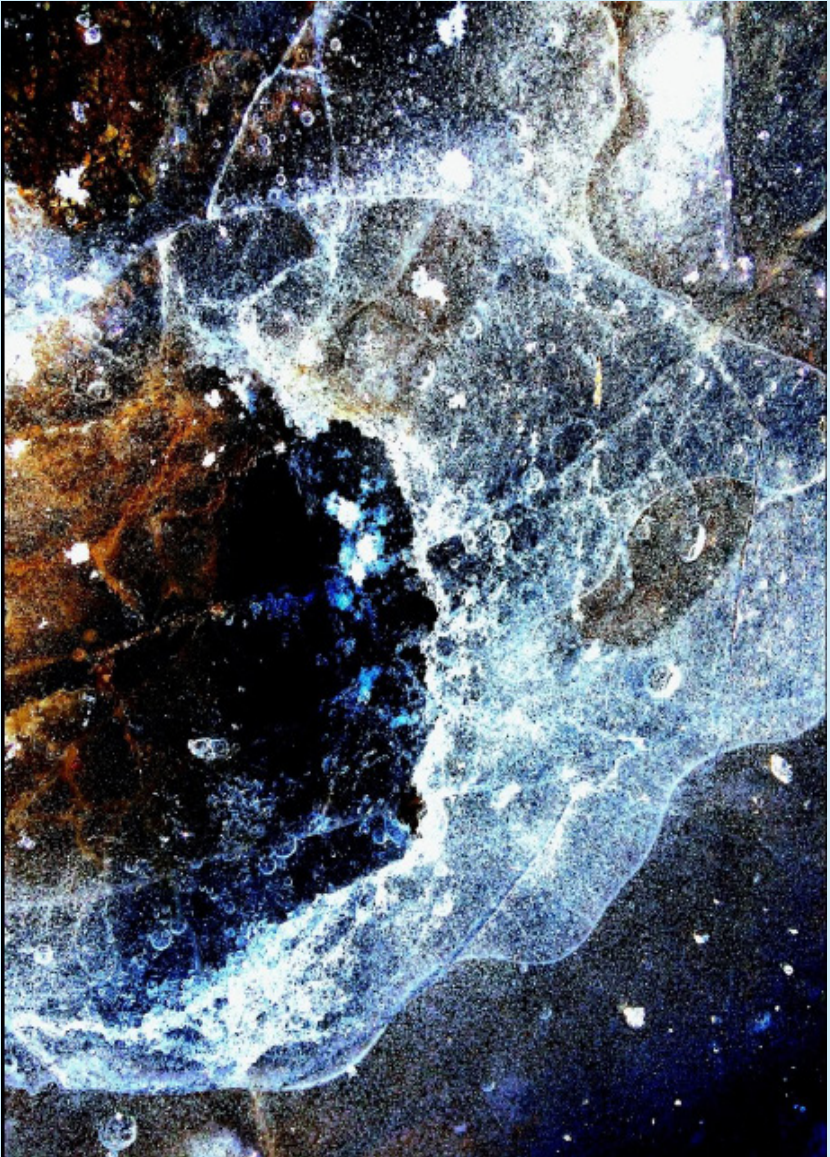


AMPERSAND



Utica University, 2022

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For more information about Ampersand submission guidelines and the Joseph E. Vogel Award, please go to page 136.

Table of Contents

Poetry

<i>Dylan Bennet-Thompson</i>	6
<i>Elizabeth Elow</i>	7
<i>Isa Hudziak</i>	8-11
<i>Alma Jasencic</i>	12-15
<i>Kayden L.</i>	16
<i>Megan Nolan</i>	17
<i>Olivia Nole-Malpezzi</i>	18-24
<i>Danae Rivera</i>	25-28
<i>Kim Robson</i>	29-31
<i>Anabella Rossi</i>	32-34
<i>Haley Simon</i>	35
<i>Jasmine Sonia</i>	36-37

Art and Photography

<i>Leola Beck</i>	39-41
<i>Hollie David</i>	42-43
<i>Gabriella Hudziak</i>	44-45
<i>Dr. Jeff Miller</i>	46-53
<i>Jasmine Sonia</i>	54-59

Fiction & Prose

<i>C.B. Buckwild</i>	61
<i>Conor Hennessy</i>	76
<i>Gabriella Hudziak</i>	81
<i>Isa Hudziak</i>	82
<i>Kayden L.</i>	109
<i>Anabella Rossi</i>	115

<i>Contributor Biographies</i>	131
<i>Ampersand Submission Guidelines</i>	136
<i>(Bolded names indicate a winner or honorable mention of the Joseph E. Vogel Award for fiction or poetry)</i>	

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Poetry

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Opening to Nothing

by Dylan Bennet-Thompson

Feet hit the ground.
Left, right, breath in, breath out.
A man runs.
Quick glances over his shoulder.
There is something old in these woods.
Older than man.
It is intangible, but it hunts.
The branches grab at him, biting at his skin.
There is a clearing,
Water trickles over the rocks ahead
He turns to face it
There is nothing
But it is there
Palpable
Crushing
He is consumed....
Nothing is left
Nothing returns.

Midnight Butterfly

by Elizabeth Elow

You flutter by, like a butterfly
Wings so blue, like the midnight sky
Oh, my heart cannot deny, the terror I feel
must subside

Delicate and intricate woven to perfection
Not a detail missing from the reflection
You flutter by, like a butterfly

Here, there, traveling everywhere
With little care, you must beware
Oh, my heart cannot deny, the terror I feel
must subside

You haunt me day and night
Appearing out of the midnight sky
You flutter by, like a butterfly
Oh, my heart cannot deny, the terror I feel
must subside

Model What You Expect*by Isa Hudziak*

My third month

Of the fourth grade, I turned in homework
late.

Dissatisfaction from my teacher showed in her
Eyes when I told her, and her
Look told me that I would be getting a zero.

When I was pulled into a fight during lunch, my
History teacher from fifth grade gave me an
Assignment to finish that night. During class, I
Took a short walk at her urging to calm down.

Years have passed since I was in elementary
school, but

One time in sixth grade, I got a low grade on a
math test

Until I asked, "Can I correct this?" and was told,
"Yes."

Every teacher creates a memory in your brain,
but

X marks the ones that carry the most weight from
Parts of school where I felt like I could learn from
Every mistake I made and grow to make every
error

Count towards my future classroom where
students won't be afraid to

Try again and know that they will grow too.

Differences

by Isa Hudziak

equality
eight letters
meant to equate
things together that are
 not the same at all
why would we give Billy glasses
because Andy wears them every single day
when Billy has perfect vision in his records?

equity
six letters
that offer kids
what they are lacking
like letting Andy sit in
Billy's seat in the front row

justice
the solution
is to eliminate
the barriers between students
and promote a diverse curriculum
that educates children on important things:
why equality and equity exist in society

memory/reality*by Isa Hudziak*

I never knew metal could
suffocate/tear/bruise/capture
my finger until I was married to him
the days when they were
threaded/caressed/treasured
when they were held years ago by her

when I dream it's of kissing lip gloss stained teeth
my nose brushing softly against hers
now I have nightmares of blood caked stubble
when the teeth that grind into my lips are his

I reconcile the scent of airy/floral/sweet perfume
my only fond memory of childhood is of her
the thought of children resembles a
chain/shackles/anvil
when it is threatened to hold me to him

when I said my vows it felt robotic
my body programmed to become entirely his
now I repeat them to photographs
when I say them I wish the response was hers

silence of the library

by Isa Hudziak

Second Place, Joseph E. Vogel Award, Poetry

Sitting in the library when you're miserable
 Doesn't make you feel any better
 If anything, you feel more alone
 Because the silence causes those sad thoughts
 To pound in your head, like someone knocked
 over a bookshelf
 And the books are hunkering heavily against your
 hurting heart
 If you try to cry, people will hear you sniffle
 And then you'll have to explain that you don't
 have a cold,
 If they even ask at all, that
 You're just sad.

The scratch of a pencil against thin paper,
 The hum of the yellowing lights above your head,
 The lemony smell of cleaning supplies,
 The whirl of the printers,
 Become
 echoes in
 the cavernous,

H o l e

That you feel in your chest
 As you try to slyly wipe your tears away and
 replace
 The volume of your barbed thoughts with
 Ambience instead of papercuts

I Have a Dream of World Peace

by Alma Jasencic

I have a dream of world peace
A world where people are treated fair and equal.
A world with no differences between wealth and
societal statuses.

I have a dream of world peace
A world where there is happiness and kindness.
A world where people have their needs met.

I have a dream of world peace
Where people of all walks of life can have a future
of Love, success, and accomplishments.

I have a dream of world peace
Where different languages, cultures, and
ethnicities
Bring us together, rather than the sadness of war
and violence.

I have a dream of world peace
Where people can have uncomfortable
conversations
To bring about the change that is needed.

I have a dream of world peace
Where children can learn how to paint, play an
instrument,
And ride a bike, rather than learn how to survive
famine.

I have a dream of world peace
Where families can enjoy concerts and activities
Rather than listening to the cries of children and
sounds of explosions.

I have a dream of world peace
Where humanity is held on higher pedestal
Rather than monopoly gains and political
interests.

I have a dream of world peace
Where our leaders care more about saving the
oceans
Rather than securing oil pipelines.

I have a dream of world peace.
This should be our reality.
The reality in today's world is far from what my
dreams consist of.

My History

by Alma Jasencic

I never knew what the word *refugee* meant
Until my sister had to define it.

I never knew what war was
Until my grandfather had to describe it.

I never knew what genocide consisted of
Until my mother had to characterize it.

My *history* begins in Bosnia,
But my life was brought into America.
I hear stories from my parents about
The genocide that had taken place in
Srebrenica '95.

The gist of the entry stems from
My mind from when I was a young girl.
It becomes instilled into the minds of younger
generations
Who are suffering from war and genocide in the
year 2022.

Leaders take pages from the books of war,
Take pages from mine where peace is valued
greater than
The love for violence.

ABORT THIS FAIRYTALE

by Alma Jasencic

To the politicians who have their head in the clouds with your right-winged klan I want you to know my body is not yours to lobby or legislate. Abort this fairytale you have of being Able to dictate who can live in womb And who can be evicted.

To the politicians—the power you hold can be addictive, but there is no room in my womb for you to have the choice to pick and choose what I can and cannot lose.

This is not about your god mentality,
I am not just some entity,
I am a woman with no autonomy over my own body.

To the politicians—my choice seems to be overshadowed by your political voice,
When will you learn this decision is private and personal, a decision that doesn't need permission from a politician.

I feel as though all you want to do is get in my business.
Respectfully I will have to decline your nonsense agenda,
Unless that agenda discusses issues such as, Equal pay for all sexes and races, fair housing for people of color, universal healthcare, mass incarceration, or any other human rights issue,
Then have a seat and *sit like a lady* and get this fairytale out of your mentality.

The Pathway*by Kayden L.*

Full of twists and turns,
Life can often give you burns.
Darkness may seep,
Which makes you weep,
For your heart, for more, it yearns.

Others set your course,
One society does endorse.
College, family, like all the others;
Hopes and dreams, the pathway smothers,
The same ideas, they reinforce.

Fear of failure, motions of doubt,
Supposedly cured, by taking this route.
And though the path seems the only choice,
Never be afraid, to shout your voice,
It's the way happiness can sprout.

Take new ideas, walk in new directions,
Let your choices be your own selections.
If you miscalculate,
With no one, debate
And make your own reflections.

So color outside the line;
Let your true desires shine.
Life is too brief,
Don't fill it with grief!

The Marigold Beside Me

by Megan Nolan

I read once that gardeners plant marigolds next to vegetables because they aid their growth. A marigold provides protection and support to the vegetable.

Essentially, it helps that tomato, pumpkin, cucumber, squash or other planted veggie thrive more than it would if it were on its own. In its own way, a marigold brings companionship, hope, and love to the vegetable planted beside it.

This being said, whoever the gardener was that planted you next to me knew exactly what they were doing.

You are my marigold—the one who helps me thrive and grow,
The one who supports me, protects me, and loves me.

With you planted beside me, I am steady, strong, hopeful and ever-growing.

As a “growing vegetable,” I thank you for being the marigold by my side,

And as a human being, I thank you for being the person by my side.

The Tempest*by Olivia Nole-Malpezzi*

My womanhood has not been sweet
Nor delicate
My heart is a tempest,
My mind on the wing
With desires unfurling
Not in the soft way of rose petals
Or ivy vines
But like thunder, crescendoing
In the wake of an electric spine
I do not lament the chance of rain
Or fear resentment that my
Awakening brings to those
Who curse themselves to live beneath
Their clouded dreams
This is the nature of being
Such a mighty,
but misunderstood thing
And I will not be predictable
Though some may try their damndest
to claim an end to my reign
Let them know next time around that
forecasting is just bad fortune-telling
For I have just begun ascending
From this damp, but hallowed ground
To find my place among the Gods
In the violet of a vast, unending sky
I am finally becoming
I am woman
And you will hear me
Thundering, by-and-by

White Goddess

by Olivia Nole-Malpezzi

I was born under the new moon
Blue as the body's highway veins
I am drenched in shadow
It drips like bath water off my paper flesh
I have made a home in it like a toad
Under a flat rock
This shadow of mine
The foaming, billowy tide is pulled back
By the gravity of the White Goddess
Exposing a coarseness
Shards of sand and beer-bottle glass
Cut your toes if you step
Too close
Pressure makes softness sharp
And I, diamond-hearted woman full of blood
Am pulled as well
My mind's tide too, waxes and wanes
See me, know me if you dare to
Step close enough
I wish to be full again, if I ever once was
Under this shadow there is
Is the soft child
Who is still in love with the idea of love
Seasons shifting, pained phases
A baby is always born on the day of a funeral
And I shall be reborn from my own death
My truth exposed
A curtain is drawn
And the darkness
Narrowed down into an eyehole
Round like an attic window
I am new to this nakedness
Full as a belly
A beacon of blinding light
See me, know me if you dare

The Worm and the Whale*by Olivia Nole-Malpezzi***1st Place, Joseph E. Vogel Award, Poetry**

There are days when I feel so small like a worm
flattened beneath a shoe,
left to die in the cracks of a wet sidewalk.
And the smell, I hate the smell of rain worms.
It is the smell of being forgotten, walked over,
unseen.
Like a silence that rings deafening, the
wondering: “am I enough?”
as I cling to my bed sheets half-fearing,
half-hoping to fall off the Earth.
When I explained this in a passenger seat outside
the bar
to a nice boy I cannot love, he told me: “even on
your worst day,
you could never be a worm.”
He said I was a tulip because that is what nice
boys say,
but I do not want to be a flower.
Flowers get stepped on too, snapping their
vulnerable little cellulose spines.
And if not that, they are picked from their dirt
beds by a stranger,
desired only for a short while until beauty fades
from the eye.
Then they, too, are forgotten on a windowsill in a
dry drinking glass.
Flowers do not survive love. To be loved as a
flower is a death sentence.

