



The Black Box

2024-2025 Issue

Not Your Typical Flight. Photo by Kayla Natelli.

THE BLACK BOX

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The Black Box is a creative publication dedicated to displaying the talented work of the Embry-Riddle Prescott community. Creativity and ingenuity flow throughout ERAU and we want to put it on display!

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Some contributors have elected to publish their work anonymously or pseudonymously. We thank everyone for their creative submissions.

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The Courage to be Kind

Amberly Neese

Before coming to Riddle, I taught junior high for many years. One particular year, one of the girls in my class, I will call her Sally, was struck with alopecia. Alopecia is a common autoimmune disorder that often results in unpredictable hair loss. According to Medical News Today, it affects roughly 6.8 million people in the United States.¹ But when one is in junior high, it doesn't really matter how many other people it affects; you just know that it dramatically and often painfully affects you. I am confident that, since no one else in our school had such a medical condition, she must have felt terribly lonely and isolated.

For many people with alopecia, hair falls out in small patches all around their head in areas about the size of a quarter. For most, it is just a few patches; for Sally, it was greater than that. It was so extreme that she eventually acquiesced and shaved her whole head; she thought it was easier than to try to manage the myriad of patches all around her head. The day she came to school without any hair was a bit shocking. By this time, it was not just the hair on her head that was gone; she also had lost her eyebrows. None of us knew what to do. None of us knew what to say or how to say it.

When I was Sally's age, it was the mid 1980s. My hair was so big and fluffy that it received a radio signal. I took great pride in securing every hair in place with enough hairspray to cause an environmental crisis. My hair was part of my identity. I cannot imagine losing my hair at that age.

But the girls in Sally's class had an idea. It was a private school, and so classes were small in size. They were an especially tight-knit group, and they proved their closeness this particular year. During the most awkward and crazy time in one's development, all of these girls shaved their heads to support Sally. They decided that if she had to go through something so terrible, they would not allow her to do it by herself. When they entered the class, shiny heads and all, I could not hold back the tears. I was so inspired by these girls who chose to show this young woman that she, indeed, was loved and supported; they chose to truly empathize with a friend in pain. Although I did not shave my head, I was forever changed by their gesture. And I know Sally was as well—long after her hair grew back.

They beautifully illustrated the power of community.

¹ McIntosh, James. (2024). Treatments, causes, and signs of alopecia areata. *Medical News Today*. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/70956.php>

Many of us misconstrue what community means. Community is not an interpersonal buffet line where we get to pick and choose those in our sphere of influence. We can care for others even when they are wounded or different or their stories make us feel uncomfortable—or when our story makes them uncomfortable.

I do not always do community well. I am a busy person. In order to keep up with all my responsibilities, I have to maximize the efficiency of my schedule and reassess regularly. I have a grocery list for every store at which we shop (seriously, every store!) because I want to make sure I get out of the store exactly what I need without unnecessary distractions, issues, or challenges. The problem is I take the same posture when it comes to people in my life. When forming a group, making a guest list for a party, or inviting others over for coffee, I often pick those folks who are “the path of least resistance” as friends. I just want to make sure that our time together is beneficial and a good use of my time and resources—in other words, that it meets my needs and is convenient for me.

I am aware that there were a whole lot of I’s, me’s, and my’s in the last paragraph, and I am not proud of that. And I am probably not alone. I think most people find it easy to like people who like us and are like us, but are we missing out on greater perspectives, deeper conversations, and stronger character when we choose to only associate with those who look, act, think, vote, and behave as we do.

Even though I am a professor and community advocate and should know better, sometimes I grow impatient when someone takes too long sharing about his/her day or doesn’t tackle problems the way I think they should, instead of empathizing and showing care to those who are hurting, as I should.

Friendship and community are much like the sandbox many of us played in when we were children. As we shoveled sand alongside others, we learned about sharing space and conflict resolution (not to mention the ramifications of eating sand), gained the skills to build and plan, and gleaned how to share the box with others who were at different stages of development. Often, much to my dismay, I had to learn to share my shovel, bucket, and plastic rake—the tools of the sandbox—with others.

Similarly, the sandbox of community here at ERAU is where we learn to learn and grow alongside peers, faculty members, and staff. If recent studies are accurate, the majority of us feel lonely, disconnected, and undersupported. What if we all took community seriously on campus and beyond? What would change?

How do we practice community better? We will need to live it out as we share, resolve conflict fairly and peaceably, and have empathy for those who are at different stages in their development. We also need to accept wisdom and love from those who have had more time in the sandbox of learning. As we begin to “share the tools” of the sandbox of community, we come to realize that it is an honor and joy to grow alongside others.

We need not shave our heads, but when we practice kindness and extend an invitation to another, we communicate that people matter. Community thrives when we step beyond our comfort zones and embrace the full spectrum of human experience. Like those junior high girls who shaved their heads in solidarity with Sally, true community asks us to be vulnerable, to show up for others even when it’s inconvenient, and to recognize the inherent value in every person we encounter.

At Riddle, we have a unique opportunity to build something extraordinary together. In this sandbox of learning and growth, each of us brings different tools, perspectives, and experiences. When we share these gifts freely and receive others’ contributions with open hearts, we create a community where everyone can flourish.

