any closer but the sword, of course, would leave her with no choice.

"I am merely a passerby—a stranger." The man cocked his head. "*You* look familiar, though. Such a striking face." He took a step forward, prompting Callisto to face him. Her breathing slowed to a crawl. "Tell me, what is your name? I'd love to place one to a face like yours."

Her eyes shot daggers in the stranger's direction. She did not like this man or his incessant, invasive questions, but if giving him a simple name would rid her of his presence...

"Callisto," she admitted. "And you are?"

"Ah—that *is* familiar." Ignoring her question, the man continued in his approach. He was much taller than Callisto had anticipated.

She narrowed her eyes at the towering man. "It shouldn't be."

The stranger raised a fist.

Pain erupted in the back of Callisto's skull. Stars littered her vision as she plummeted to the ground. The stranger entered her swirling sight, accompanied by another cloaked figure who grasped a staff equipped to crack skulls. The stranger fell to a knee, pressing weight into her abdomen. Her chest heaved under the sudden force as the man captured both of her wrists.

"You plan to kill me, right?" Callisto's voice, full of confidence, betrayed the panic that was racing through her blood. "My parents—they'll find you. They'll turn you inside out."

The man's hands squeezed tighter around her wrists as it began to rain.

Sweat, mixed with the rainfall, trickled down the side of Callisto's aching head. A lump formed in her throat, taut with anxiety that begged her to act rather than speak. Her eyes darted left. She counted three figures, with a fourth emerging. To the right, five more. She would *talk* her way out. Intimidate them as Father taught her. "How about—"

"Your *parents*." Spit, reeking of rot and cigar ash, fell onto her face in tiny droplets. It was warm on her skin, like the radiant heat of a freshly felled animal. "I'm not going to *kill* you," the man cackled, his eyes wide. "That would be a waste."

"Then it would be in your best interest to let me leave." Confusion tainted what little assertiveness remained in her voice. The man did not reply. Callisto's heart sank. "I'm *very* forgetful, you know," she sputtered. "This—this *never* happened."

"I beg to differ." Color flickered in the stranger's eyes—a wrathful orange that glowed like the dying embers in a firepit. "You won't forget this night for as long as you may live."

The man stood to his feet, wiping his palms on his cloak. Callisto, astounded by her sudden freedom, began to backpedal. Her hands grasped muddy rocks and tree roots as they pulled her away from the man and his horrible eyes. "Leave me be," she begged. Rain battered her face.

"You think me a fool?" He cackled. "We are all too aware of your crimes, *Mardagayl*—you and your wretched family. Countless members of this court gone, slain in the name of human tradition." His band of cloaked figures revealed themselves, more than a dozen stepping from the shadows. "It's a fair trade. You shed our blood—you kill our own? So be it." He pulled the soaked hood from his head. A wildness barely contained itself behind the features of his scarred face, aching to reveal themselves under the moonlight. "An eye for an eye, a heart for a heart."

He chuckled. "Humanity for *humanity*."

Werewolves, she realized. *They're a cult of accursed.*

"I swear, I'm not worth your time or worth *eating*—"

"I would rather rot than plunge my teeth into your putrid flesh," he barked. "I expected a hunter of such caliber to be familiar with the processes, but I digress." He gnashed his jaws, displaying carnivorous teeth, cramped tight in his mouth. "There are plenty of ways to curse."

Callisto shrieked as *hands* sprouted from the earth, gaunt and mummified. Impenetrable black coated their exteriors, dull, irreflective, and all-swallowing. Bony fingers flexed, producing cracks and pops between the joints.

"And you, doomed girl," he hissed, "will find yourself immolated."

White hot pain surged through Callisto's shape as one of the hands gripped her left forearm. It was like fire, melting through steel and cloth as if it were never there at all. It twisted outwards, an ache that latched onto every part of her, heavy in her limbs like lead. Rancid and sour, the sharp scent of charred flesh began its assault on her senses.

A brand appeared in the stranger's hand, the kind fit for stamping livestock, sparkling a brilliant silver. The image on its end was unreadable and, markedly, unheated. Before she could protest, it was pressed into her shoulder blade.

It was worse than the hands. It quickly sunk past skin and muscle, shoving itself against bone. Sickness spread from the brand as it was finally removed and she vomited.

Something deep inside her—a primal feeling that she somehow knew was causing the migraine—urged her to bite.

Sharpened agony branched from the front of her face as something erupted from within it, paired with a deafening crack. The bones in her arms and legs felt like they'd been shattered and reformed past the limitations of her anatomy. Pinpricks exploded across her skin, burrowing into her very follicles.