No, I am not a tulip.

I think I would like to be a blue whale.

She is the largest thing to ever live, yet rarely
seen or heard from.

She lives out her life quietly cradled in the arms
of the ocean

and if she were to never be loved by another,
she would still have the cold-salted sea.

The only thing more enormous than she,
a great and godly thing she can belong to and not
be owned by.

No, I decided I am not a worm beneath a shoe,
or a flower waiting to be picked.

I am a blue whale, held together by something
more powerful

than my fears could ever dream,
and I am swimming.

Always swimming toward the heart of it all,
Vast, dark, and deep.

Russian Doll

by Olivia Nole-Malpezzi

Oh, little Russian doll
How safely you were tucked away
Like the yolk of an egg
Or the pearl of a shell
Hidden gem of a damp cave
You kept quiet so well
They almost couldn't tell
But little Alice,
You kissed the lips of a bottle,
Drank me
My blood, my air, my love
Until your own belly swelled
The fruit plucked
From its root
I was merely the dirt
For you, my seed
My Russian doll
How I long to keep you safe
How I wished you'd never leave
If they could open me
At the waist
Halved like a pepper
A Pac-Man face
They would find you still there
The outline of your frame
Cashew-shaped
The root cellar is haunted
The furnace moans and aches
Breathing a warm embrace

Just in case
The world is too cold for you
Like a Russian doll,
I had to make myself enormous
to create a space to keep you
It was for you that I was made
And as you grow,
So too the space that kept you
It is for you,
I will be remade
Again and again and again.

To Move and Be Moved*by Olivia Nole-Malpezzi*

I want to burst forth, like the breaking of a dam.
Like water overturning ancient rocks
that have slept in the same place
for hundreds of years.

I want to always be water and never the rocks.
But even I know, that in this life we are both.

For there are moments in which we move
and moments in which we are moved.

And maybe that is enough,
for water and rocks still touch the tops
of mountains, where there is a silent life
that exists without the presence of
human touch.

May I learn the ways of that kind of love
and be brought to my knees

in order to understand
that I am singular and whole, as I am.

May I live as a child of my own heart,
holding on tightly to the world's hand.

Oh great warring queen, do you love me so
by Danae Rivera

Coarse like stardust and ichor
Cut my hand if I dare caress

The prettiest things we wish
Ask for such blood to touch

Sweet moon,
There's an ache in my chest
An empty echoing that hallows me

Worlds I own and worlds I've burned
My cup is filled with smoldering embers
Ash streaking down the sides in a molten glow

The sun painting the backwash of my quest
To have everything at my fingertips
That is real desire is it not

Yet the moon escapes me
An idle tune that sits on my shoulders
A sweet, soft touch I feel in dreams

How else could I pass my days
waiting for you,
sunrise to sunset
without carnage

Its so cold waiting for the day to pass
There are never enough fires to warm me
Not when I miss you sweet moon

Atop a spire I found so pretty
A last link between the sun and the earth
They were lovers I heard

The green of the world
gardens they cherished
The blues of the oceans
Tears they shed apart

With the same spire
Maybe I could see you

Perhaps you're warmer up close
Perhaps I might freeze

Whichever
I hope it consumes me

There's a whisper at the peak
An idle tune
A soft touch
That aches me to my core

'You'll destroy yourself'
It whispered

*'Oh, great warring queen
Of all the rage and all the fire*

*When will you be warm
When will you be soft*

*Do you miss it?
The foreboding feeling
What it's like to have an empty cup unbroken*

*Tell me,
War raging queen
When the moon is new and I am gone
Absent from a sky so blue and deep
Shall you miss me?'*

*"Yes" I whisper,
'How long' she asks
"Days and nights are all the same and I'm falling
apart"*

*'Does it not hurt?
The days of carnage
The worlds of wood and stone you burn*

*Oh, great warring queen
When will you be mine'*

*Sweet moon,
I am always yours*

*Without you there's an ache
And I only know the crackle
Of smoldering embers under my heels*

*'Fizzle down for me, my supernova
To die so all your little pieces will be mine
To scatter a constellation in the big blue sky you
yearn for so*

*So every cycle I turn
I will always have you in my eyes
The blind devotion your temptation caused
Will always lead to your destruction*

*So pretty and perfect and messy like war
You've pained and torn to meet me in a spire for
lovers
Rest your carnage and be the one I yearn days
and nights to see'*

Dear Unmarked Grave

by Kim Robson

Dear unmarked grave,
I'm sorry I could not save
You

As I step through the forest
I ponder your
Name

I may not know much
But I know you were loved
Once.

Leper

by Kim Robson

I feel like a leper in my own flesh
I feel pus pulse through my veins
And ooze through my wounds
I feel my flesh squelch like that of an overripe
 peach
My tongue, wet and pink
Feels cauterized at the stump
My arm, pale and plump
Feels like exposed bone and rotting meat
I feel like a leper in my own flesh

Midsommar

By Kim Robson

Midnight sun.
Funeral pyre.
Painted walls.
Ancient writings.

Sacrifice.
Death.
Birth.
Grief.

Burning.
Screaming.
Crying.
Release.

The Dog

by Kim Robson

It was October 28th when I saw the dog.
It was my birthday when I saw the dog.
It was a mound of half rotten flesh, the dog.
Its ribcage splayed like a young bride, the dog.
In eve it was gone, the dog.
In dawn it reappeared, the dog.
It haunts only me, the dog.
I still have the nightmares.

Witch

by Kim Robson

Witch.

Witch.

Witch.

Accusations with burning tongue.

Trial with burning stake.

The tension is palpable.

A somber tone slashes the air.

Pleading does not help

When those around you

Have made up

Their minds.

Mint

by Anabella Rossi

Somehow I always forget that the simple act of
placing
a white, green-flecked breath mint onto my
tongue
and tasting the stinging sweet wintergreen
will rocket me back to my parents' first home
and the mint plant that grew wildly against the
back of the house—
the one my mother let me pick and taste at my
leisure
like I was a feral child in the wilderness,
scavenging for food through my mother's lawless
garden.

Other times, the biting, strong taste of sugar-free
spearmint
will pull me into my grandfather's rusted red
pickup:
him in the driver's seat, rumbling along the
highway
with the windows cranked down to flood wind
into the cramped,
crumb-filled cabin to combat the crushing,
smothering, summer heat,
and he would offer me a sugar-free mint,
which I would take gladly
trusting him when he told me that a mint
would cool down my mind
along with my mouth.

The Death that Follows The Cold

by Anabella Rossi

How seldom do the birds sing of life and growth
once the ground turns blindingly white.

How seldom do my mother's eyes retain their
sparkle of diamonds and wit
once the temperature plummets itself to an
icy, frozen death.

How seldom do I see the barren trees wobble and
creak in the biting wind
once the ice creeps up their trunks and
freezes their branches still.

How seldom do I see my father wake with life
guiding his worker's hands
once the sky is covered in the gray
patchwork quilt of winter
that never seems to move.

How seldom does the white glow of distant sun
grace our eyes
when the days shorten to make room for
the dark demands of night,
seeping into our sunless days.

How seldom does my sister experience the bite of
winter winds,
while I can feel my body grow cold as each
day of frozen hell passes,

knowing her immunity will not last forever.

How seldom do I forget that Dante's ninth circle
was a frozen wasteland of miserable
sinners.

How seldom do I forget that we may pretend to be
alive
when the long, dead moths of winter
arrive, but nature tells no such lies.

The symphony

by Jasmine Sonia

With the onset of a performance comes silence,
As does the onset of a storm.

The kids that once filled the stage take a seat,
The birds quit practicing their melodic tunes.
And for a moment time stops, as you wait for the
first note to be played.

The world holds this moment of silence in
anticipation.

Everything goes dim, and then the symphony
begins.

This Storm was different
Louder and more vibrant than any before,
It left everyone who could hear it breathless.
The old creaky cherry-stained rocking chairs on
my porch swayed in the wind on either side of a
little oak table.

As if they were dancing to the melody.
I watch my metal windchimes rattle and clank
together creating a little tune.
The once Rhythmic sound of raindrops hitting my
old metal roof was no longer such,
But now a long purr, as if a snare drum were
being played by a professional percussionist,
never skipping a beat.
The lights flash with the loud crash of cymbals
soon to follow.

The sky was engulfed by a beautiful display of
streamline lights that bent, twisted, and crackled
in every direction, leaving the hairs on my arms

at attention.

Watching this show with front row seats was
nothing short of enchanting.

The lights would flash lighting up the evening sky
and I would begin to count

One.... Two...Three...Four....CRACK!

Four miles away I tell myself.

Next thing I know I am being dragged to center
stage,

By the person who knows me best, who knew
front row seats weren't close enough.

The music surrounded me in the empty street,
Watching the light fill the sky, feeling the warm
rain brush against my cheek, and drench my
flower covered dress entirely.

I had become a dancer in this beautiful
performance, splashing and jumping on stage,
feeling the emotion that came with each note.

The show soon came to a close but there was no
applause,

I stood there in silent admiration for what had
just unfolded,
and how quickly it disappeared.

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Art

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Photos

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Photography by Leola Beck



Look Up



Gleam

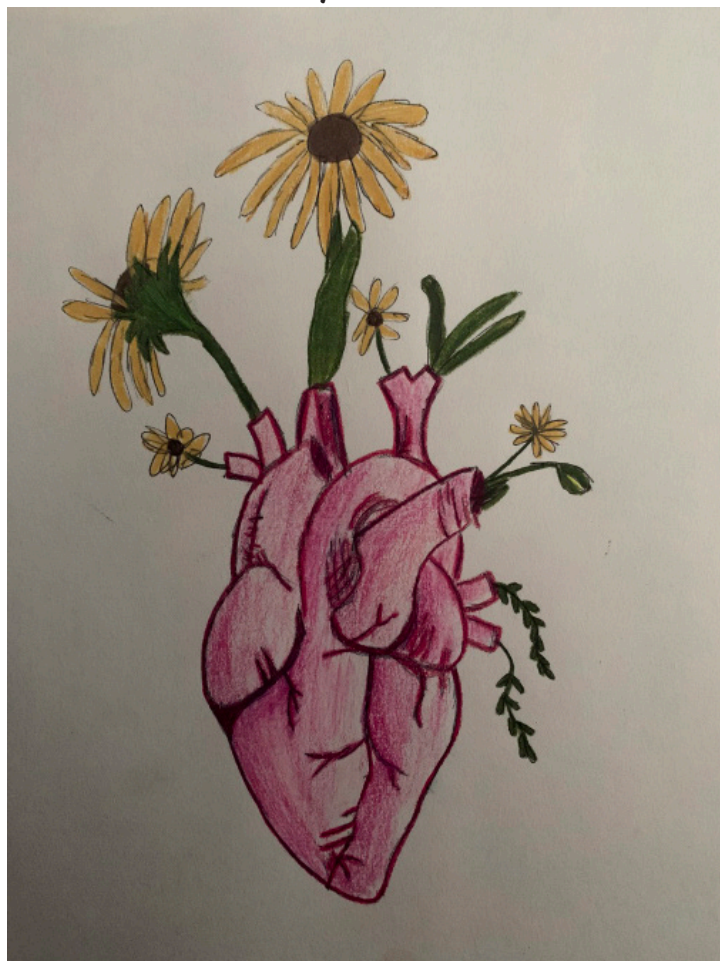


A Quiet Place



Waiting for the World

Artwork by Hollie David



Growing on Me



Thoughts

Artwork by Gabriella Hudziak



In the Kitchen



Safiya 'n Bebby

Photography by Jeff Miller. Ph.D.