So today, I challenge each of us—myself included—to look beyond our carefully curated social circles. Sit with someone new in the dining hall. Ask a question and truly listen to the answer. Offer help without expecting anything in return. These small acts of authentic connection ripple outward, transforming not just our campus but our understanding of what it means to be human together.

After all, the most meaningful lessons we learn here may not come from textbooks or lectures, but from how we choose to treat one another along the way. And that might be the most valuable education of all.



Place or People

Oliver Sowers

I've always loved the sea: it's an untamable beast that doesn't forgive, but its beauty shines through more often than not. When you enter these charted waters, there's only one place to do it from: a slip. It might be a slip in a marina, or a port, or your neighborhood dock. Though distinct in administration, they are not all as different as they seem.

At any marina I've ever been to, there's always been a gruff-looking old man, bearded, who stands maintaining his sailboat. He's one of the nicest men on the dock, but also the most respected: he knows exactly what he's doing, an experienced yachtsman. "That's Greg," they'll say, "he can tie any knot and repair any sail."

When I was planning to write this essay, I told myself I would walk with my dad down to the public access dock and take photos and chat with the people getting off their boats at sunset. However, on the day we had scheduled the photo shoot, there were high winds, and the beaches were closed. The harbor was as empty as a ghost town.

I decided to go out to the splash wall near the south end of the harbor and then the breakwater at the north end of the harbor. In both places, I saw the same sign, boldly stating "KEEP OFF SPLASH WALL." I decided to take photos of three different signs. I thought they might have different stories.



Both signs on the south splash wall, near the entrance of the harbor, were in some way damaged. The first was scratched, presumably from the children climbing on the wall and the fishermen bumping it with their rods and tackle boxes. The second sign hangs off of the wall, new and still glistening, but hanging off the wall only by one bolt. The outline of the last sign, a specter of times gone, remains. On the north breakwater, lit by a solitary fluorescent light, a brand-new sign hangs. It's surrounded by stains and cobwebs, grease and moisture. It's spotless, shining, and visible from across the road. It looks unnatural, too clean—the story of the sign before it erased.

Whenever I had been to marinas before, there had been people. That was the essence of the culture: the interactions with the guy who owned the Martin 242 in the slip next to you, or the guy with the Boston Whaler on the end of the dock. This time, I saw all the boats, but none of the people. I was disconcerted, and somewhat ill at ease. The more I looked at the empty space, though, the more I saw the people who weren't there. I saw the stories of the people who inhabited this marina: those who lived lavish lives, massive yachts covered in sweeping black windows, covered as if to see inside would be a great sin to those commoners walking below.



Then the small inflatable Zodiac, barely floating, bleached white by the sun and the violent spray of the seawater. The only evidence of occupation? A net and tackle box, haphazardly placed at the bow.

It's evident that whoever owns that dinghy cares: it's crusty, destroyed by the years, and patched up every which way. Clearly, the

owner decided that the dinghy they had was worth what they had put into it, whether money, or labor, or time, or love.

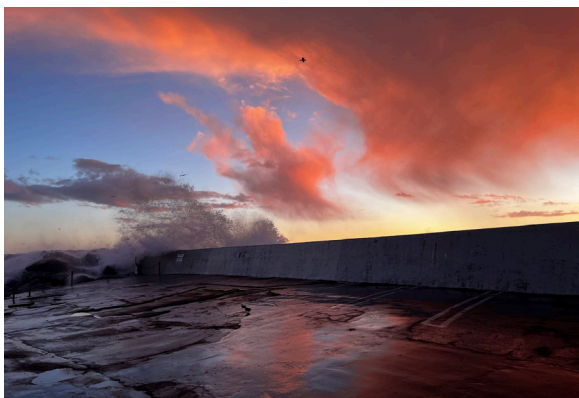
Often, ‘boat people’ talk about the massive yachts and brand-new speed boats they see on the water, and there’s a certain kind of disdain in their voices. They think, as do I, that those people who always want the next new boat aren’t truly ‘boat people’, but merely ‘people who own a boat.’



I walked along the north break wall, and as the sun dipped just below the horizon, I saw the waves crashing against the rocks and spraying above the wall. It was almost too picturesque, the pinks and oranges of the sunset, the blue sky peeking through the clouds, the seagulls flying across the sky, the ocean spray— it was almost too much. I was reminded of why exactly I love moments like this: high wind, a transcendent moment, it instills something within me I miss in my everyday life, a love and recognition that this world is so much more beautiful than we give it credit for.

My dad and I stood next to each other, taking photos and hollering into the wind at the sheer beauty of it all. It reminded me of what it feels like to be somewhere incredible, with people that you love, doing something amazing.

Perhaps that’s why people come to the marina, even though there are people so vastly different from you, and people with better boats, and trash floating near the docks. It doesn’t need to be perfect to be beautiful. Perhaps it’s the place that makes it all worthwhile.



All photos by the author at King Harbor in Redondo Beach, California, 24 March, 2024. All rights reserved.