A shape she had seen many times before, with its twisted lupine head, lunged towards her. The stranger—or what had once been—slashed its claws along her face, halfway blinding her. Callisto, reborn, licked her lips to discover teeth, sharp and curved and knifelike. Her newfound jaws crunched into the opposing beast's muzzle.

I'll kill you all.

Hot blood clung to her mouth. Its iron taste filled her with energy. Carried by instinct and limbs that felt disconnected from her own body, Callisto bound away, abandoning the cult and its vile instruments.

Twigs smacked into her face, wet with fresh rain. She had to get away from him.

That *man*.

Aellur cast itself upon her bleeding face. Sounds were louder, colors—sharper. New smells were *everywhere*. A persistent growl swelled in her chest as if it had made a home in her ribcage. Her thoughts scrambled to find purchase within her slippery mind.

After some time, a building appeared in her path, surrounded by scents that produced an ache in her chest that rivaled the pain in her shoulder blade. Tired legs carried her towards it, sinuous, lanky, and bent in ways that made Callisto want to collapse. Mud clung to her feet, joining the burrs that had built up around her ankles.

As she reached the doorstep, the pain in her eye flared, throbbing within the orbit of her skull. Her full sight had not returned. No matter. A door lay ahead—the door to her *home*, she realized.

It was smaller than she remembered. Blood rushed to her head as she pushed through the doorway. Tripping over a pair of wet boots, she fell to her knees. Her ears swiveled to catch the sudden sound of a voice to her right. Based on the faint scent of charcoal that came from the fireplace on rainy nights, it came from the den.

Father?

She shot to her feet, smacking her head against the ceiling. Indeed, Father was in his chair, but something was amiss. Callisto approached, toppling furniture with each step. Father seemed upset, shouting fragments of words that didn't quite reach her.

Father, she pleaded. *There is something wrong with me.*

He pressed himself deeper into the chair as she closed the distance between them, eyes wide and trembling. Again, he yelled. Again, Callisto did not understand.

It feels like my thoughts are leaking out onto the floor. Callisto's hands—large, knife-like things that trembled with anticipation—reached towards him. *Help me.*

He froze as they laid themselves upon his shoulders, bunching up the fabric of his shirt. His skin lay beneath it, tender and soft—thin, like paper. Her black lips lifted into the cruel mimic of a smile.

I missed you, Father.

The ringing in her ears subsided and if only briefly, Father spoke.

“DIANA, PLEASE—”

Callisto's mind went blank.

Hot liquid poured onto the floor, mingling with the wood grain that she could feel beneath her feet. Wind bristled the fur on her back. The door must be open. In that voiceless silence, she dared only to stand still and breathe as she awaited the blackness in her sight to fade—to figure out why her hands and chest and mouth were so, *so* warm.

His scent was palpable, mingled iron and meat and tears—that was her father who had lolled back into his lovingly worn chair. Sleeping, she first thought, but his eyes were open, surfaces blurry as if he hadn't slept at all.

A fresh burn rippled through the muscles of her back. With a yelp, Callisto swung to face the source, flexing her clawed fingers. Yellow eyes met hazel.

“Callisto?”

Mother.

There her mother stood, drenched in rain, her face twisted with confusion and horror. The brief reassurance Callisto felt was instantly smothered by the axe, stinking of silver, that sat comfortably in her mother's grasp. Father had called for *her*.

Most importantly, Callisto had returned empty-handed.

Mother, there were men. They hurt me. I ran.

“You—you did this?”

What do you mean? She glanced towards Father. *He won't wake. Something is wrong.*

The burning returned as her mother plunged the axehead into her chest. Callisto fell back with a cry, reeling at the sizzling noise that came from the wound. Mother started shouting, just as Father had—incomprehensible, yet so, so angry.

Why? she begged. *Why won't you listen?*

“You killed him!”

Callisto froze.

What?

Her eyes returned to Father's chair, painted in reds and browns and—

Oh.

Oh gods.

The axe found her flesh again, near her shoulder. She clawed against the hardwood floor.

"Leave this house or die," came Mother's voice.

I love you.

"Leave or die!"

I'm sorry.

Glass shattered as Callisto leaped through a window. She ran without destination, away from the wailing that came from a place she had once called "home."

The monster threw back her head and howled.

It did not dare to look back.



The Beast of Gevaudan

by Annah Lovette

1st Place Winner (Visual Arts), Gunard Carlson Contest

Sweet Dreams

by Jillian Hodge

1st Place Winner, Gunard Carlson Contest

Every war begins with silence. Silence until the first shot is fired or the first explosion lights up the world with a sickening shriek. What would make the third World War any different? When the rumblings of World War III first arose, it brought along many memes and running jokes. No one's laughing now, though. One day there were only rumors of the coming war. The next there were missiles in the sky, searching for a home on American soil.