Cicada



Did it take long to find me (Cat Stevens, 1971)



Lokadhātu



Maitrī (loving kindness)



overnight visitor



tsukubai (Syracuse, NY, 2021)

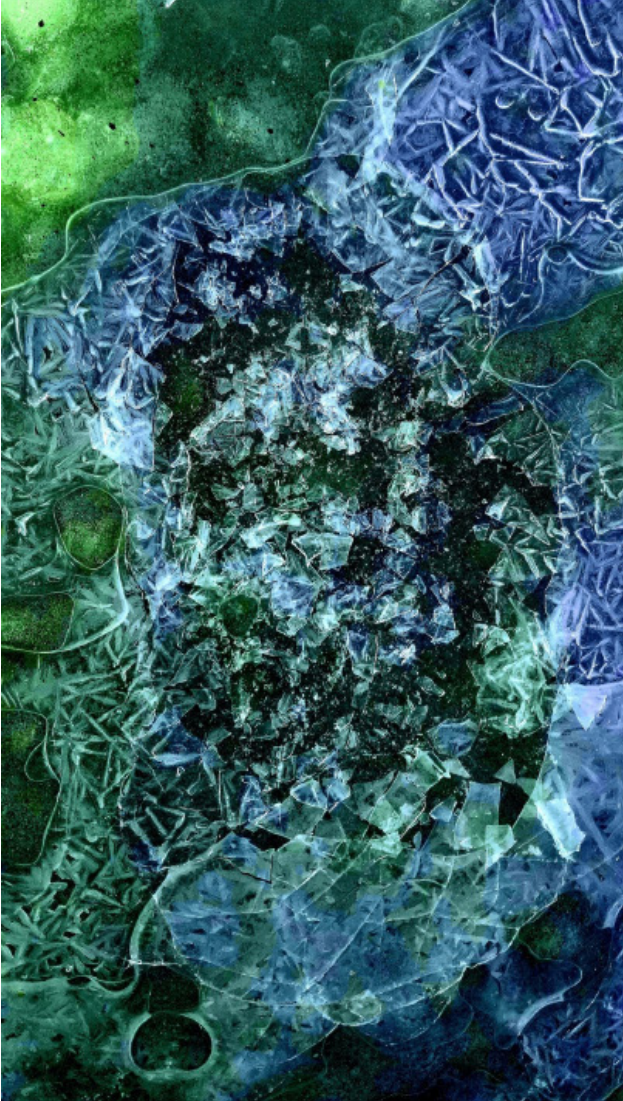


We shall by morning Inherit the earth (Plath, 1959)



massuka

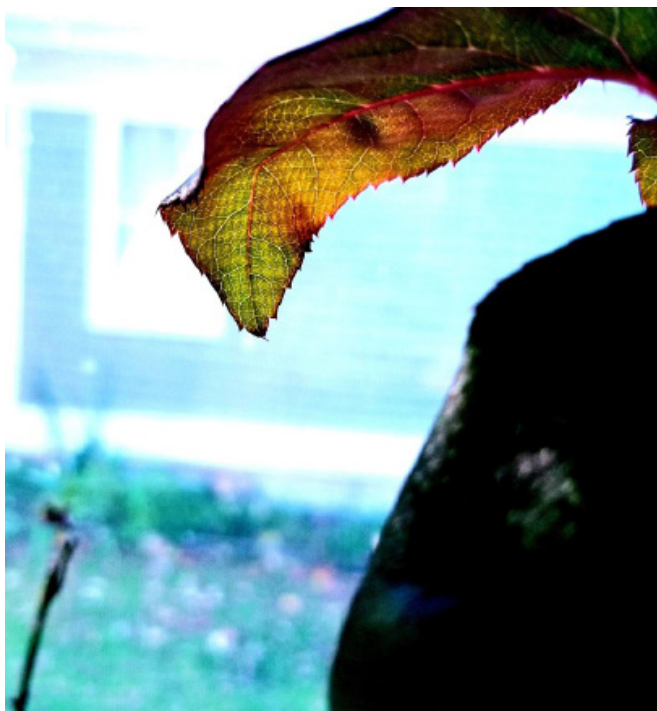
Photography by Jasmine Sonia



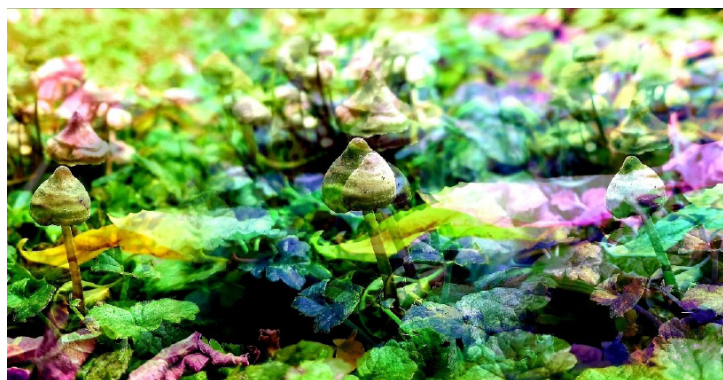
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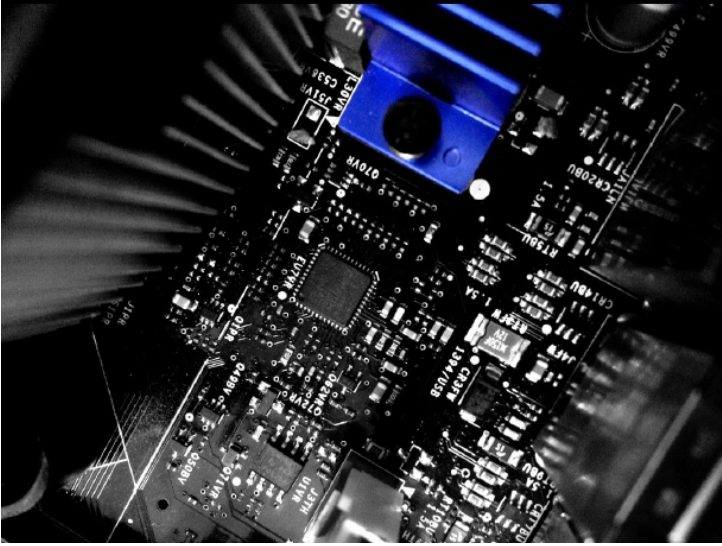
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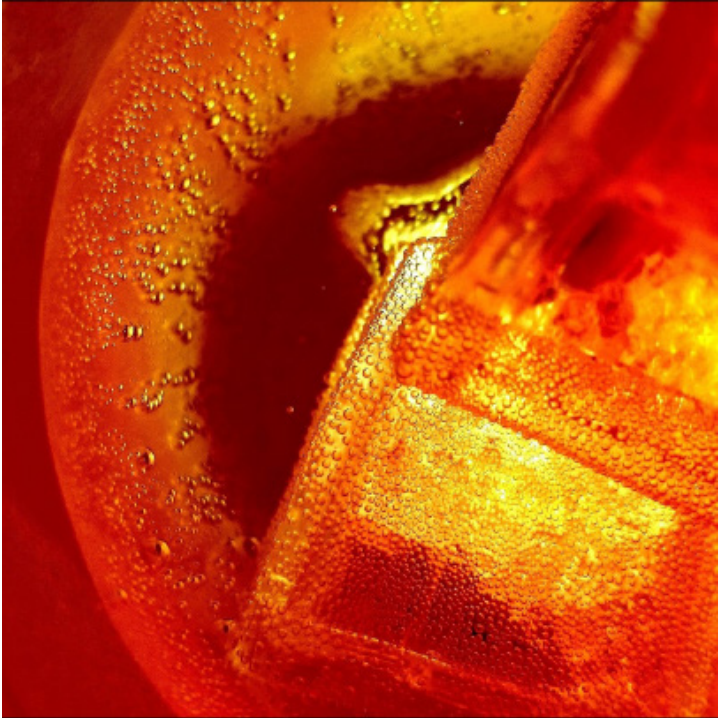
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Prose

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Fiction

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Thunder Wing

by C.B. Buckwild

It was a cool summer's day. The day that changed my life forever, the day I encountered something that seemed to be in the wrong realm, a god-like entity that was in the human realm.

It was the middle of August, I had just risen from my bed and was getting dressed into a pair of blue jeans, a black plaid shirt, and boots when I heard a call from downstairs.

"Andrew, come on! You'll be late for your hunting trip with your girlfriend's brothers," my mom yelled.

"Yea I'll be right down, just finishing up here. Get my bag by the door please!" I yelled down to her as I pulled the last boot onto my right foot and began lacing the shoe.

After finishing with my boot, I headed downstairs, throwing my grey Nike hoodie over the shirt I was wearing while checking my pockets for my keys to my truck and my phone (thankfully they were both there).

"You ready, got everything?" My mom asked as she handed me my bag (a small backpack packed to the brim with supplies and food) and my water bottle.

"Yes, I am, thanks for getting me my bag. I will see you in a couple of days, ok?" I responded.

"Yep, go have fun!" She replied cheerfully.

"I will," I said and headed out the door, heading to my truck and opening the door on the

driver's side, I threw my bag on the passenger seat and turned the key over in the ignition, slowly backing out of my driveway and then driving down the street. Within a few minutes, I was on the back roads in the country.

"I hope I can impress them this weekend," I thought to myself as I drove down the roads, lots of twists and turns being made.

After a half-hour of driving in silence, my phone began to ring. I slowed down to the side of the road to pick it up.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey Andrew, where are you, buddy? We're waiting for you at the entrance to the hunting camp," A gruff voice answered on the phone.

"Oh! Sorry Cyrus I'm almost there, I think I just need to make another right. I hope," I replied worriedly.

"Alright. You should see our truck from the road since we haven't gone in the entrance," Cyrus replied.

"Alright got it, see ya guys soon!" I responded before hanging up. I slowly got my truck back on the road and kept driving for about another 10 minutes when I finally saw their truck parked on the side of the road so I pulled over and parked.

"There he is! Finally," Cyrus laughed as he walked over, his brother Damian following in tow.

"Good to see ya again Andrew, how's the journalism job?" Damian asked me.

"It's... It's going alright," I replied kindly

with a little of a quiver in my voice. Damian and Cyrus always poked fun at my job because it was considered “Uptight” to them.

“Alright! Well, start your truck back up and follow us. The hunting camp is just up the road,” Cyrus yelled as he and Damian hopped back into their truck and began moving up the dirt road.

I started my truck again and slowly followed them for about five minutes and we arrived at the hunting camp, it was a pretty open area with an oak wood cabin, a small pond, a wide-open field for a backyard, but the most interesting part was a small clearing next to the pond. In the clearing stood an old Indian totem pole. The craftsmanship and age of the wood totaled it to be a couple of hundred years old.

“When I bought this hunting camp, the seller said that the old totem pole was made by a group of the Sauquoit tribe that lived here,” Cyrus answered, staring up at the top of it.

“Impressive, I recently had to do an article on Native American folklore and it said that desecrating anything made by a tribe can lead to curses and supernatural phenomenon,” I replied.

Cyrus couldn’t help but laugh, “Don’t be stupid now. That’s all just myth!”

“Probably, but you never know. Besides, didn’t the seller warn you about that?” I asked.

“Of course he did but the dude was crazy anyhow. Now come on, we got to get things unloaded and situated. Damian ain’t gonna wait

for us,” Cyrus replied and headed back towards the truck. I followed behind him quickly and just as I got to the truck I felt a chill race down my spine. I turned around and I saw the top of the totem pole in the distance, it almost seemed as if the bird’s head carved on the top of the totem pole was staring back at me.

“Andrew come on!” Cyrus yelled from down the trail.

“Coming,” I replied and headed down the trail, turning my back to the pole.

Over the next few hours, we all worked together to set up the camp. Once we were done, the camp went from an area of land with a cabin to being filled with an outside grill, snares tied up on the trees for small animals, and even a huge pile of firewood next to a newly made fire pit (We made it while setting up using some rocks and a shovel to dig up some ground).

“Finally. Perfection has been achieved,” Damian laughed.

“You said it. Now let’s go fishing for a bit and see if we catch anything for lunch!” Cyrus answered and grabbed his fishing pole from his truck, heading towards the pond.

I grabbed my fishing pole as well as headed towards the pond, Damian following behind us. After we reached the pond, we all threw our lines into the water and sat on the pond’s edge, watching the water stir as our lines were bit and pulled at.

“So, what’s the top of the totem pole

suppose to represent?” I asked Cyrus.

Damian snickered as he listened to Cyrus’s answer, “Well according to the seller, Native American legend states the top of a totem pole must be carved with a symbol known as the Thunderbird or as I like to call it, Thunder Wing,” Cyrus chuckled. “But like I told you before it’s all myth and that nonsense.”

“Well, I don’t know man... The last time I heard of someone messing with a totem pole, they were cursed by *whatever* was spirited on the totem pole,” I replied.

At this point, Damian fell back, laughing so hard he was crying. “Oh my god dude your insane for believing that shit! It’s just a story, the only real stories are ones where people got proof it happened,” Damian howled as he laughed, practically wheezing.

At that moment, Cyrus’s pole bent down fast and his line began to pull away from us.

“CYRUS YOU GOT ONE!” I yelled and set the drag on his line.

“Oh shit! Finally! Alright, you’re mine,” Cyrus chuckled and began reeling against the fish, pulling hard against the fish as he pulled it closer to shore.

After about ten minutes, Cyrus got the fish into shore and it was a decent-sized bass. Damian unhooked it, weighing and measuring it.

“A foot long and about 6 pounds! Not bad Cyrus,” Damian said with a smile as he threw the fish on ice.

For the next hour, we continued to fish, only managing to catch two more but three fish was better than nothing! We all made our way back to the camp and within minutes I was cutting up potatoes and vegetables to be grilled together while Damian was currently grilling the fish we caught. Cyrus was still cleaning himself up but after a few minutes came out and made rice to go with the meal as well. Once we were all done cooking, we sat down and dished out the food between all of us, and began to eat. As we ate we cracked jokes about animals and told stories about our times during high school (Damian made a few jokes about my love life before I met his sister) as well as talking about how I went to college for journalism and how I ended up in the current position I am with my job.

“Man I still don’t understand how you and Jillian managed to become so close when you two were in two completely different fields. You’re a journalist and she went into construction management,” Cyrus answered as he finished his fish.

“Well, she was dating someone in my field who I thought was a nice guy... ended up being a real asshole and tried to make her throw away her dreams for him. I was the one who helped her finally get rid of him and leave him for good,” I replied and explained how Jillian and I went about against him, and eventually, when Jillian left him, it left us closer than ever.

“Your story sure is a sweet one. But you’re still an uptight butt,” Damian answered with a chuckle as he finished his fish as well and took a swig of a beer he opened.

“Shut up,” I replied with a small laugh and finished my food, taking the dishes and cleaning them after.

For the rest of the day, we spent time divided between the snare traps, rifle practice, and fishing. Eventually, the day turned to dusk and then dusk tonight and we found ourselves sitting around the fire, roasting pepperoni sticks and cracking jokes about a variety of topics.

“So then I tell the officer I don’t care what you say, that buck’s fucking coming home with me whether its legal or not!” Cyrus said, howling in laughter as he finished his beer.

Damian fell over laughing, clearly already gone from drinking so much (He’d been drinking since lunch) and I was just sitting there laughing as I drank my NA beer (not a drinker and I don’t want to be one.)