First Semester as a Deferred Student

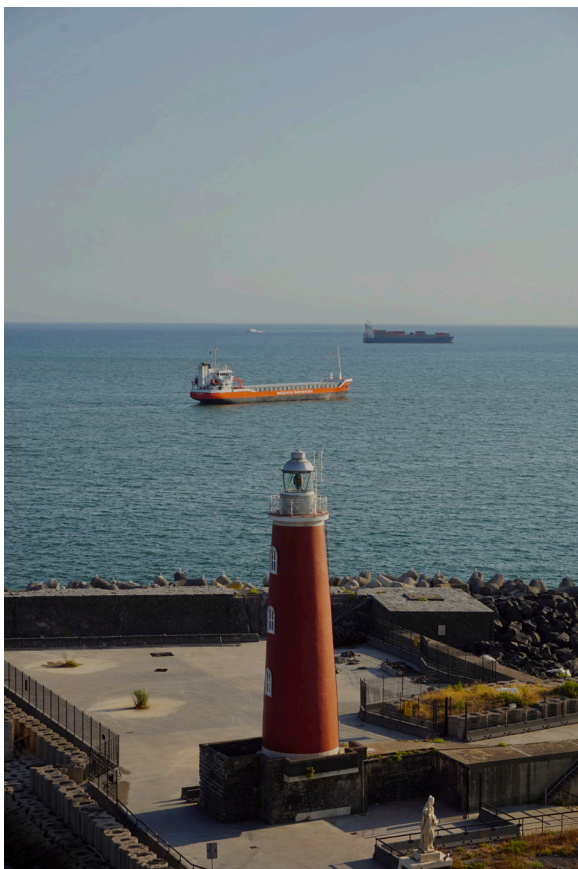
Cordelia Cep

When I first received my acceptance from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University on January 24th 2024, I couldn't believe my eyes. The feeling of pure excitement and surprise rushed over me. I thought there would be absolutely no chance I could get into Embry-Riddle, the "Harvard" of aviation for aeronautical science. Hearing my friend gush about the unique projects he was working on as an aerospace engineering major ignited a sense of curiosity in me, and compelled me to apply too. Before applying, I researched every major that was offered, potential events on campus, and all other aspects that came to mind. I even persuaded my parents to come to Preview Day in April to get a feel of the campus vibe which was so crucial to choosing a school. Although things seemed to be smooth sailing on my end, I was informed by my parents that the combined cost of tuition and flight would be financially challenging, so in the summer I finished as many General Ed Requirements as possible so I could focus solely on aviation classes. During Preview Day, I made sure to get my pressing list of sixteen questions answered on campus life, academic competitiveness, and student support groups. I was happy to find that almost all the students I conversed with were very supportive and willing to take time out of their day to answer a stranger's questions. My parents were also pleased with the academic rigor and the hardworking and passionate mindset of the students we came across. Seeing my efforts and passion in researching the school started to sway them.

Things took a positive turn in May when my dad, being the sole benefactor for my education, agreed to let me study at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University under the conditions that I graduate on time and maintain good academic standing. Around this time, I also considered getting my private pilot license before attending ERAU because I felt guilty that my dad would have to borrow money for me to come here. After extensive research and a dozen calls and emails later, I decided to defer my admission with the goal of finishing my private pilot license.

Although I did not end up getting my private pilot license before I came here due to Designated Pilot Examiner challenges, I still decided to follow through with my original plan and attend Embry-Riddle. When my parents and I first hauled my luggages on a howling January night, I realized the weather was a lot colder than I expected and staying in Prescott for two days during Preview Day had not been a good measurement of how cold the weather actually was. In addition, realizing there were no elevators to help me haul my three large luggages and two small backpacks made it worse. Having the dream of making friends immediately

on the first day of school was slowly fading. I stopped expecting people to start a conversation, and decided to let things flow naturally. Surprisingly, not forcing things to happen yielded an unexpected result when a classmate sitting next to me started a conversation one day, and we became good friends. Getting involved in internship and career workshops, and campus events such as the Organizational Faire and associations have propelled me to feel more connected with this university. Even after extensive research through Internet, Reddit, and personal connections, I found that Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University still did not live up to my “ideal” standard, and it doesn’t have to. My skyrocketing expectations of unrealistic perfection only spiraled into disappointment. A dream isn’t always going to be exactly what happens in real life because that wouldn’t be called a dream anymore—that would be reality. So long as a dream doesn’t become a nightmare, I am grateful for all the opportunities and experiences that have shaped my time here.



The Mystery of the In-Between

Luca Careaga

I feel the cold winter air rushing past me as I move underneath the stars. I am running, not running from anything but running for something. Running to gain clarity.

Feeling the crisp cold air rush past me as I run through this town. The town that causes me to run in the first place. As I pass through the neighborhoods, I see memories that have died. Memories that have been left behind. Memories that have been altered. I run to try and escape the memories, these ghosts that haunt me. Ever since leaving for college this town doesn't feel the same.

Home was a place of joy and friends. Late nights running through this town with my friends; acting like teenagers, while running this town like it was our own. Drinking in the woods behind our highschool football field, playing truth or dare in an old treehouse that was built when we were still young enough to believe that monsters lived under our bed. Running home from friends' houses right before curfew as we were laughing all the way. The place where I shared my first kiss in the center of our middle school baseball field after it was stormed when we beat our rivals from the town right next to us.