The United States had been too divided within themselves to do much more than argue over their opposing political viewpoints. It seemed that as soon as the war had begun it was over. The war ended the same way it started... in silence. The United States was reduced to a shell of what it had been, and the remaining survivors gathered in the center of the U.S., taking refuge in what remained of South Dakota.

The aftermath of the war had left the United States with a toxic and harsh environment that was next to impossible to live in. Using parts of old buildings and automobiles from the surrounding areas, a dome was constructed to allow survivors to live and thrive in until the earth had healed enough for them to live freely about its surface.

With the building of The Dome completed, the ragtag society decided to set up a government of their own. An election was held, and Briggs Fordworth, a scientist who was employed by the U.S. military during the war and responsible for the planning and creation of The Dome, was elected to be their leader.

In a way, the survivors had felt indebted to Briggs. He was, after all, responsible for the establishment of their new home. So, it was no surprise that Briggs' demand for the people of The Dome to submit for monitored "therapy" sessions was met with little resistance. The survivors filtered into The Dome's main hospital in orderly lines.

The lights were a blinding white, and rows upon rows of cots and beds were spread in tidy intervals throughout the entire one-room hospital. A large machine was positioned next to each bed with elastic tubes and wires wrapped around the posts on the front of the computers. A single nurse in bright blue scrubs led groups of four into the large room, assigning them each a bed. They settled themselves in, and the nurse attached wires with soft, sticky pads to their foreheads.

She inserted pristine silver needles into the patients' forearms. A thick silvery liquid had begun to filter through the thin tubing when the nurse pressed a series of

buttons on the monitor. The liquid flowed through the tube in a continuous stream long after the patients had fallen into a peaceful sleep.

That was when Briggs took over. As the nurse moved away to medicate the next round of patients, Briggs would visit each of the machines, manipulating the individual's brainwaves until they were linked with those surrounding patients. This was the part of the treatment when Briggs placed people into the Dream World. A society entirely of his creation, one so genuine and perfect that no one questioned whether it was real.

* * *

Briggs had been on his own for fifteen years now, but he didn't mind. With everyone preserved in the alternate reality he had created, there was no one left to keep him company when he left the Dream World and lived in the Real World. It was better that way, though.

Nothing prevented Briggs from visiting the Dream World whenever he pleased, and, when he left, he would just tell the others he was going on a business meeting outside of The Dome, attempting to build foreign relations and reconstruct the United States to its former glory. Though this was far from the truth, his lies weren't hurting anyone. On the contrary, they were helping.

The world he had constructed was a perfect version of The Dome. The land and people were healthy, and everyone got along. Everyone's appearance was frozen in the same state as when they had first entered the Dream World. Everyone was happy in the world he had created, and what gave him the right to take that happiness away from them?

Originally, Briggs had planned to allow people to go to the Dream World in designated amounts, spend time in both the Real World and his perfectly crafted utopia. However, the more he allowed patients into the utopia during the treatment's test run, the worse their depression was when they reemerged in the Real World. The patients longed to be back in the pristine utopia... so when the opportunity came along for Briggs to help others experience that same happiness, how could he deny them that?

Occasionally, there would be a hiccup in the system. One of the older citizens would pass away from natural causes or one of the tubes feeding the patients would disconnect, and the patient would starve to death. To deal with this, Briggs would have to manually add the person into the Dream World's coding, creating a coded clone of who the patient used to be. The system wasn't perfect, but it wasn't anything Briggs couldn't handle. For the most part, everything in the Real World and the Dream World stayed the same. This was why when a patient went missing, Briggs could only gape at the empty bed.

* * *

When Nova woke up, the first thing she noticed was the silence. Her eyes had peeled open with a heavy slowness, as if she hadn't used them in years. The deafening silence

caused a shrill ringing in her ears. Her neck ached as she glanced around. Nova's heart skipped a beat when her eyes observed the rows of sleeping people. They all breathed in the same labored rhythm.

Nova's head spun in confusion. Hadn't she just been sitting on her living room couch with her family? How did she get here? The metallic grind of a sliding door startled Nova out of her thoughts. She couldn't stay here... wherever here was. Her eyes panned quickly about the room, and her gaze landed on a small window about a foot from the ground.