“Oh my god, that story never gets old! Alright, you guys chill here I’m gonna take a piss,” Damian said with a hiccup and staggered to his feet, stumbling away towards the bushes and back of the campsite.

“You think he’ll make it back alright?” I asked.

“Oh, he’ll be fine Andrew. Don’t worry about him,” Cyrus replied as he opened a soda, done with drinking beer.

“Yea, your probably right. So how come you never finished college?” I asked, this was a conversation that had come up earlier in our topics during lunch but he didn’t want to talk about it. I’m guessing it was because Damian was around.

“Well, two reasons. One was because the college was offering me the help I needed in my classes, the other reason was because of money. College is a good thing but not if it squeezes every drop you got out of your savings and allows rich kids to be pushed along, barely passing. It’s ridiculous,” Cyrus answered, his tone changing from calm and collected to rougher and angered. His face hardened and no longer in a smile, but a neutral look with his eyes saying it all.

“I’m sorry man. I hope you know not every college is like that. Hell, look at the one I go to! It only cares about people who want to learn. I’m sure if you applied there you could finish your degree in agriculture,” I replied to him, locking my eyes with his to show my seriousness to the response I gave.

“You think so?” Cyrus said, his eyes seeming to show a glimmer of hope.

“Yea! Once this trip is over I will talk to the Registrar for you and get you in contact with them. I promise,” I answered with a chuckle.

“Thanks, Andrew, you’re alright. My sister was right to be with you,” Cyrus replied, a smile coming across his face.

At that moment, Damian stumbled back

into the area from the bushes, laughing and hiccupping.

“Well, he’s done his business. Let’s get him inside,” I said to Cyrus and helped Damian stay still, Cyrus nodded and grabbed Damian. Together the two of us helped inside the cabin onto a bed and then we each crashed inside the cabin too, Cyrus crashed on the other bed while I crashed on the couch. The night went by peacefully, but the morning was a whole other scenario.

The next morning, I opened my eyes to the sound of the pitter-patter of rainfall. I sighed as I stretched, going to the bathroom and taking a shower. Once I finished I got dressed into a fresh pair of jeans, a white collared polo shirt, and my boots. I made my way outside onto the cabin’s porch, watching the rain come down harder and fiercer by the minute. I was about to get up when a loud thunderclap echoed through the sky, startling me back into my chair on the porch.

“Strange... thunder sounded but there’s no lightning. I wonder why?” I thought to myself curiously but immediately shrugged it off, assuming the lightning happened behind the cabin and I just didn’t see it.

I made my way back inside to see the brothers up, getting ready for the day. They also seemed to be packing up things a little.

“How come you guys are packing up?” I asked.

“Well if the rain doesn’t let up we are

gonna need to cut this trip short sadly,” Cyrus answered.

“Yea, nothing good happens in the rain. Especially with thunder,” Damian added, packing his old clothes and bathroom supplies.

“Understood,” I said with a nod and began helping pick up.

A couple of hours passed, the rain continued to pour and we began to take things to the trucks. It was a shame the trip had to be cut short but nothing we could do about it. However, the trip was about to take not only a dangerous but crazy turn next.

“Guys you got every—” I was saying when suddenly I heard a snap from a tree. I looked up to see major rustling from a tree and instead of a branch or two falling, the whole tree was coming down!

“What did you say—HOLY SHIT!!!” Damian yelled and shoved me to the ground as the tree fell just beside up, slamming into the cabin, destroying the front of the roof and the porch.

“What the heck happened? Lightning didn’t strike it!” I shouted in disbelief, that’s when another thunderclap echoed in the sky.

“Cyrus you ok?!” Damian yelled towards the cabin, worry building in his voice.

“Yea! I’m heading out the back now!” Cyrus shouted and within seconds appeared around the side of the cabin when yet another snap was heard.

“GET DOWN!” I yelled and pushed both

brothers to the ground. We all watched as another whole tree fell, crashing into the cabin.

“What is happening???” Cyrus asked, astonished at the turn of events.

“I have no idea but we got to go!” Damian yelled and headed for the truck.

“He’s right! Let’s book it!” Cyrus yelled and sped for the truck as well.

I nodded to both of them and raced for my truck, getting into it and turning on the engine. Once the engine roared to life, I hit the gas, and alongside Cyrus and Damian, I sped out onto the highway.

A few minutes of silence went by, the rain still falling and thunderclaps still being heard in the background. Suddenly I got a phone call from them.

“What’s going on guys?” I asked, keeping a firm eye on the road.

“A storm wasn’t supposed to happen. Yet we got one right now,” Damian answered.

“Well, that’s the weather for ya, it’s not always correct. Let’s just get home—” I replied when suddenly something slammed into my truck, sending me swerving to the side of the road.

“Andrew what happened!” Cyrus yelled over the phone.

“I don’t know, something hit me!” I replied in shock and that’s when I saw it. Something was flying and slamming into the road next to us. I looked closer at it and the head of the thing

turned to stare at me. Its big black, demonic eyes stared straight at me and its wings flapped with great strength, causing another thunderclap to echo.

“Andrew are you—WHAT IS THAT THING NEXT TO YOU?!?!?!” Damian screamed over the phone.

“I don’t know! It looks like an eagle or a condor or... SOMETHING!” I yelled back.

I couldn’t believe it... The thunderclaps... were coming from this monstrous beast next to me. The beast turned its head away from me and suddenly a realization hit me...

“Guys... THIS THING IS A THUNDERBIRD!” I yelled through the phone.

“WHAT? NO WAY WE ALREADY SAID THOSE THINGS WERE A MYTH—” They yelled back over the phone.

After a moment, I watched as the creature dashed towards their truck, flying high in the sky, extending its huge crane-like talons and dropping down, grabbing ahold of their truck.

“GUYS YOU NEED TO TUCK AND ROLL!!!!” I yelled over the phone.

“WHY—” They both responded when suddenly I watched the creature violently shake their truck along the road.

“JUST DO IT!!!!” I screamed out my window, tired of talking over the phone.

After a moment I watched both of their doors fly open as they dived out of their sides of the truck, landing on both sides of the road.

As soon as they hit the ground, the truck left the ground. The creature flew high into the sky, taking the truck with it, disappearing into the clouds.

I immediately hit the breaks and opened the doors for them to get in. The two of them sped and ran into the truck, slamming and locking the doors.

“DRIVE!!!!” They both yelled.

Without hesitation, I hit the gas. We flew down the highway going at least 90 miles an hour when suddenly in the rear mirror we watched something dip below the clouds again.

“Crap it’s coming back!” I yelled and turned the truck to four-wheel drive and spun us to the side.

Within seconds we watched as their truck flew by mine. Their trucks slammed into the nearby brush, exploding in flames.

“Holy... HOLY SHIT!” Damian yelled, terror overtaking his face.

I pressed on, hitting the gas harder, now the truck was going at least 120 miles an hour. I shifted gears and it seemed we finally reached the edge of the storm as the sky started to brighten. “Guys we’re almost out of it! Just a little more!” I shouted in excitement.

Just then, a giant figure crashed in front of us on the road, bringing our truck to a screeching halt. The figure was the creature, now fully revealed to us. It was a bird with wings extending to extreme lengths, they had to make a wingspan

of at least 40 ft or more. Its head was arched back, black and purple feathers surrounding its dark black soulless eyes as well as being the natural feather color of the entire bird's body and a dark brown beak curved for its mouth. Its talon's long and sharp, almost like crane claws. The bird stared down at us, its eyes peering at us like it was looking right into our souls. Suddenly, the bird's beak opened and a voice echoed.

"Foolish Humans.... You desecrated the sacred land! For that, your punishment is death!" The bird boomed.

"What? Who could of—" I began to say when it hit me, I immediately looked over at Damian and my eyes narrowed, Cyrus was doing the same.

"Ok so I might of...soiled the totem pole-" Damian said.

"YOU WHAT-" We both exclaimed at Damian.

"Hear me out! I was drunk and thought it was a tree! Don't be upset!" Damian replied.

"DESECRATION IS DESECRATION! FOR THAT YOU'LL PAY!!!!" the bird echoed and roared, the sky becoming black as night due to the storm clouds.

"Wait! We all make mistakes! That's why we are human! If we promise to never step foot on your land again, will you let us leave?" I asked the bird.

The bird just stared for a moment at our truck and us. After a moment, the bird took off

into the sky. The sky brightened as the dark clouds dispersed and the rain slowly dissipated. They were now on the highway on a bright and sunny August day.

“Did we just imagine all that?” Damian asked in shock.

“No way, that was all too real...” Cyrus replied.

“Look, let’s just vow never to speak of this again!” I shouted.

“Agreed.” They both replied.

And so we did, we returned home and to our own lives, never stepping foot in that camping land again... and no one said a word! Until now...

Transitioning

by Conor Hennessy

This is a story about my transition out of the United States Navy and into being a college student here at UC. It is a story that is both unique to me and reflective of the struggles so many veterans face upon leaving The Service. My transition, like many of my Brothers and Sisters before and after me, was difficult, but I did not realize at the time that I was struggling so deeply or that it was negatively impacting my relationships with my family (my parents, who I was living with at the time). I know that my struggles were not unique, and it is hard to say that I was not prepared by the Navy for the difficulties that I experienced, but at the time it felt like I was alone and had been abandoned by the system that I spent six years living in.

I got out February 20th, 2018, six years to the day after I entered boot camp. I had 19 days of leave (paid time off) saved up when I got out, so I had a nice two-week vacation before I started working again. I was already enrolled at Utica College, but would not start for another 6 months, so I got a job with a construction company building cell towers from raw land sites. I genuinely enjoyed the work, and the people at the company were beneficial to my transition; several of them were veterans themselves and there were a lot of similarities between my Navy Shipmates and my construction crew. Both

workplaces were male dominant, did not adhere to 'ordinary' HR standards, and involved long hours and hard manual labor, so it didn't feel like I was being thrown into a completely new type of work environment with the 'inside people' (that's what we call desk workers).

Fairly early into transitioning out, I started to struggle with my choice. I went to college right after high school in 2009 (SUNY Brockport) for one semester, followed by two semesters at a local community college, but my GPA did not have a number to the left of the decimal point. As I start settling into my new life, these thoughts start returning: how on Earth am I going to go through school again? The last time I tried it went terribly. I just left a good paying job doing something I genuinely enjoyed with people that I love for the chance of being an occupational therapist. I had traded a sure thing for what seemed like a pipedream, as my only frame of reference for college was riddled with failure, and I had just spent six years striving to avoid failure at all costs. I had gone from being a tactical craft coxswain, responsible for the lives of my four crewmembers and about \$3 million worth of equipment to living in my parent's basement making \$15 an hour chain-sawing raw land sites and pouring concrete, and about to enter an environment that I had failed miserably at previously. I felt like a loser, which began to manifest itself with destructive drinking and outbursts of anger at those who cared about

me. I was spiraling; I felt like I had finally made something of myself and in one fell swoop had ruined everything that I had worked so hard to achieve. These feelings reached their zenith on May 19th, 2018.

I don't remember the incident, but it was a Saturday night, and I was home for the weekend (we worked out of town, sometimes for weeks at a time for a cash bonus). I was feeling lost and despondent, so I did the only thing I knew how to do in this situation: I had gotten blind drunk, alone. I woke up the next morning at my desk where I had blacked out with my Smith & Wesson 1911 E-Series sitting next to me. I was alarmed when I noticed it was loaded, so I ejected the magazine and saw a round in the chamber. When I took it out, I saw that there was a light-strike on the primer (firing pin hit the primer on the bullet, leaving an indent, but not with enough force to ignite the powder). In my drunken stupor I had tried to kill myself. The only reason I am here today writing this is because I reload my own ammunition, meaning I get about one dud out of every 10 that I reload. Luckily for me, the round at the top of my eight-round magazine was a dud.

This happened over three years ago, yet I still find myself to this day perseverating on what happened. I have no memory of the incident as I said earlier, but I can't think of any other reason why I would have had a firearm, next to me, with a round in the chamber, with indications that the trigger had been pulled, other than I had given

up that night. During my time in The Service, three close friends of mine killed themselves, and all three of them did at least one tour in Iraq or Afghanistan. Their decision has (and continues to) bring up feelings of anger in me: why did they do this? Why did you take yourselves away from us, your brothers who love you dearly, your children who love you dearly, your family who loves you dearly, yet I, in a moment of absolute surrender, had made the same choice that they had.

I haven't had a repeat of that incident since. A few months after my attempt, school started, and I quickly acclimated to the demands of my new environment and found that I was a more than capable student. I am now (at the time of this writing) finishing up my first semester of the UCOT graduate program and have (to my eternal surprise) made friends and connections with both students and faculty that I hope to keep for the remainder of my days here on Earth. I have told this story to only four other people previously, but submitted a similar write-up for an assignment about how occupational therapy could be beneficial for veterans transitioning out of the military. After reading my assignment, one of my professors encouraged me to continue writing about my experience for cathartic purposes and encouraged me (if I felt comfortable) to begin sharing this story with others, as hearing or reading about an experience that they might have had could provide catharsis as well. I don't

know about all of that, but I do know that s/he was correct in that I do feel a greater sense of relief the more I let this out of me, so maybe s/he is right about sharing my story as well. It seems only fitting to end this with a thank you to that professor, so thank you [REDACTED] (name redacted for privacy) for everything you have done for myself and everyone who has walked through your classroom door. I am eternally grateful that the universe saw fit to spare me on the night of May 19th, 2018 and am hopeful that my story may reach someone who is having feelings that reflect my own on that day, veteran or civilian.

RESTART

by Gabriella Hudziak

STAGE: BARE EXCEPT FOR ONE CHAIR

[ENTER WITH CROCHET BAG, SIT ON THE CHAIR]

[RUMMAGE THROUGH THE BAG FOR YOUR CURRENT PROJECT]

[COMPLETE A FEW STITCHES]

[LOOK AT THE PROJECT, EXAMINE IT]

[BEGIN UNRAVELING IT]

[KEEP UNRAVELING UNTIL IT IS COMPLETELY UNDONE]

[REWIND THE YARN AROUND THE SKEIN]

[PUT THE SKEIN BACK IN THE BAG]

[LEAVE]

Now You Don't*by Isa Hudziak***Second Place, Joseph E. Vogel Award, Fiction**

Her hand, gloveless and manicured from showtime preparation, ran down the velvet curtain. The dimly colored material, coarse and weathered, often reminded her of the escapades around the theater she and her brother embarked on as children.