Home was a place of family and connections. With my friends helping me through my first heartbreak, when my first kiss cheated on me not even six months later, when I used to believe she was my true love. Watching my extended family circle around Watson Lake every summer, eating hotdogs and using a rope tied to a tree to fling ourselves into the lake. Staying up late, way past our bedtime, helping my younger brother win against his troop in a boxcar race. One of our friends' older brother who taught us how to drive on a dirt roadway before we should have.

All these memories altered in the three months I was gone. The first week back I was ecstatic to be back home. Home, where all my friends and family were; the place where my life is. Not in some other state where I'm a stranger. The excitement finally faded, and I saw the town for what it is. The town has become soulless, its people dead. My friends changed, the people I have spent my whole life with have become unrecognizable.

Seeing the ghosts of old memories surrounding me as I ran through this town made me realize something. This run for clarity ended up becoming a funeral; I found myself mourning the people and memories as if they died.

I finally stopped. I realized I ran 3 miles. I was so in my head that I ran till my breaking point, barely able to breathe, I stopped. “God, how did I get this far? I’m kind of athletic but nothing to this point.” Instead of gaining clarity, I spiraled, gasping for air until I came back to reality. Focusing on these emotions made me feel worse than when I started, as if these emotions were slowly killing me. I eventually caught my breath and started to walk home, down the lane of altered memories and internalized grief.

I don’t know when everything changed—when this town became so bleak. Nothing is the same and I lost my sense of home. Home is not here, nor my dorm over 200 miles away. I have many roofs to live under, yet no home. I felt sad and angry; how could such little time change so much about the town and people I love? What could’ve happened that changed my home this much? What did I miss?

Before I left, everything made sense, my life was planned out. I would go to college, get my degree, meet someone, go home to my family and friends, introduce said someone to them, and everything would go right and everyone would be happy. I had dreams of having a successful career and family, I was in a joyful bliss due to my naivety. Now everything is the opposite. College is hard; I have yet to make friends, the classes are challenging and nothing like I thought. Through everything I always thought I had my home to fall back on. Home being something I thought could never change, yet it has.

“Everyone is still here and I left, I left a town that no one thought anyone would make out of, because no one has. I left and everything changed for the worse. I left my family and my friends in this town. I made it out while they’re still stuck here with no light at the end of the tunnel. I shouldn’t have made it out. If I were to have stayed none of this would have happened.” I feel guilty leaving them behind, leaving them in a town that holds no hope for escape. Leaving them in a place where I can’t be there for them.

I eventually make it back to “home” or at least what’s left of it. I look at this old house, still standing strong even though this town has gone through disaster, or at least that’s what it feels like. This town is still standing, the buildings and light poles that have been here from the beginning still stand tall unlike its people. The people here used to stand as tall or even taller than these buildings, now it seems as if they were left feeling two feet tall. Like a tragedy or disaster had passed through the town even though this is the most calm the town has been in years.

I walk through my house, back to my childhood bedroom. I lay in my bed with this weight hanging over my head, the mystery of what killed the spirit of this town. A town that, even as inescapable as it was, the people used to be happy and optimistic, now they're depressed and somber. The people have given up. I sleep with this weight, I wake up and live with this weight. It's a weight that will never leave. It's a burden that I will have to carry until I find my sense of home, and self again, if I ever do.

The next day, I am currently packing to leave back to college. I pack my clothes, school supplies, my altered memories, and the added weight. I say goodbye to my family and friends, and hope that everything will go back to normal. I hope that when I come back for the summer I will have a home again. Once I'm done, I pack everything into my car and drive. I leave with a continuous feeling of abandonment, the feeling I am abandoning the people I love. The drive feels different. This drive was once full of dread, now it feels empty. This place isn't my home anymore. I am driving to and away from the in-between. A place where home and homeless live simultaneously together in harmony. As I drive in this limbo, I search for the answers to the mystery, in hopes to have my home back somewhere in the rubble.

AZ-ANG T-38 Talon Departing Phoenix Sky Harbor. Photo by Joshua Taylor.



Acrostic for Embry-Riddle

Samuel Davidson

Each and every year we spend here
Men and women's lives become clear
But even when the times get tough
Remember that your effort is enough
You may give up and say it's not for you
Remember it will all be worth it in the end too
If things don't always work out
Don't worry, it can all be fixed with time, don't doubt
Daily you will commit yourself to lessons
Lessons that when you finish leave great impressions
Expect that in the end it will all be worth it



Blue Angels Flight Team. Photo by Cristian Garland.



Hercules. Photo by Cristian Garland.

The Effects of ADHD

Annelise Newnum

Imagine someone between the ages of 6 and 12. They are still a child and just learning the foundations of life and what it means to be a model citizen in this world. Now, imagine that the kid is having difficulty with routine and structure, often forgetting their homework or lunch bag at home before school. Furthermore, imagine that once in school, they have difficulty focusing on what teachers are saying, that despite trying their best, they are struggling to stay on task and frustrated with the lack of stimulation that they are receiving in their classes. Now after school, when they arrive home, they struggle to recall their day to their parents as they reflect on what they did, even though they want to talk about their day, they just can't seem to recall it. Frustrating, right? Well, this is the typical day in the life of a child who deals with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

ADHD is a neurological condition that affects many different parts of the brain but significantly impacts the prefrontal cortex and its functions. The prefrontal cortex is in charge of executive functions (such as decision-making, problem-solving, and organization), attention regulation, impulse control, emotional regulation, and memory. When ADHD is involved, executive functionality is disrupted making it more difficult for an individual to make important decisions, focus on tasks in front of them, make impulse control difficult, and struggle with organization and planning including time management.