In her hurry, Nova didn't notice the pads and wires taped to her head. They pulled taut when she tried to move, locking her in place. Nova ripped furiously at the wires as she stood. Her feet landed in a cool liquid that squished under the soles of her feet. She glanced toward the ground, noting a stray tube lying a few feet from the machine. It continued pumping a silver liquid onto the cement, coating the area around her hospital bed in thick goo.

A lock clicked in the distance, and Nova didn't waste any more time. She sprinted to the window, prepared to break it if she had to. Nova pressed her hands against the window, prepared to force it open, but her reflection caught her attention. She couldn't help but stare in shock. Nova did not recognize the person who stared back at her. The last time she had seen her reflection she had been a petite seven-year-old with a thin layer of fat rounding out her face. This person staring back at her couldn't be Nova. She didn't look this mature. Gone was the layer of fat that rounded out her cheeks. It had been replaced by sunken cheekbones and black and blue bags underneath her chocolate eyes.

Nova ran a hand along the side of her face, gaping at her own reflection. She jumped as the door to the room she was in had begun to creak open. Her hands gripped the base of the window, prying it open.

A batch of icy air stung Nova's skin as she clambered through the small opening. The goo on her feet began to freeze as it met with the cold air. She sprinted through the dying grass. It crunched beneath her toes, scraping the bottoms of her feet raw. Nova's lungs began to burn from breathing the cold air, and sweat ran in jagged trails down her face.

A thick band dug into Nova's ankle as she moved to take a step. She fell hard onto the ground, blood erupting in a bitter stream from her nose and mouth. She spit out a wad of grass as an object collided with her head, knocking her unconscious.

* * *

Nova's forehead throbbed in an uncomfortable rhythm, and she tasted blood in her mouth as she regained consciousness. She reached toward her aching temple, but her hand didn't move. She tried to turn her head but to no avail. Nova couldn't move anything other than her eyes. Someone coughed behind her, and Nova felt her heart clench.

She jumped in surprise as a woman appeared in front of her. The woman bent down to get a closer look at Nova. Having completed her observations, the woman took a step back, glaring in Nova's direction.

"Didn't think there was anyone else left," mumbled the woman.

"Who are you?" demanded Nova.

The woman ignored the question. Instead, she paced the length of the small room, leaving a trail of dusty footprints behind her.

"There hasn't been anyone new for fifteen years. It's been so long I assumed everyone was gone."

The woman ceased her pacing for a moment.

"Where were you hiding out?"

"Tell me who you are first," said Nova.

The woman was silent for a moment, holding Nova's gaze just long enough to make her insides coil in uneasiness.

"Charlotte. I created the safe house we're in now."

"Safehouse? Why would you need a safehouse?"

The woman—Charlotte—leaned in until she was inches from Nova's face.

"I answered your question. Now you answer mine."

"My name is Nova, and I wasn't hiding out. I was sitting on my couch and then..." Nova trailed off.

"And then?" demanded Charlotte.

"And then I wasn't on my couch anymore. I was in a room with hundreds of sleeping people. I heard someone coming, so I ran."

Nova cringed against the back of her chair as Charlotte reached behind her, removing a small knife from her pocket. Nova squeezed her eyes shut as she waited for the sting of a wound that never came.

Nova opened her eyes as the bonds that held her captive fell away. Charlotte stepped away from Nova, moving toward a hole in the wall and beckoning for Nova to follow.

"Where are we going?"

"Nowhere special."

* * *

The room Nova was led into was just as shabby as the last. A small group of people were gathered in the center of the room, sitting around a wobbly table.

“All right, listen up,” said Charlotte as she barged through a door barely held to the frame by its hinges.

The light chatter that filled the room moments ago was squashed by Charlotte’s voice. The group had set their cards and drinks onto the table instantly, turning their full attention to Charlotte.

“We have a situation,” declared Charlotte as she clapped Nova on the shoulder. “Nova here is from The Hospital. She’s one of the Sleepers.”

“Hospital? Sleepers? I don’t understand,” said Nova.

A petite blonde girl with braided dreadlocks piped up from the corner of the table.

“You were in a medically induced state of sleep. Your body was asleep, but your mind was in a simulation of The Dome. It was part of a mental health treatment plan.”

“This place doesn’t look anything like where I came from. Maybe being in there wasn’t such a bad thing,” said Nova as she glanced around the room.

“It’s only a good thing if you don’t mind being trapped inside your own head with no way out,” replied the girl.

“Nova being here proves that people can be woken up,” interjected Charlotte.

“Great. Except we don’t know how to wake people up. Remember what happened last time?” said the blonde girl.

“What happened last time?” asked Nova.

“He didn’t even make it out of his bed,” answered the girl.