Arms stuck in the chipped vending machine, sharpie declarations of J & K WERE HERE, and white paint footprints across the stage

The antiquated dressing room with scuffed wooden floors and peeling floral wallpaper used to have a scarlet loveseat across from the door. The twins would hide behind the couch as best they could, stifling their laughter, but John's gangly legs were always too long to bend comfortably. He was always the first to give up hiding from the theater's owner, otherwise known to them as dad.

While John received an earful from their dad, Kara squatted behind the loveseat and tried to stay as silent as a mouse. If she cheated by using a silencing spell, that would be between her and the Grayson family magic.

Murmurs from a crowd quietly creep through the curtains to Kara's ears.

She nudged the hefty curtains with her right hand, slotting a watchful eye through the miniscule opening. Her heart jumped in

excitement when she spotted the spectators filling the brim of the vintage theater seats. Pulse quickening, the woman stepped back and allowed the cloth to fall back into place.

“The show will begin momentarily. Take your seats and hold onto your hats!”

As the nostalgic sound of the announcer’s voice met her ears, the elation bubbling in her chest nearly exited through her mouth in the form of a shout. She held her tongue, taking another deep inhale. She flicked her wrist in a circular motion, head bowing as her wand appeared in her grasp. A stereotypical possession for a magician, but she felt no need for embarrassment. The wand in her hand, carved from pine and polished to perfection, had been passed through the generations of the Grayson family. At the thought of her father, she couldn’t help the elevation of her heartbeat in anticipation for her opening act, much like the timer of a ticking bomb.

She raised her wand to eye level. Her long, nimble fingers curled around the castor tightly as she exhaled, pointing her hand towards an empty flower vase upon her table. The vase exhibited signs of aging, the porcelain decor cracked and faded. For most magicians, they would retain a button, a trigger of sorts in order to perform the illusion of a plant flourishing at the command of a mere spellcaster. She, however, pressed her lips together and uttered a simple command:

“Bloom.”

Within seconds, the vase gave life to a single rose. The flower grew and expanded, its soft petals dripping with vibrant hues and stem offering guard with subtle thorns. She nodded to herself in approval, confidence radiating off her in waves.

Her shoulders straightened, and she spared herself a glance in the mirror to the far right of the stage, hidden from audience viewing. Long gone was the choppy bob of her youth, replaced by a neat bun of pinned black curls. Her petite body adorned a simple costume: the regular pristine blouse, the navy-blue pinafore dress, and the exaggerated bowtie. The signature top-hat had shrunk in size and appeared as a small hair clip.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time to introduce Ms. Kara Grayson to the stage. She will dazzle you; she will amaze you—and her advice for you: never once take your eyes off her!”

In an instant, her body fell into autopilot. Her giddy nerves dissipated, an eerie calm washing over her muscles. The ancient pulley system of the curtains noisily squeaked, the familiarity of the sound comforting her even further. A mischievous idea planted itself within her consciousness: why not start the show with a little fun?

She waved her wand around and disappeared in a spiral of thick, vivid gray smoke. All she had to do was think, command, and her wand would do the rest. The curtains

opened to reveal an empty stage, wisps of her disappearance floating above the confused spectators.

She found herself in one of the balcony seats, legs crossed. The golden railing of the private area felt luxurious, illuminated by the beaming lights. She heard murmurs, and extended her wand into a long, thick staff.

She opened her mouth to speak, commanding her volume to project across the room. “Are you ready to be amazed?” She teased, blue eyes brightening at the startled bodies occupying the seats. She laughed, the sound echoing as she pushed herself up. A man from the audience must’ve spotted her, as she heard loud exclamations of her whereabouts. She raised a finger to her lips.

“Now you see me,”

As the spotlight turned to catch her, the sorceress lifted her staff and spun. She once again vanished into a veil of smoke, the spotlight piercing through the remnants of her stay. She spun her staff once situated upon the stage. She raised her eyebrows, lips parted in amusement.

“Now you don’t.”

A thunderous amount of applause sounded throughout the theater. Kara’s impossibly wide grin bared her teeth, her tongue poking through the gap playfully. She bowed. If there was one thing she was well known for, it was her ability to toy with the audience and make a memorable entrance. It was her specialty,

something her father, Zachary Grayson, had lacked. Throughout his ownership of the theater, the elder stuck to the traditional magic shows. Only once in an elongated span of time would her father surprise the audience with a special act, whether it be a special illusion or an impossible trick that would have critics scratching their heads.

“Shall we begin?”

• &&& •

“Thank you for joining me tonight!”

Kara’s laboring breaths expelled at rapid pace, sweat-slicked arms spreading in her bow. Her knees bent fluidly, right foot toeing behind her left. She watched the crowd through the luminous spotlight, squinting through the brightness. The applause rattled in her ears and brought satisfaction, even as her legs quivered. Performing in front of a crowd always spiked her adrenaline, the intoxicating feeling of energy which always pulled her back for more. The mesh of people, elders and children intermingling as they filed through the curtained exits, imprinted in her mind as another success.

The magician relaxed her shoulders, suddenly aware of the achiness of her back. She had spun extravagantly, pounced eagerly across the floorboards as sparks of magic poured from her fingertips. The adrenaline rush routed back to her mind, wide awake and ready to perform another show. Her body, however, became limp and uncomfortable in her sweat-

soaked garments. Kara always took this as a sign of success, despite the atrocious cramps and drained alertness she would be prone to.

“Kara.”

She twirled on her left foot, pirouetting to face her father. Zachary Grayson was by no means a petite man: he retained a slender stature and wiry limbs. His gelled black hair, so similar in hue to her own, glinted in the blaring stage lights and his smile-lined eyes were considerably downcast. His expression bore no lies, only the truth of dread and weariness, the signs of age visible in forehead wrinkles and creases indented into his tanned skin.

“Daddy, what’s wrong?”

“It’s John. He’s missing.”

The weariness of her limbs doubled. Her knees nearly buckled, causing a tremble through her slender legs. Her mouth, seemingly filled with cotton balls, dried instantly. Her muscles contracted, stature straightening considerably. Her knuckles whitened, the color stark against the mahogany of her wand. Eyes narrowing, Kara’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion, an inkling of dread visible in her expression.

“Missing? What do you mean missing?”

It occurred to her now that he had not been present before the show began. He had only been present, the small gap-toothed version of him, in her childhood musings. John had always been present for her previous, smaller-scale shows. Perhaps the excitement in her veins, the

rush of her heart, had echoed too loudly to notice that his bespectacled face wasn't backstage across from her. Thinking of it now, the woman stilled at the realization that she had not seen her brother for a week, at least. She had been filled to the brim with stress, preparation and paperwork for her entire schedule, that she had not even noticed the change of night and day.

"He's gone. I've been calling him for days and he hasn't answered. He did not show up for your performance, nor has he attended any classes lately. I called the school and all they could tell me was that John left the dorms yesterday, no reasons given!"

Kara's teeth began worrying against her bottom lip. Had she been that thoughtless that she hadn't even called her brother over the last couple days? She must've, and most likely, had been. She wrapped her hand around her father's forearm, tugging him gently towards the backstage area. She spotted a few interns nearby, lingering as they did their work, and she suspected they were listening in. She couldn't blame them: John had been at the theater as much as Kara, perhaps not as noticeably, but his presence couldn't have gone overlooked by the interns.

The pair walked in silence. Kara guided her father into her dressing room, the door embroidered with a bright golden star. She felt a pang in her chest when she remembered that John had ordered it especially for their birthday

last year. She cried when he gave it to her, and she handed him the book set he had been gawking for weeks.

The magician sat down upon her wooden stool, legs crossing as she stared up at her father through her eyelashes. She didn't bother taking off her makeup or attempting to undress out of her costume. Her priorities related to her brother's mysterious absence.

"No letter? Nothing? That's not like John! I'm going to find him."

"Kara, this was your opening night! Tomorrow you will have another show that you cannot miss! I'll go look for him."

It was these moments that reminded Kara how old her father looked. The white streaks in his hair and the tight, wrinkled hand holding onto his cane. He had children later in his life, after his magician career had been established, and it showed. She wouldn't let him run around town to find John. She strengthened her resolve.

"Daddy. John might be in trouble! I can't just... sit here and do nothing! I can track him with magic."

The woman stood and took her father's free hand. It felt leathery and chapped against her palm, but she could feel telltale trembles trying so hard to be hidden.

"Stay here and make sure the theater doesn't go up in flames while I'm gone. We'll be back before you know it."

A sigh was emitted from her father, so

miniscule and quiet that she barely noticed it. If not for his in-between expression of disapproval, desperation, and exhaustion, Kara may have missed the mood entirely.

She squeezed his hand tightly, eyebrows drawn in determination. She watched closely as her father's eyes closed.

“I will not stop you, Kara.”

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The midnight sky was obscured by a veil of fog. The thick atmosphere caused Kara to squint her eyes as she marched down the sidewalk. Her mind drifted back to her twin brother. It amazed her, still, how two people could share the same DNA, but still be extremely different.

John always kept to himself, a born and bred introvert. He found friends in book clubs and drama club crew, while Kara built relationships through gymnastics and singing recitals. She always had an air for the stage, the crackle of energy and warmth of spotlights. John preferred to stay behind the scenes.

Or, at least, that's the way it always was.

Her heels scraped the asphalt with each step, the noise breaking the overhang of silence. The weather echoed her sullen mood. After her conversation with her father, the young magician departed from the theater as soon as she could. She helped the interns and workers clean up after her performance, moving objects back into place and drawing the curtains closed securely. She had taken a deep breath, thanking everyone

for their hard work and departed for her small apartment a few blocks away.

The woman shivered inadvertently as a sudden onslaught of chilly air brushed past her body. She clenched her teeth together instinctively, muscles tensing. She forced herself to relax, muscles remaining tight as she shuddered. Weary, yet determined eyes fixated upon the door handle, to which she slotted the key and twisted to unlock the entrance.

Kara's apartment was far from extraordinary, but it was home. The darkened floorboards were covered by a small lavender rug, where multiple pairs of shoes were neatly lined up. The walls of her apartment were painted stark white, brightened only by the abstract art pieces her former college roommate had made before Kara had dropped out. The transition from college to a life of magic and spectacle was difficult, but worth it.

She had been eighteen and floundering in her nursing program, a career path she chose on a whim. Many told her that a career as a magician wouldn't be successful, and her worries grew. But the pressure of her classes sucked the life out of her. She would often lay on John's dorm floor sobbing as he tried to comfort her. A few major switches and tears down the road, their father called with a proposition: become his stage assistant and train to take over his position as the theater's main attraction. It had been an automatic yes.

John stayed behind in college. He helped his sister pack up her things and drove the hour trip to the theater to help in the ways that he could. He took to the lighting boards like a moth to a flame and offered quiet critiques on her set. His expertise in writing and promotional material came in especially handy when Kara's magician prowess budded into a career.

A man behind the scenes and his sister in the spotlight.

Shedding her thin overcoat, the magician slid off her heeled boots and heaved a sigh. She ran a hand through her unruly hair, the wind having blown each sweaty strand astray. As she stood by the now closed door, Kara solidified her determination. John was missing, and she had to find him. There was no question: finding him would become her goal. Rolling back her shoulders, Kara cracked her back and sat herself down on the small couch in her living room. Now would be the time to plan her next move: how would she find John?

She leaned back against the couch, when a thought occurred to her. Kara's fingers snapped abruptly, her petite body straightening immediately. Her eyes widened excitably. She pushed herself off the couch and rushed towards her bedroom, shouldering the door open distractedly and directing herself towards the closet. She pried the sliding door aside, peering inside for her desired object. Her pulse quickened when she spotted it: a navy-blue hoodie twice her

size.

Kara shut the closet a bit too hard, the sound echoing through her room and no doubtedly the thin walls of her home. She sat herself down on her floral bedspread, legs tucking under her in a kneeling position. She had taken her brother's sweatshirt from his dorm a few weeks prior, when she complained about the cold and he tossed it at her to, quite effectively, shut her up. The hoodie still smelled of John: the aroma of the seawater scented cologne she had bought him for their eighteenth birthday. She would use this to find him, to track him down.

The magician pressed her lips together firmly. Her thumb gently rubbed against the soft material of the garment. She closed her eyes, focusing on the hoodie in her hands. John had never been well-trained with his magic; his was significantly weaker than Kara's according to their father. He wouldn't have thought of blocking a tracing spell: would he? Weariness heavy upon her, Kara focused her energy on the garment between her fingertips. She could feel her brother.

The sound of low humming. The yellow light emitting from a streetlight. The blanket of fog. Kara felt the dull heartbeat of John, the thrum of his pulse as if it were in her own veins. Her eyebrows furrowed and she gripped the hoodie tighter. She could feel his leg, bouncing up and down in a repeated motion. She could feel the steady breaths escaping his chapped

lips, his half-lidded eyes. She gasped, suddenly, pinpointing his location.

The bus station.

Kara had always been known to walk slow in the hallways during high school. She would always be the one student who would appear in the classroom a split second before the final bell rang. She had been the athletic kid in P.E. that goofed off during an intense game of dodgeball, dawdling about and still maintaining above average marks. But at that moment, she sprinted. She tugged her boots on quickly, ripping the door open and missing the faint sound of it slamming shut as she bolted out.

She sprinted as fast as her legs would carry her. Her nerves teetered off the edge, the dryness of her throat causing it to tighten. She could keep a steady and speedy pace without breaking a sweat, but her panic hindered her performance.

She forced herself on, fists tightening and shaking with each catapulting step she took. It was as if her feet never once touched the ground, floating in the air and gliding towards her goal. John's waiting for her, waiting for someone to come and make him stay.