A high number of ADHD diagnoses happen between 5 and 7 years of age, which is extremely important and beneficial in a child's development as it helps explain specific behaviors and gives them the tools they need to manage their ADHD, making it easier to live a relatively normal life. However, there are various long term effects on an individual's life being diagnosed with ADHD in their adolescence. These long term effects can leave an individual struggling and discouraged, unsure of what to do and how to cope, making it all the more important to recognize and educate the general public on the long term effects of individuals who are diagnosed with ADHD at an early age.

ADHD and Education

As stated previously, a child dealing with ADHD in a school setting can be incredibly challenging, and often discouraging. The inability to remember certain things or pay attention to certain tasks, the frustration in not being able to stay focused due to lack of stimulation and engagement, and the difficulty recalling specific things to detail when prompted—all of

these factors are hurdles that most children with ADHD cannot seem to overcome.

A study conducted by a group of scientists was meant to research the long term effects of ADHD on achievement tests and performance within the school environment and it highlighted the differences in success between children with untreated ADHD and children who had no signs of ADHD at all. The results of the study concluded, “ADHD adversely affects long-term academic outcomes. A greater proportion of achievement test outcomes improved with treatment compared with academic performance. Both improved most consistently with multimodal treatment” (Arnold et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of providing children the resources they need to promote success within their environment, even if they struggle with academics and ADHD.

Allowing individuals with ADHD, especially in their early school years, the resources they need to help maintain their ADHD and improve their cognitive functions is crucial. Without these resources, their grades and performance visibly suffer. They cannot help the struggles they face when it comes to their development and learning skills and although it may not fully help them achieve success, it at least points them in the right direction of what they are capable of utilizing in order to better their needs and performance.

ADHD and Medication

Using medication to help suppress ADHD symptoms is incredibly common among those who have been tested. Common drugs used include Adderall, methylphenidate, and Ritalin. These can prove to be beneficial for individuals who are struggling to maintain quality of life because of their ADHD. A report, “Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews” sought to discover the benefits of putting children with ADHD on methylphenidate. The article presents the potential neurological and psychiatric side effects associated with the long term use of methylphenidate. Highlighting the risks of putting your child on these medications, which include but are not limited to mood disorders, anxiety, and sleep disruption. The authors concluded that there needs to be further research and close examination of these patients to get a full grasp on the long term effects of methylphenidate treatment for ADHD (Krinzinger et al., 2019).

Another medication used for ADHD treatment is Ritalin. This drug also has many risks associated with it when it comes to giving it to children. An interview was conducted with a mother, Lindsay Newnum, of a child diagnosed with ADHD, who was instructed by the doctor to put her son on Ritalin. This is what she had to say:

When we made the decision to put our 8 year old son on Ritalin it didn't take us long to notice our son became extremely lethargic as well as moody. He was withdrawn, not at all what he used to be. Within a few months, he was given a blood test that revealed he had a low white blood cell count. The doctors thought he could have Leukemia. Yet after visiting the children's hospital and doing further tests, the doctors discovered that it wasn't Leukemia at all. In fact, it was the Ritalin we had put him on that was lowering his white blood cell count. We quickly removed him from the medication and found different ways to help him with his ADHD. (Newnum, personal interview)

It is clear that Newnum's child did not take to the Ritalin as well as the doctors had hoped he would. The outcome was just not worth the reward, even causing serious health scares.

Medicating children who have been diagnosed with ADHD seems to have some risks tethered to it. Not only were there psychological effects, there were physical effects. It appears scientists don't know enough about the long term implications of either drug on adolescence and yet they are still administering it. Perhaps, finding a different route to helping a child with their ADHD is necessary or at least more ideal.

ADHD and Adult Life

There is no cure for ADHD, which means those who develop the neurological disorder in their childhood will live with it their entire lives. So, even though these individuals are no longer struggling in school, there are other factors they begin to struggle with, the biggest being financial stability. Due to their lack of impulse control, those with ADHD find it harder to manage money. An article in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* titled "Long Term Financial Outcome of Children Diagnosed with ADHD" reports on a study of the financial functionality in adults who were diagnosed with ADHD at a young age, concluding that "at age 30, adults with a history of ADHD exhibited substantially worse outcomes than controls on most financial indicators, even when they and their parents no longer endorsed any DSM symptoms of ADHD" (Pelham et al., 2019). ADHD hinders adults' ability to manage their money and disturbs their ability to refrain from impulse buying, making them far less financially stable than individuals without ADHD.