* * *

Briggs dragged a hand along his scalp, glancing at the sleeping patients. He dropped the tubes back into the goo, moving toward his study attached to the side of The Hospital. He sat on a couch near a darkened window, attaching wires to his forehead and spinning a dial on the machine that was next to him. The number 15 glowed on the dial, and a clock began ticking down the minutes as Briggs was sucked into The Dream World.

* * *

Charlotte’s crew didn’t have any issues when they snuck into The Hospital. No one was awake to catch them. Nova led the group, leading them to her bed at the end of one of the many rows. The group examined it for a moment, picking up the tubes and wires Nova discarded during her escape, hoping to uncover the secret to waking people up. Charlotte ran her hands along it, feeling tiny punctures in its casing.

“There’s holes in this,” said Charlotte. “The fluid must’ve started leaking out.”

“We don’t have time to waste weening people off it. Briggs would notice,” said one of Charlotte’s group members.

“Then the only other option we have is to mess with the machine.”

“I thought you said you already tried to wake someone up that way and it didn’t work,” interjected Nova.

Charlotte ignored her and turned toward the machine.

Nova reached out to stop Charlotte from pressing buttons, but she was too late. The woman who was attached to the machine began to thrash and convulse.

* * *

Briggs walked through the pristine streets of his utopia, searching for a clue as to how someone exited The Dream World. He paused at the end of a narrow street where a woman stood watering her flowers. Briggs glanced away, turning to walk back the way he came. When he turned to leave, his eyes landed on the spot where the woman had been watering flowers moments ago. The hose she had been using was left running on the lawn, but the woman was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

Nova stumbled away from the bed. Fear rippled through her chest in nauseating waves. Charlotte continued pressing buttons until the woman stopped moving and her breathing stopped entirely. Charlotte cursed under her breath, preparing to move onto the next bed. Nova stepped forward to block her path.

“Wait. I’ll... I’ll try to figure this out. Maybe my subconscious will know something after having been in the Dream World.”

Nova took Charlotte’s place and tapped the machine’s screen with the tip of her finger.

It lit up with a hum, and Nova stared at the screen in confusion. The icons on the screen made no sense to her. She picked one at random. The liquid began to flow into the body faster. Nova stopped the sequence she had activated, carefully deciding on the next button to press. A vacuuming sound erupted from the machine as she pressed the next button.

Startled, Nova stepped back as the liquid began to drain from the tube, and the boy who was connected to the machine began to twitch and gasp for air. The vacuuming stopped, and the body laid unmoving on the bed sheets. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the body’s chest had begun to rise and fall evenly. His eyes opened seconds later, and a relieved sigh filled the room.

This was when the door to the lab slammed open to reveal Briggs. He charged toward the group, but he was not strong enough to fight them all. They pinned him down, strapping him to the bed, and inserting a needle and tube into his arm. Briggs didn’t try to stop the liquid from flowing from the machine into his body. His eyes closed shortly after.

Nova stared at Briggs for a moment. The others walked from bed to bed, waking people up from their slumber. Nova's feet carried her away from the lab, taking her into Briggs' study. She looked around the room, and her eyes caught on an envelope placed neatly on top of the desk in the corner. Her name was scrawled neatly in its center. She opened it and pulled out the letter inside.

Nova,

After Mom and Dad died in the war, you were so devastated and scared. I wanted to help you, but I've never been good with emotions. So, I turned to science and created a simulation that I could control. I suppressed your tragic memories of The Real World once you were in The Dream World and allowed you to live without any knowledge of Mom and Dad passing or war destroying our home.

You were at peace there. Happy and healed. I couldn't justify denying the kind of peace and happiness you experienced to others. I know there will be people who will paint me as a monster, but I did what I thought was best. I would do it all again to make you happy.

I love you,

Briggs

Nova dropped the letter as she fell onto the couch, messing with the machine to put herself in The Dream World.

When Nova appeared in The Dream World, she knew something was wrong. The vibrant colors of the world were dulled to a gray. The streets were cracked, and buildings were caving inwards.

Briggs stood in the center of the deserted road. Neither one spoke. They just stared at each other. Finally, Briggs stepped forward, wrapping Nova into a bone crushing hug.

"What's going to happen to you?" whispered Nova.

Briggs glanced at the gray sky, sighing as the world around them began to crumble to nothing.

"I'm going to be with Mom and Dad."

Suddenly, the pressure of Briggs's arms around her was gone, and Nova awoke on the couch in her brother's study.

Tapestries

2023-2024

Weaving the Threads of
Creativity & Innovation