Why would he want to leave?

Kara could not fathom wanting to abandon their hometown, their city, their theater. The younger twin threw herself across the streets, panicked eyes scanning each bright green sign for the street name. Hamilton Street, the local bus

station. Faster, she urged herself, faster.

• &&& •

“I want to be a magician like daddy!”

A chorus of applause erupted through the elementary class. Her teacher, an elderly woman with hair clips and a sweet smile clapped her withering hands. For career day, each child was allowed to dress up as whatever they wished to be when they were adults. Kara had yanked her father’s jacket when she brought the flier home, and with shining eyes asked him if he could make her a magician’s costume. Zachary couldn’t keep the fondness of his expression hidden well enough and caved to her demand.

The young girl turned to her brother. He seemed smaller than her, curled into himself. His hands were clasped in front of him, his top hat nearly slipping off his crow’s nest of dark hair. Kara stomped next to him, wrapping her chubby fingers around his bony wrist.

“Johnny’s gonna be my assist.”

“Assistant?”

“Yeah!”

Kara’s wide smile overpowered anything John could’ve said. The boy peered at his sister, and seeing her delighted expression, nodded. He would be her assistant, if that’s what she wanted for him. He would be the best magic assistant ever! They could be a magic duo!

If only he showed signs of powerful magic.

Kara released his wrist and bounced away, humming the obnoxious theme to a pop art

cartoon as she approached her group of friends. John watched for a moment, and another, and another. Then, he turned back to his schoolwork.

• &&& •

“John!”

She spotted his hunched form on the bench. His gangly legs curled beneath the bench, ankles crossing in an uncomfortable fashion. His shoulders slouched, something that alerted Kara as completely wrong. John had always been the uptight sibling, the one with perfected posture and an impassive air. As she drew closer, she noted the large knapsack hanging off his left shoulder. Her stomach lurched uncomfortably.

“John!”

He finally took notice of her. She skidded to a stop, gasping for air as she collapsed on the bench. She wrapped her hand around her twin’s arm, eyes shaking and moving across John’s body. She drank in his appearance, the ragged attire- as if he had thrown them on because of a split-second decision. She gulped.

“Why are you here, Kara?”

His voice caused her chest to ache. His words were frosty and strained. The question, perhaps a hidden accusation, confused her. Her hand froze, and it took a moment for the words to truly register. When they did, the young woman straightened herself and launched her body at him. Despite the cold wind piercing her pale skin, she gathered her brother in her arms and embraced him.

“You can’t leave!”

The empty streets now occurred to her. There would be an early bus in a few hours, but the thought never occurred to her that John was merely thinking at the station. The heavy backpack told her otherwise. He planned to depart, to leave, to exit their stage. He had planned to leave her and their father and their theater and their friends without a single word. Without a note, without any idea what happened to him.

“Kara...”

She tightened her hold against him. She could feel his chest moving up and down through the thick material of his sweater. She could feel the warmth radiating off him. She could smell the nostalgic scent of cologne.

“You didn’t even notice I was gone until dad told you.”

Kara pulled away with an incredulous look upon her face.

“Of course, I noticed, dummy!”

She felt his large hands touch her shoulders. He pushed her away.

“I can’t do this anymore, Kara.”

“Do what John? Stay?”

She heard, rather than saw, the deep breath he took. His hands were shaking, but he stilled them. His bowed head raised to meet her steady and firm gaze.

“I’m not happy, Kara. I never was. I’m always in your shadow. There’s nothing for me

here. Don't you understand? I don't feel like family, I feel like an obligation.

It was as if vines had grown in her chest and spread through the cracks of her ribcage, squeezing until they fractured bone and impaired her breathing. She was breathing ice.

"An ob—no! John! You're being ridiculous! We can get you help, and then—!"

"No. You're not listening to me! You never do!"

"Stop being selfish, John! It's not all about you!"

"You're right. It's never about me!"

Kara felt outraged. He's being ridiculous! The young magician slid herself away from her brother and stood, feeling more dominant when she could stare up directly at her obnoxiously tall twin. He, however, would not look her in the eyes. He stared at the ground. She could see his lip twitch downward.

"John! Stop being a drama queen! I thought you were in serious trouble! But no, you're being ridiculously selfish! Dad was worried sick!"

She received no reply.

"Say something! You can't pull a stupid stunt like this and expect us to just take it! Explain yourself!"

"When was my award ceremony?"

"What?"

"My award ceremony. For the short play I wrote."

Kara stared at her brother incredulously. This is what he wants to talk about? He's avoiding the subject!

"January eighth. Why're you ignoring the question—?"

"Today's the eleventh."

"I don't see how this is relevant—!"

"You missed it. Both you and dad."

He sounded tired. His large hands fell flat against the wooden bench. His hunched shoulders deepened, his head raising. His darkened blue eyes were unreadable, but there was something in the sullenness of his face that spoke volumes.

"John, we missed one thing—my show—!"

"This isn't the first time you and dad decided I wasn't a priority, and I'm tired, Kara.

The graveness of his voice chilled Kara to the core. The woman crossed her arms across her chest, hands folded over her forearms. She felt something heavy chew up in her insides, gnawing at her heart.

"You never noticed, did you? This isn't something new, Kara. When you wanted something, it always happened. When I wanted something, dad forgot the instant his attention was turned on you. When you said you wanted to follow the family footsteps, dad was happy and trained you right away. When I wanted to become a magician, dad told me I'd never be as good as you. When you started cheerleading, dad went to every game. When I was in the musical,

you laughed at me and neither you or dad came. When I was sick, I spent the entire time locked up in my room so I wouldn't infect anyone else; you were babied."

With each word passing through John's lips, the gnawing made Kara nauseous. He couldn't be telling the truth! They've been alive for twenty years, there's no way that Kara would've let that kind of treatment pass.

"You're wrong! Dad and I always took care of you. What about when you scraped your knee on the way to my recital? Dad carried you and I patched up your knee! Or every time dad came to pick you up from school when you felt sick, when he took you to see all the colleges you wanted to go to!"

"It was your recital, and he didn't want you to be late. Every time he picked me up, it was because you insisted, we called him because you wanted to go home. All the colleges he took us to were the ones that interested you, Kara. He told me that I would never amount to anything close to you."

"He didn't mean that! Johnny, please. Dad loves you! He was worried about you! He's been trying to reach you for weeks! He sent me to find you."

A low chuckle escaped John's throat.

"No, he didn't. He called me because I was supposed to set up the lights for your performance, remember? And I know he didn't send you. Tomorrow is your show," He looked up

at the slowly brightening sky. “Or today.”

“John, stop it! Just stop!”

The man hoisted himself off the bench. He packed five more inches than Kara, towering over her. He was lanky with a posture that was always a bit too concave. His eyes retained dark circles, now visible in the dim lighting. John slid his backpack off his shoulder.

“Dad always told me I could never be better than you because I can’t do magic very well. Duel me.”

“What?”

“I’ll make you a deal, Kara. If you win, I’ll stay. If you lose, I’m getting on the next ride out.”

A frown pulled her pinkened lips, her teeth worrying against her inner lip. She straightened once again, dropping her crossed arms and glaring up at John. It was an unfair fight, and she knew it. She could beat him, she always would when their father would pit them against one another for “practice.”

“Fine.

• &&& •

The twins disappeared into the underbrush of the damp, foul smelling forest. Kara tensely strode ahead of John, who lugged his backpack with him silently. She was fuming externally, but on the inside, she began to wonder: what if he was right? What if all these years, when she had thought their family was a perfect single-father with two-kids dynamic, was actually a sham? She berated herself for thinking

that way, but her resolve was cracking. She felt guilt pour out through her skin, as if the shame blemished each crevice and expanse.

Eventually, the pair reached a moderately cleared area. The tall trees loomed overhead, while the slowly rising sun stained the sky shades of yellow, gray, red, and orange. Kara cracked her knuckles, fixating her tired eyes upon her brother. An adrenaline rush poured through her veins as if it were a drug, addictive and leaving her winded, and wanting more. She inhaled slowly, watching her brother as he slid his knapsack off his shoulder. She watched as he shed his coat, revealing a completely buttoned-up plaid shirt, typical for John.

“The first one down loses. Fair?”

“Fair.”

Despite her cockiness minutes prior, Kara had never been in a true duel before. She had stopped dueling when John proved to lack the affinity and coordination for battling magic. Kara had focused her eyes towards a future of performing, happily and enjoying every round of applause that reached her ears. In this moment, Kara realized how little she truly knew about her brother. Did he, too, enjoy the sound of applause? The crowd fawning over his every move, swooning at every breath he took, at every trick he mastered? Kara felt irked but forced it away.

Never throw the first attack, a simple rule. Her trained eyes locked upon John. He

seemed still, as if he were a statue watching over the woodlands. She almost missed the quick flick of his wrist, the inaudible words he murmured if not for the movement of his lips. She felt the ground around her quake with moderate force. She held her ground, weight pressed fully with her feet. She spun, and through the dizzying switch of perspective, directed the quake back towards her brother. He jumped aside, dodging the shaking ground beneath his feet.

She summoned smoke, sending it lofting across the clearing. She could use this to her advantage. John was always too rooted to the ground, heavy with each step he took, and she doubted he held the training that allowed him to lighten or quiet each step. She listened sharply, tiptoeing across branches and keeping her body afloat in one sense or another. She heard a twig snap, and jumped, clearing the fog and bearing the force of sharpened thorns in that direction. She watched closely as John was hit in the right arm, tearing his plaid shirt.

Uncertainty filled Kara to the brim. She couldn't actually hurt her brother! But this is what he wanted. A fair duel, until one magician would not be able to magic back any longer. Whatever means it takes in order for you to win. She watched John stumble, hissing quietly as his fingers wrapped around his right shoulder. She had torn skin.

“John—!”

A vine tore its way through her leggings.

She gasped at the sheer force of the attack, the blow initially leaving her breathless. The more she struggled against the pulsating vines, the more she felt points sharpening, torturously slow growth. She closed her eyes momentarily, and pictured the spread of trees the twins had gone through. She vanished into smoke, appearing now behind her twin. He twirled fast, too fast, and stumbled. His eyes were wide, similar to a wild animal. She cast her hands forward and murmured the incantation, the demand for the ground beneath her brother to become quicksand.

She watched in odd horror and fascination as he sunk into the ground, writhing and shaking as he fell deeper down. She heard his stifled breaths, panting and abruptly cutting off. She stepped towards the ground, closing her fist. The ground hardened and trapped him within its compound. She smirked down at him, a gut-instinct: you've won. Brandish your victory.

That was when she was levitated off the ground. She was knocked backwards, stealing the air from her lungs. She yelped involuntarily, back colliding with the rough barked tree. She watched as John teleported himself in front of her. Her smirk faded into a grimace. He was covered in dirt and grime, clothes tattered and ripped, soaked with sweat from the struggle. She couldn't imagine herself looking any better.

Kara took one last desperate measure. She couldn't lose to John! He was untrained. He

was an amateur at magic! He wasn't powerful. He never had been. She's superior. She's the stronger one. She's going to win.

She launched herself forward, the soles of her feet colliding with John's stomach. He fell backwards. She pictured herself across the clearing, and disappeared into a vat of murky smoke. She watched her brother double over, coughing and hacking towards the ground.

She felt cocky, she felt rage for being humiliated - she commanded the ground to shake, to become so violent beneath John that his body was thrown like a rag doll. She watched as his limp body jolted up, as he attempted fruitlessly to stay up, as he plummeted down to the ground. She felt a sudden rush of power build in her mind. She clapped her hands together, and watched John fly towards the tree behind him.

His body flew backwards in slow motion. The power-hungry satisfaction drained itself out as John's front slammed directly into the large tree trunk. A sickening crack signified the end of their duel, the trickle of blood pooling around John's head another story. Kara gasped, raising her hands for the quaking to stop and sprinted across the clearing. Her vision blurred, whether it be from guilt or sadness, she could not say.

Her brother's arm seemed to be bent the wrong way. Kara held in her urge to vomit, focusing her attention solely upon her twin. His nose was turning an alarming shade of violet as the bruise formed, blood trickling out at a

quicken pace. The magician tried to summon a tool, anything to help her brother, but the fizzle of magic refused to light. She had exhausted herself emotionally and physically.

John was conscious, crying out in pain whenever she touched his arm or dabbed away the blood from underneath his nose with her sleeve. She felt warm tears slide down her cheeks, tracks sticky against her skin. Strands of her matted hair pressed to her cheeks, but she couldn't find it in herself to brush them away from the teartracks.

"John, are you okay?! I don't know why I did that—I didn't—you could've—!"

John pushed himself to sit up as Kara reset his arm. She had been taught healing magic first when she was still holding onto her dreams of being a nurse. When she found a love for the stage during her training, her healer magic turned rusty from disuse.

But now, she needed it. There was no question that John's arm had been broken. She worked silently, the piercing veil of silence echoing in her ears. It felt empty, alone, but she knew John was still awake. He gasped, breathing rapidly through his mouth. When she had finished, she pulled John into an embrace.

"Kara... This is what I mean. You didn't care about me, did you? You cared about winning."

She wished she could've denied him. She wished she could've lied, and had told him he

was thinking off the rails. But her guilt wouldn't let her profess such lies. She swallowed a lump in her throat.

“Please. If you care about me, let me go. I need this. I need to be myself, I need to find myself. Please.”

He spoke in whispers, the blood flowing out of his nose inhibiting his speech. She couldn't speak clearly, mouth open and gaping like a fish out of water. She wiped her tears shakily, avoiding the bloodstained cuffs of her top. She stared at John's face, looked into his eyes and she reached her decision. Swallowing her pride, she nodded slowly, muffled sobs escaping her lips.