ADHD doesn't just affect someone's childhood; it is a lifelong disorder that will often affect a person their entire life. It is important to highlight this because many place an emphasis on children who struggle coping with ADHD. Yet, many fail to realize that adults have the same disorder

and therefore experience the same effects. Just because an adult may not be struggling in school anymore or behaving a certain way doesn't mean living with ADHD isn't still difficult. However, a study, "Life Gets Better: Important Resilience Factors When Growing Up with ADHD" was conducted to deeper understand someone with ADHD and how it plays out throughout their life. The findings were quite encouraging for individuals who do have ADHD:

Growing up with ADHD was associated with both challenges and positives, but the main theme in this study was that life gets better. Important resilience factors were strategies to regulate ADHD, valuable relationships, acceptance, seeing positives of ADHD, tailored and non-stigmatizing support, and meaningful activities. (Dangmann et al., 2024)

Optimistically, life with ADHD does get better. Though the challenges are tough in childhood and early stages of adulthood, as time goes on, it gets better. The resilience learned from adapting with ADHD helps individuals cope and even adapt throughout their years, making it easier and easier to get by.

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Of a Headache

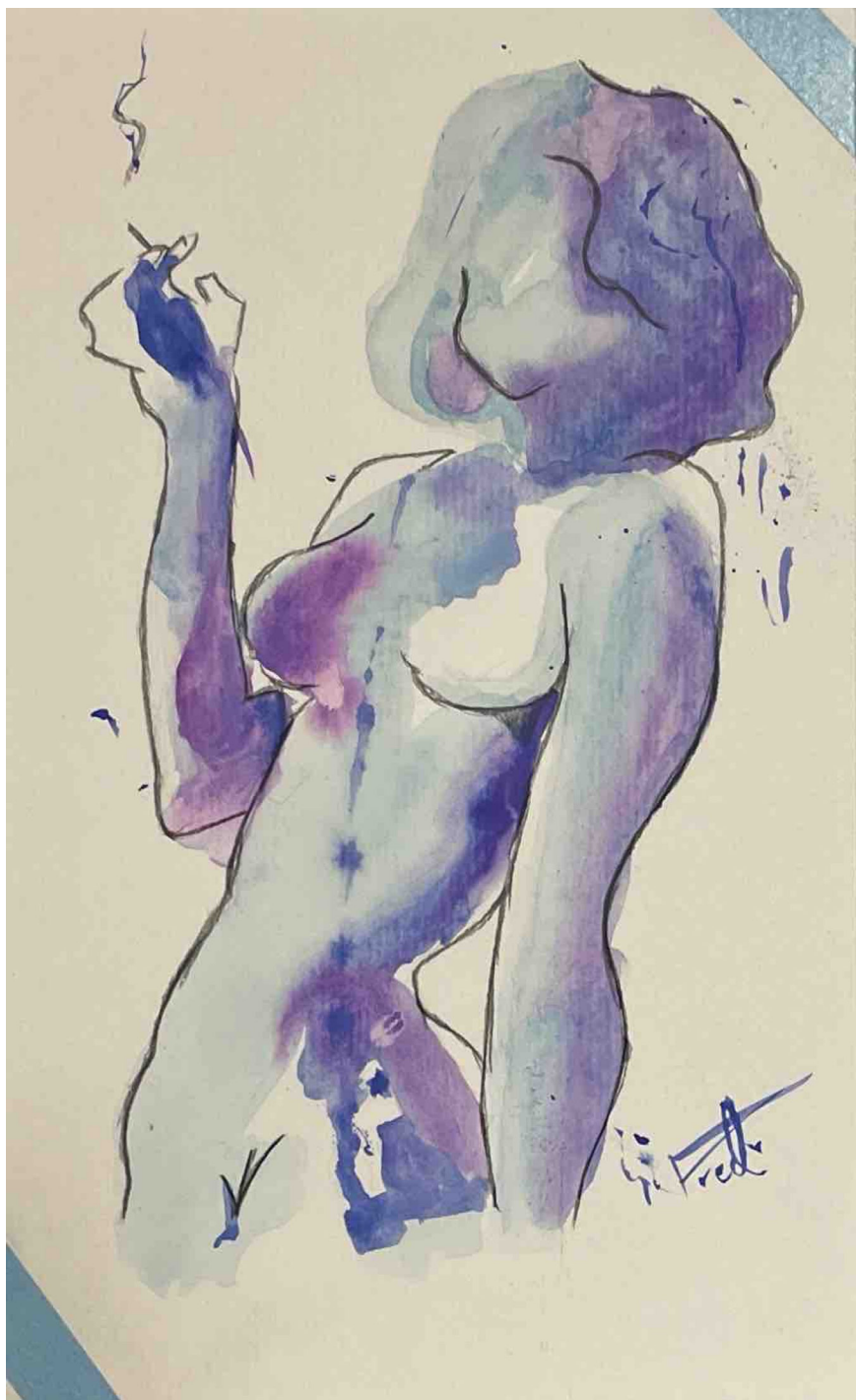
Brandon West

It's a shock,
The sudden blow
And resonating sick
The loss of sense
And time and luck
The end of day.

It's the coming
But never going
The lingering reminder
Of betrayal
And collapse



Abstraction #4 (Revelation).
Acrylic and Colored Pencil on Foam Board by James Bradley.



We, the So-Called “Strawberry” Generation

Cordelia Cep

They said we couldn't cry and pour our tears out
It would make us look weak
timid afraid to fight
but yet we cry to release our frustration
it helps us sort things out
blurry becomes translucent
our highs are as deep as our lows

We're the strawberry generation
never experiencing significant
but a little cut appears, we say it hurts
Releasing emotion before we explode

Yes we may be fragile but we say what we feel
Embracing our scars helps us grow
into a better person, who knows
yet we're self-aware of our problems
willing to talk it out instead of bottling it all up
and we always aim
For the smoothest skin
For the sweetest outcome
For life to be one big strawberry
Juicy and sweet
And when we're bruised and torn up
We're willing
to wash away our dirt and bloom

Worldly Beings

Navaeh Allen

If we are victims of this world
Then let us have the moon as our mentor
Reminding us every step of the way that we are still alive and well
even with meteor scars

If we are victims of this world
Then we have the stars as our “insert here” anonymous group
The ones we know we can hold on too when everyone else is gone

If we are victims of this world
Then let us have the wind as our blanket
Rushing around us at the slightest hint of pain
Sting us just a bit to ensure we are still here

If we are victims of this world
Then let us have the trees be our protectors
Reaching out with their roots lining up with our veins
Grounding us enough so we don't float away

If we are victims of this world
Then let us have the water be our guide
No matter where we are
we follow the stream
right back to where we belong

If we are victims of this world
Then let the sun be our home
If nothing else
allow us to have this place to call our own

if ever a new world comes knocking
we will not fall victim anymore.



Dynamic Mind. Street Art Mixed Media by Matin Winiarski.



Abstraction #6
(The Smell of Burning Leaves on Hot Asphalt Doused by a Sudden Rain).
Acrylic, Colored Pencil, and Mixed Media on Paper by James Bradley.

Engram

Austin Palahnuk

Hykar landed with a thunk onto the smooth plating of the chamber floor. Besides the faint blue light trickling in from the open hatch in the ceiling she had fluttered through, the only illumination was from the brightening row of lights atop a glossy bunker door, smooth as ice. Her steps rang with low metallic beats as she approached, and when her beak was no more than an arm's length away, she stopped. A section of the door's surface popped out and swiveled upwards. From inside, a spindly metal arm rose out and approached her face. On its end glowed a menacing circle of deep red light, and it pondered her for a moment, swaying back and forth.

The arm reared back, and in a basso voice which rumbled throughout the chamber, it said, "Memory engram?"

She nodded.

The arm lowered to her face, nearly touching the end of her beak. Its lights increased in brightness, momentarily blinding her in a sea of red, and then flashed to black. From somewhere unseen, there was the faint magnetic pull of computation.

"Welcome, Hykar," the voice said, while the arm folded back into the door.

There was a quiet rumbling and clicking, before the great doors snapped open a feather-width with a slam. They parted further with silent precision, and once the gap was wide enough, she stepped through.

The other side was a cavernous length of hallway which proceeded far into the darkness, creating four parallel lines that ended nowhere. Unfazed, she continued into the void.

Then the same voice said, "Your engram is fading, Hykar."

She glanced back to the closing door, between her folded wings. "Has it been that long?"

"Yes."

She stopped in thought and her feathers shrunk close to her skin.

“May I renew it for you?” the voice rumbled.

Taking in a breath, she said, “Sure.”

A circle of floor about halfway to the entrance behind her slid away, and out from the hole rose a symmetrical arrangement of flat disks, each on thin mechanical arms, followed by a central plate of perforated metal which clicked into place. She walked over and stepped onto the plate while the disks folded smoothly out of her way like reeds. The disks then shifted to face their flat sides towards her from all angles and began to spin. And as their velocity increased, so too did her dreariness, until she fell asleep.

The horizon sang in violet while the stars above listened. The forest’s wards stood tall to await the daybreak. But they were dwarfed by the pillars of civilization to their sides. A peeping rose in the air, followed by clicks, and then trills. The jungle prepared for the sweltering day. Yet cool grass was beneath her folded legs.

She turned to watch the yellow hen beside her, who was fixated on the growing hemisphere of dawn, and said, “Bitty?”

The yellow hen glanced back with a glow in her eyes and sang, “What?”

“It’s all very purple. Like lavender.”

“Nothing like Mars, is it?”

Hykar bounced her head side to side.

“Just wait until you see this. You’ll wonder why you ever stayed there.”

Hykar looked back to the brightening horizon and whispered, “It’s cheaper.”

Bitty giggled. “That’s good a reason.”

Steadily, the brightening blue of dawn reached its peak. Shadows sprung into being as a blinding light rolled over the horizon. The fullness of color engulfed all in sight and warmed her feathers with a violet blue haze. From somewhere deep in her mind, a thought emerged. This alien world began to feel like home. Then, not but a moment later, and faster than the star had risen, it began to dim.

“Here we go,” Bitty whispered.

As the star continued upwards, its light split sideways and diminished, while the heavens above spun backwards through their shades. She felt her feathers prick up in a silent breeze. Then, the star stretched out and around into a great half circle, before winking out entirely.

And the jungle went silent. For where the star had disappeared now grew a red arc of iridescent light that spread into a full circle, enclosing a black disk over twice the size of the hidden light. In the darkness within the disk, patterns of clouds peeked out, while on its left and right ends, Hykar noticed spiraling bands of purple and red, waltzing to an unheard rhythm.

“You see the aurora?”

“Yes, but,” Hykar whispered, “Where are the lights?”

“You’ll see.”