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Before he left, John cleaned his face off with a towel Kara had summoned. She offered to give him a new shirt before he departed, but he declined. He knew if he took something she had given him, he would never be able to leave. He had to. Living in his twin's shadow, lost and insecure, John could never understand how to live. How to survive, knowing you're a failed copy of a successful person. He needed to become someone else. He needed to become John Grayson. It had taken years for him to see what he needed. He needed his roommate to call him out for 'acting depressed,' and the seminars where he felt his aim in life was lacking. He needed to think about the missed dates, the unsaid words between him and his family, on his

own.

Before John boarded the early morning bus, he stopped to address his twin with tired eyes.

“I’ll be back soon.”

Her hand, muddied and limp from the battle, lay at her side. The purr of the bus engine sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

She didn’t need to see his face to know he was lying.

The SOUL Foundation - Log #004

by Kayden L.

**Honorable Mention, Joseph E. Vogel Award,
Fiction**

Your skin crawls as the breath of the room's icy, dead air hits it. It's truly hard to believe that a mere 3 years ago, this place would have been bustling with anxious researchers and big-wig business people, rushing around at the behest of one Dr. K. R. Sullivan. That name is one that no one will ever forget, especially now; the man did create a cure for the Z-03 virus outbreak that nearly wiped out 10% of the planet. Now, he and his foundation are seen as the saviors of the entire planet, people who could never do anything wrong. You're here to change the narrative, based on the rumors you've heard, and expose these greedy monsters for who they are. You shine your flashlight around the empty office a bit more, empty cubicles and abandoned office chairs being the only thing to catch your eye where you are now. The floor creaks and moans in agony as you press your weight into it, the boards not having felt the pressure of a person in quite some time. As your light flickers a tiny amount, your legs carrying you towards the stairwell to continue upwards, something piques your ears; the faint groan of a boiler starting up in the basement. Why on earth would this place still have fuel for a heater to even kick on?

Nevertheless, you continue on your

path, making strides up the stairs as quickly as possible. You find yourself oddly being quiet about your movement, though you should be alone in here... strange. You round the corner onto the next section of stairs, a clear view of the doorway in front of you, a shimmering golden label adorned on it: "RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT." You see your breath hit the metal door as you approach it, grasping at the freezing handle. A horrific squeak escapes the mechanics of the handle as you turn it, applying pressure to open the surprisingly resistant door. Once you step onto the other side, the door nearly slamming shut behind you, your eyes gaze upon the equipment in front of you. The room is half scientific equipment, and half computers with office chairs, everything having a layer or two of dust caked onto its surface. Heavy metal shutters prevent your vision from escaping to the outside world, probably also used to keep the outside world from looking in on the experiments that were performed here. You feel your heart beating in your throat as your legs carry you around the scene, your eyes wider than they ever have been before, keeping you on full alert.

Microscopes, damaged scanners, petri dishes, abandoned notebooks, worn goggles, heavily used PCs: everything you could ever need to permanently alter the course of human history, apparently.

As your eyes scan the dusty black countertops, finally something catches your

attention: a cassette tape. You remember your great-great-uncle telling you about these, but why would something so primitive be in a place as modern as this? You reach out, grabbing the small and feeble item to examine it further. The label on it is worn and smudged, though you can make out what it's supposed to read: SOUL Foundation, LOG #004. You fumble with it for a moment, not helped by the sudden, loud creak of the building settling making you jump. Your vision darts around your surroundings, trying to find something that you could maybe play this tape in. You stroll around the room, weaving through the maze of long forgotten desks and tools, before your flashlight finally illuminates a small, gray box laying next to one of the computer towers. Gritty dust meets your fingertips as they grasp it, followed by the cold metal of the player. Inspecting it over, you notice a major issue; there are no batteries in the machine. Pondering for a moment, you decide to take a seat at the desk you're at, and use the batteries from your flashlight to power the device. As soon as you remove the only batteries at your disposal, you're plunged into total darkness, only saved by the small amount of light from the outside world peering in through the metal blinders allowing your vision to adjust.

You press every button on the interface, with no victory over the ancient technology in sight, before finally the plate pops open, releasing a spurt of dirt back into the atmosphere. The

cassette tape finds its way into the chamber, thanks to your elegant handiwork, and the springs lock the latch back into place. A soft sigh escapes your lips, you adjust yourself in your seat, close your eyes, and press the red play button.

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“This is SOUL Foundation Research Log number 004. Date, February 12th, 20XX... local time is 18:40. Reporting, Doctor Ashley Reut.” The soft chatter from behind the feminine voice fills in the space between her sentences, a light humming from the overhead lights catching in the recording at all times. “This may be the final log we need to make for this project. The development of the cure is going wonderfully, and everything is on track to being completed within a few days, even. After this whole outbreak, we were worried that we may never get to this point... even Dr. Sullivan was surprised at how quickly our virus got out of hand. It would have been fine, if Jim had just listened to instructions...” A distant yell from a masculine voice sparks a slight chuckle from the doctor, before she continues. “Pretty sure that we may end up using him for our cure, instead of the volunteers. The way it’s done is quite remarkable, actually; I won’t get too far into the details, since I’m sure that Dr. K. R. Sullivan fleshed out the procedure in full on the first or second log. Side effects from the first three trial runs have been

fully ironed out, though it was quite difficult... experimenting with the human soul in order to cure disease is a very tricky science.” The sound of a metal chair being pushed aside signals the scientist rising from her desk, the motion of her movement caught in slight breaks and random noises of air resistance.

“Going downstairs now, to the holding chamber. Hopefully the subjects aren’t too restless, and of course, warm. It’s needed for extraction, which is the plan in full for today. We’re nearing the greenlight from the DCC to begin mass distribution, so today and tomorrow at the very least are going to be spent creating the cure we’ve developed now...” The echo of her shoes clapping against the stairwell fills the recording, chatter and clacking from fingers hitting keyboards coming from the other side of the wall as she walks down the stairwell to the basement.

“It’s quite a miracle, actually, how Dr. Sullivan found out about this cure so quickly. Almost makes you think that he was doing this before the virus broke out of containment in the first place... haha! Wouldn’t that be crazy.” A mechanical beep emanates from an electronic lock, a click signaling the door unlocking. A familiar boiler sound emanates from the tape, accompanied by an unfamiliar, repetitive muffled noise. “Phew, it is hot in here... Now, let’s see. Who is next for extraction... ah, number 215.” Click. The press of a button is followed by

industrial level mechanics working, as one of the more muffled sounds draws closer to the speaker than the rest. It finally settles with a loud huff of steam, the sound metal and glass hitting the floor in front of the microphone.

“Y’know... this whole process wouldn’t be nearly as bad if they just would ever stop screaming.”

END LOG

Loss

by Anabella Rossi

First Place, Joseph E. Vogel Award, Fiction

Day 32 without you:

Hi.

I have been instructed by my therapist to start a series of daily journals documenting how I am feeling and what I have been doing. She recommended I address them to you. This is supposed to help my mental health—to heal the “trauma.” I don’t know. This seems ridiculous, but I have to try, right?

I guess I’ve been doing okay. People keep telling me it will get easier. It’s been 32 days, and it hasn’t felt any easier, but they have to be right, so I keep taking it day by day. And they have to be right. Because I don’t know what I will do if they are wrong.

I got out of bed at ten today, which made me late for work. I got another warning. I think they are going easy on me because of everything. I’m pretty sure I would have stopped receiving warnings weeks ago and just been fired, but Janelle knew you, so.

I was supposed to go to the gym after work, but mom called, and it took all of my energy to talk to her about my day so I skipped it. It’s the third time this week I skipped going. It’s going to suck when I go back, but at this rate, I don’t know when I’m going to make it there. I know if you were here, you’d kick my ass for

being lazy. But you're not here. Hence me not going to the gym in the first place.

You never made it easy on me, did you?

Day 35 without you:

Totally forgot about this. Doctor asked me if I had been keeping up and I lied straight to her face. Might as well write something down in case she asks.

I don't know, I went to work, therapy, and now I'm not emailing Jonathan from HR back like I said I would earlier today. I should probably do that. But I don't feel like it right now.

I don't feel like doing anything anymore.

I miss you like crazy. It was never supposed to end like this. Life feels so wrong now, like the world has been turned upside down. I guess it means I finally processed what happened. Part of me wishes I didn't. It was easier when the reality of everything hadn't set in. It felt like you just went away for a bit, like you'd walk back in the door at any second, ready to be by my side again.

Life really isn't fair, I guess.

Day 36 without you:

Functioning like a normal human being has become really difficult. I don't even feel like I'm existing anymore. Earlier, while on the way to work, I thought for a moment that I could drive off the road and no one would even notice, even see me, or even find the wreck. It took more effort

than I'd care to admit to keep my car on the road. And I've been feeling like I'm being watched. I swear I felt eyes on me all day, watching every mood I made. And at one point, I heard your voice talking from another room, but it ended up just being whistling from that stupid draft by the window that I can't get the landlord to fix. I should have listened to you and moved out by now. I should have followed my gut earlier and drove off the road. I should find a way to bring you back to me.

Please don't leave me alone like this anymore.

Day 41 without you:

Sorry, I didn't mean to disappear for a few days. Work kinda snapped at me, and I've been dealing with some financial problems that randomly popped up. Sorry.

Day 43 without you:

Hi, I'm back. Last time was weird. The time before was weirder. I don't know, there was just a lot going on all at once. But I'm doing alright again. I can finally work on doing this journal thing properly.

Work is alright. I'm finally showing up on time and they seem satisfied with that for now. I'm going to the gym again, too. Regularly, if you can believe it. It's surprising how weak I got over the last five days... it already sucks to be getting back into it. I guess I was right about something,

at least.

I finally answered my sister's messages. Jessica, not Charlotte. Charlotte stopped messaging me three weeks ago. She's never been patient enough to wait for a response. Anyway, Jessica is doing good. She was more concerned with how I was doing, but I didn't really want to talk about that, so I let her tell me about the kids at work and her new colleague who's been bothering her. It was good to hear her voice again. She called me as soon as I texted her back, actually. I guess my silence was worrying her.

I'm feeling better. The sky kind of seems.... I don't know, brighter? The color seems more vibrant. It feels like you're with me when I look at it. I spend a lot of time looking at it now.

I miss you.

Day 45 without you:

I started watching this show. I know that's a weird way to start this entry, but I've been thinking about it all day. It's called "Dreamcatcher". One of the characters... oh my god, you would've loved them. They're super bubbly and sweet, and when they get mad they turn into this gigantic monster that breaks anything in sight. It's just your type of character and just your type of show. It feels like you're sitting next to me, watching this with me. I swear I can hear you laughing any time the character says something remotely funny. I've been hearing your laughter all day long. It's so beautiful to

hear your voice again, even if I'm not *really* hearing it.

Anyway, there's this character that *I* really like. I don't want to go into too much detail, cause you never liked the characters I did, but I *swear*, the evil ones are the most interesting! Who cares if they're evil, they're *cool*! This show makes my day go by so much faster. I think it's helped. A lot. I hesitate to say I feel "better", but... things are definitely looking up.

You should watch it with me, wherever you are.

Day 46 without you:

Hey.

Yeah, I don't know if that was weird, but it feels weirder to start these journals without a greeting. I mean, I'm supposed to be writing to you, so I might as well address them properly, right?

That's two days in a row I went to the gym, and dear God, today sucked even more than yesterday. But I managed to add more weight to my bench press, so that's an achievement. The person who spotted me was really nice. They made me laugh a few times, probably for the first time since everything happened. I mentioned Dreamcatcher— that show I'm liking— by accident, and they said they also watch it and like it! I don't know, but I kinda felt like they made the day a little better. Just like you used to.

I think my therapist is right. This feels like

it's helping. And I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing anymore.

Day 47 without you:

So this new person at the gym (they asked me to call them Dom) seems really interested in being friends. They made plans with me to go try a new boba place that opened up. I told them that I've never tried it, and they insisted that we go together. I'll get your favorite, milk tea with tapioca. I am totally going to judge you if it's terrible. But I'm still excited to try it!

I think I'm doing good. This is the longest stretch so far that I've felt steady since everything happened. Maybe this journal really is working. Or maybe I just needed time.

Day 55 without you:

God, it's been so busy, I haven't had any time to write in this thing. Work had this huge order in... I'd tell you about it, but then I'd get behind! Overall, I'm doing good. Great, even. I think it's a sign for better things to come. I hope you're watching over me.

Day 68 without you:

Man, I'm terrible at keeping this journal up to date.

There's this new promotion opportunity at work, I think I'm gonna go for it. Why not? What do I have to lose at this point? Why shouldn't I push myself?

I think Dom is rubbing off on me. By the way, I'm implementing your old workout routine into my time at the gym, and you're completely insane. It's so hard. How did you do that every day? Dom has been a great help, though. They're super encouraging, and they've gotten me through some of the breakdowns I had in the locker room during some of my bad days. I really appreciate them. I just wish I could tell them that. I never was as brave as you when it came to people. Maybe you can send some of that confidence down to me?

I miss you like crazy. But this journal to you is helping, and I think that's a good thing.

Day 75 without you:

Sarah reached out.

Day 83 without you:

I can't do this

I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE

Day 98 without you:

My therapist changed my medication. Which was a stupid decision. The other meds were fine, and now I'm just constantly in a pissy mood. I'm pissed at my therapist for changing the meds. I'm pissed at Sarah for fucking up my good-mood streak. I'm pissed at you for leaving. I'm so pissed at you for leaving.

Day 102 without you:

My therapist is making me tell you what Sarah said.

This is so stupid. She texted me and said she wanted to check-in, that she knew it had been a bit since she had spoken to me, and that it was time to reach out. She asked me how I was doing.

They can both go to hell.

Day 104 without you:

Sarah has been asking to meet up for weeks now. I keep saying later. I don't want to see her. I know you would want me to, but I don't want to. And Dom has been texting me constantly, trying to figure out what's wrong. What they can do for me.

All I want is to see you again. Living feels like too much effort without you.

I stopped taking those new meds.

Day 105 without you:

Sarah guilt-tripped me. I'm meeting up with her in a few days. I really don't want to, but she mentioned you, and your mom, and what you would want, and I couldn't take her asking anymore so I agreed. I'm not, in any way, excited about this. And that doesn't even solve all of my contact problems, because I still can't bring myself to answer Dom, and they're even more persistent than her. Everything feels like a goddamn mess.

Day 106 without you:

I saw you standing in the hallway.

Day 108 without you:

I've seen you four times in the last two days. I know it's not you, but in every other way, it is you. You don't answer when I call out to you, and you don't do anything except stand and watch me, but it's like you're back despite everything. I don't want to take my meds again. I don't want to lose you again.

Sarah is supposed to stop over tomorrow. Maybe she'll see you, too. Maybe it really is you after all.

Day 109 without you:

Seeing Sarah in person was even more disturbing than seeing you watch me in the hallway. I know she's your sister, but the similarities between the two of you are ridiculous. Before, I never saw them, but now it's all I can see when I look at her.

Unsurprisingly, she's doing better than I am. She's seeing this new guy... I don't know, you would probably have hated him, but you hated all of her boyfriends. Some of that was undeserved, you know. Richie and Sam were good guys. And I still don't think Frank meant to hurt her so badly—he was a troubled man with a good heart.

I haven't seen Sarah since the funeral. I guess I never really told you about how that went.

Your parents let me stand up with the family for the wake. It was a really, truly horrible experience to have strangers come up to me and tell me they were “sorry for my loss”, as if they could somehow make it better by repeating that phrase over and over. I had barely even processed you being gone at that point. The line of people telling me you were dead, however, really sped that up.

Sarah could tell I wasn't doing well. It must be pretty obvious. She told me if I stopped wanting you back and started celebrating your life, I would be able to process my grief better and move on with my life. But why would I move on? Why in God's name would I willingly leave you behind? You always waited for me to catch up when I fell behind. I have to do the same. I can't just abandon you. I can't.

Day 111 without you:

Dom actually showed up at my apartment without any freaking warning. I had no idea who was pressing my buzzer so frantically, but let me tell you, I didn't expect it to be them. They said they had been worried sick, and berated me for not answering their texts.

So, I told them about you.

Dom said they had seen the obituary a few months ago. I broke down crying in the middle of telling them about you, and they comforted me while I wept fat, ugly tears into their nice jacket. I offered to clean it, but they refused. Once I stopped being gross, they dragged my ass to the

gym and directed me through a new workout. By the time we were done, I was too tired to be sad. I guess it did end up making me feel better.

They took me home, and I let them use my shower while I remembered how to breathe again. I swear, you two would've gotten along great—you both enjoy working out until you can't move. They came out and told me to sit down while they found Dreamcatcher and put it on for a bit. I don't know how many episodes we watched, but we fell asleep on the couch together. When I woke up, you were watching us from the hall.

I took my medication. You haven't come back all day.

Sarah is insisting we meet up regularly so she can keep tabs on me, so I'm seeing her later today, and then going to Charlotte's for... I don't know, I think she said "pie", but knowing her, it's some gross, gluten-free, vegan mess of a pastry that is charred to all hell and entirely inedible. I will spare you the horror of telling you how bad it is. You always hated her baking.

Day 115 of recovering from losing you:

I miss you.

But I'm getting sick of this pain.

Day 128 of finishing shows with you:

I finished Dreamcatcher and I cried. It was a terrible ending. You would have loved it.

Day 136 of panicking with you:

Dom walked me to my car after the gym, and they asked me out. I was so flustered, but I said yes. We have a date tomorrow.

I haven't been nervous like this in years. What the hell do you wear to a date? What do you say? I think I forgot how to chew like a normal person. I could really use your confidence right about now.

Day 165 of celebrating you:

Happy birthday! I got a cupcake, your favorite, red velvet with cream cheese frosting! Sarah and I are celebrating your life today. I'll leave flowers at your grave.

Day 187 of hoping with you:

I know it's only been a month since Dom asked me out but... I think I'm gonna marry them.

Day 204 of congratulating you:

Holy shit, Sarah is pregnant! You're actually gonna have a niece or nephew in a few months! Congratulations! This is crazy!

Day 253 of appreciating you:

Hi.

I haven't really felt the need to write in this anymore... My therapist says it's okay to retire this journal for the foreseeable future. I don't know when I'll touch this again. I don't know if I'll

ever touch this again. And that's okay.

This decision has nothing to do with missing you—believe me, I miss you like crazy. But I'm doing better. I have bad days, sure, but overall my mentality has changed. I took Sarah's advice. I took my therapist's advice. I see your life as a gift now, and I am grateful to have been in it. It was hard work to get my mentality on your life and your death to that point, but I think it was an important change.

I might as well give a quick update: work is still good. I'm currently waiting to hear who will receive the promotion, but I have a really good feeling about it. I'm hoping I get it, it'll really help me out, and I might be able to finally move out of this terrible apartment and into a place that doesn't leak heat all months of the year.

I went to the gym after work today with Dom—mom called in the middle of my squat reps, so of course I had to talk to her for a bit, ignoring the stupid faces Dom was making at me to try to get me to laugh. Mom is doing good. I actually finished my workout afterward, which you should know is unheard of for me. Dom definitely has a good influence on my motivation to get stronger. Remembering how hard you worked is motivation, too. You always motivated me. Always.

I miss seeing you every day. But I appreciate knowing that, through this, you've been listening to me. Thank you. I love you. Goodbye.

Day 873 of living for you:

Hello!

Don't ask me how long it took me to do the math on that number up there. Okay, fine, I'll tell you. It took me three minutes because I did it wrong the first time and Dom caught my mistake and made me do it again.

So, it's been a while! I'm sure you'd be glad to know that I'm doing wonderful. I've gotten closer to my family, Dom and I live together now and are still in a healthy, happy relationship. I've even become good friends with Sarah—we spend a lot of time reminiscing about you and your life, but in a healthy way.

Sarah named her baby after you—you have a niece named Jude Zera. She confided in me that she never cared what the baby's gender was: your name was gender-neutral, so she was always going to name them after you. Funnily enough, Jude has your eyes. On your birthday this year, Sarah brought baby Jude to see your grave and let me tag along. Jude cried the whole way there, but as soon as we got to the grave, she stopped and started staring at this random point in the distance. No matter what we did, we couldn't get her attention to be elsewhere. She even laughed and waved at that random spot at one point, almost as if she was seeing someone we couldn't. Sarah was really freaked out at first. She thought something was wrong, but I think she grasped the situation after a few minutes. I guess what I'm trying to say is: I'm glad you

got to meet your niece. She seems to love you already. I had to drive on the way back because Sarah couldn't stop crying and laughing. She really needed that sign from you, that some part of you was still there, watching over us.

I've had a lot of time over these last few years to reflect and handle my grief. It's been one hell of a rollercoaster, but I'm feeling much better than I was when I had to write in this journal. Dom has been wonderful. They've helped me through so much, and I am extraordinarily grateful to them for it. Though, I can't quite say they are responsible for my recovery, because most of it was just me. I never realized how much of coping with loss is actually a mental workout, but it really is. It's the kind of workout you would like: a crazy mess of difficult, energy-sapping exercise that leaves you drained and tired by the end, but you feel good once it's done. That's exactly what coping with grief is, just for your mind. And I do feel good. I feel great, actually. I know you are watching over me. Tell my dad I say hi, and that I love him.

I was never good at expressing my emotions verbally, but I feel like it's a good time to do so. You were my best friend. I loved every second I got to be in your life, and I am glad I get to carry our shared memories with me for the rest of my life. You radiated light and laughter and love and I appreciated every second I was able to be around you and feel you share that with me. My memories with you are my most treasured

possessions, and I wouldn't trade them for the world. Thank you for everything you gave me during your life. You will always hold a special place in my heart.

I would go on, but I'm pretty sure this is getting repetitive, and I know how much you appreciated conciseness. I promised Sarah I would watch baby Jude today while she and her boyfriend go out for some much needed "them time" (it's the same guy as before, and I can confirm he's very nice and treats her well, though I reminded him a few times that you would have hated him regardless of how he treated her. Sarah seemed to appreciate it, though she spent most of my "threatening"—if you can call it that—rolling her eyes). I'll make sure to recount your many adventures to baby Jude, since you would have done your best to be a bad influence on your niece. Don't worry, I'll fill in for you while you're gone.

I miss you, as always. I hope you are doing well.

Sincerely,
Your friend through life, death,
and beyond

Contributor Biographies

Leola Beck is a first year student at Utica University who is majoring in Communication and Media with a concentration in Creativity Studies and has a minor in Film. With that, she hopes to one day become a video editor. Leola is an active member of UCTV, but in her spare time she loves to read, draw, and travel.

Dylan Bennett-Thompson is a History and Political Science Major and returning adult student veteran. Their goal is to study Cold War Germany and the impact of division on that state. In their free time, they write fiction, poetry, draw, knit and play table-top roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons.

C. B. Buckwild is a sophomore at Utica University that is majoring in communications and media with minors in both theater and creative writing. He enjoys working with the theater and writes as much as he can in his free time.

Hollie David is a junior Communication and Media major. She is the Features Editor for the Utica Tangerine and this is her first time submitting to Ampersand. Drawing is just a

hobby for her and her piece, “Growing on Me” was done as a tribute to Karen Holly.

Elizabeth Elow is a junior majoring in Nutrition & Dietetics.

Conor Hennessy is currently enrolled in the Utica University Occupational Therapy graduate program. He was born and raised just outside of Rochester, NY, and lived in Norfolk, VA for 5 years prior to enrolling at Utica University. He is a United States Navy veteran, and enjoys spending his time reading, playing basketball (standing or wheelchair), hiking, and being outdoors in all seasons.

Gabriella Hudziak exists >:) and is the layout designer for *Ampersand*.

Isa Hudziak is a dual degree English Education major with a minor in Journalism. She spends her time reading, making awful puns, and spending time with her pawsitively adorable cats: Clara, Bebbby, and Safiya.

Alma Jasencic lives in Utica, New York and is a recent graduate from Utica University. Alma Jasencic graduated with a degree in Political Science and a minor in Human Rights Advocacy. She is very passionate about creating world change. Alma continues

to make a greater impact in her community by influencing others to speak up about human rights issues and have uncomfortable conversations to create change.

Kayden L. is an aspiring author, planning on publishing his own novels and stories in the near future. He is a sophomore level student at Utica University. Currently, he's an English major with a concentration in Education, looking to teach secondary education level English.

Dr. Jeff Miller is Chair and Associate Professor of Communication and Media and director of FILM@UC, and teaches a variety of courses including Theories of Visual Communication (CMM 426). His photography has regularly appeared in the Ampersand since 2015 and three of his photographs, titled “Punabbhava,” “Trilakshana,” and “Sota” were published in last year’s edition. This year’s photographs were taken at the Zen Center of Syracuse [“tsukubai (Syracuse, 2021)” and “Lokadhātu”], at Swale Pond Sanctuary [“We shall by morning Inherit the earth (Plath, 1959)”], on campus [“Did it take long to find me? (Cat Stevens, 1971)” and “Maitrī (loving kindness)”], and in Dr. Miller’s own karesansui garden [“Cicada,” “massuka,” and “overnight visitor”].

Megan Nolan is a senior, graduating in May of 2022 with a B.A. in English. Her plans for the future are to teach high school English where she hopes to extend her love for reading and writing with her future students. This is Megan's second time sharing her written work with Ampersand and she is grateful for the opportunity to be published and share her poems for others to read!

Olivia Nole-Malpezzi is a senior at Utica University and a published poet from Central New York. She has been writing poetry for the past decade and a half, in hopes that sharing her experiences with love and loss will resonate with others on their own journey toward self-actualization.

Danae Rivera listens to too much Mitski.

Kim Robson is a 22 year old English major at Utica University. Her favorite things include steak, horror films, and stand up comedy. She also loves reading and her two cats, Tigerlily and Zico.

Anabella Rossi is an English major at Utica University, with a double-minor in Creative Writing and Theatre. She is an avid author at heart, and spends most of her time reading, writing creatively, editing, and dodging attempts at violence from her cat.

Haley Simon is a graduate from Mohawk Valley Community College and she is in her second year here at Utica University. Her passion for writing has led her to major in English with the hope of one day becoming a teacher.

Jasmine Sonia is a girl who at a young age fell in love with art, music, and poetry. She enjoys teaching others and is a peer tutor here on campus! One day she hopes to publish a book of poems, some novels, and open her own art studio. After college she plans to work in the insurance industry helping to insure small businesses.

Joseph E. Vogel Award Guest Judge

Molly McCaffrey is the award-winning author of *You Belong to Us* (memoir) and *How to Survive Graduate School & Other Disasters* (short stories). Her debut novel, *The Chaperone*, will be published in early 2023. Her stories, essays, and poems have appeared in dozens of publications, including *Aesthetica*, *Newsweek*, *The Independent*, *USA Today*, *The Vestal Review*, *Psychology Today*, and many more. She lives in Bowling Green, Kentucky, with her husband, bestselling suspense novelist David Bell. To learn more, visit mollymccaffrey.com.

Vogel Award Information

Established by the late author Joseph E. Vogel, these awards are given to students for outstanding work in poetry and in fiction published in the yearly *Ampersand*. Each year, a guest judge outside of Utica University is chosen.

Every eligible accepted work is provided to the judge anonymously by the *Ampersand* Faculty Advisor, and the judge has no contact with any of the submitters or editorial board.

Ampersand Submission Guidelines

All submissions must be from students, faculty, or staff of Utica University. Students can be recently graduated and still submit to that year's publication.

Submissions may be poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, photography, or artwork. If fiction or creative nonfiction, the pieces must be fifteen pages maximum.

Submission is not a guarantee of acceptance into the literary magazine.

Submitted works must not contain graphic sexual or violent content. Submitted work cannot contain material promoting discrimination or stereotypes of people of various races, ethnicities, religions, genders, and/or sexual orientations.

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D. Bennett-Thompson

C.B. Buckwild

H. David

E. Elow

C. Hennessy

G. Hudziak

I. Hudziak

A. Jasencic

K.L.

J. Miller, Ph.D.

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A. Rossi

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