The breeze strengthened with the brightening red ring. Once it reached its brightest, the whole of the banded disk lit up in a magnificent display. Countless blinking and flashing lights joined in a chorus of points across the dark surface. Until, suddenly, they formed the words:

Happy Eclipse-day!

She wondered at the shining lights as they and the wind instilled in her the tingly feeling of diving through the clouds. Then the lights began to meander, becoming harder and harder to pick out. As she glanced back to Bitty, then to her soundings, she found her vision blurry, and her limbs treading in water. She blinked.

A dark and steely room enclosed her on all sides. Before her, the whirl of spinning disks slowed. A low voice grumbled throughout.

“Welcome back, Hykar.”

You Shouldn't Leave Your Eternal Soul Lying Around

James Bradley

You shouldn't leave your eternal soul lying around
where any idle & capricious visionary prole,
haunted by the spirits of an unrealized yesteryear,
might pick it up & accidentally see something,
espying all the peaks & valleys of your naked conscience.
Perhaps he was raised by swans on an enchanted lake,
this prole, nursed at the teats of Rimbaud & the Bible,
a guarded romanticism which he keeps to this day
bestowed as his birthright by some long-lost ancestor,
come a-calling but once & never heard from again.

Fast-forward four elevens, the wilting shamrock of romance,
hidden & almost forgotten under a pile of his dirty laundry,
has maybe begun to sing the words of some wistful song,
some old peasants' ballad for the endless, thankless fields:

*"The rain will come, sweet serenade,
to grow the weeds that choke my mind.
The world was lost once it was made,
the maker evermore maligned."*

Let us all resolve to treat our treasures less carelessly
in this uncertain interval before the rain comes.



DarkStar. Digital art by Gianna Morelli.

The River Bed

Sawyer Star

At first a dousing of fear
A deep breath of still
One last fruitful effort as you grasp and pull
Sweet breaths, shivering relief
A lighthouse in the distance
Guiding you home
Warm soup, a good drink
Drowsy eyes and a heavy body
Soft mud caresses
You breathe pain
A bursting balloon
A doll with no strings
Terror desperately clings and coddles
Soon peeled away by soft care
A loving touch
A hand to hold
Warmth to sink into
One last lullaby



Steam by the Canyon. Photo by Solomon Sharp.

Big Chino

Jaxon Binch

Here, I gaze upon a land of great in-betweens
Where a valley of golden grass slants out towards a horizon,
And opens her berth to this red, wild land
As I step steep, downhill, a slight jaunt
Out across some wide, twisting expanse
There past the twin sphinxes, where tan sandstone rises-
And rises, and is suddenly level.
It stretches to the white-capped peaks,
Still, I gaze upon a land of great in-betweens.
A swirling eddy descends the mountainside
There ebb'd the wheat in golden tide,
With vast horizon to drink the dew of sunshine
And smell of juniper and pinyon pine
And black hills that roll like rain,
Or roll like thunder, like sea's terrain.



Cactus Close-up. Photo by Alex Nie.

Whiskey

Autumn Cooper

Deep, smooth amber liquid,
Draped over the rocks.
A bitter taste, it burns
But not in the same way you did
Such a waste of a night,
Mirroring my bitter spite.

I see your eyes in the whiskey
A colorful haze, I get lost in for days
How could you change for darker ways?

Memories rise then fade away,
Drinking whiskey to keep them at bay.
Yet like the taste the thoughts still linger.

I choke down another sip,
It hits, a sting that doesn't quit.
But not in the same way you did,

Grappling with the truth,
Reminding me of my youth.
Dearest twisted lifelong friend,
This drink reminds me of you,
Goodbye to wounds we could never mend.



Red Crest

Solomon Sharp

Personal Log

Date: 9/22/07

I've never really been the type to write about myself, so I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to be saying. My boss INSISTED that I put my thoughts down on paper—said it would be good for me. Funny, my boss is the last person I'd tell anything personal. I'll need to have a word with Jameson about his inability to hold his tongue about my personal life. As annoying as that is, the fact that there are words currently appearing on this page probably meant my boss was right. So, here I am, I guess.

I arrived at the cabin about 20 minutes ago. The drive took me a whopping 3 hours. There were a bunch of “roads” that had been completely reduced to mud due to last week's storm. Under normal circumstances, the drive down from Outpost Beta would have been half that. I'm just happy I didn't get stuck out in the cold. They never tell you how bitterly frigid it gets in the valley in the winter months. Granted, this place looks like nobody's been here for years. I find it hard to believe this cabin used to be another outpost, it's way too small to fit more than two VERY well-acquainted people. It goes without saying there's insects and spider webs and dust absolutely everywhere. I'm stuck writing in the truck for now as these pages would turn an irreversible shade of brown if I didn't. It's not all bad though—the view is spectacular. Being surrounded by these huge, immovable masses of rock is certainly humbling. It'll probably take me a few days to get situated, and hopefully I don't get my pay docked for it.

Date: 9/27/07

I'm surprised! Took me 5 days of blood, sweat, and tears to get to this point, but this cabin is way cozier than it looked. Not to toot my own horn, but I have quite spectacular house-cleaning skills. Maybe I should apply to be a renovator. House-flipping, anyone? Haha.. I guess I'll talk about the layout and how I got it set up. There's a kitchen and a cozy fireplace, with a couple large windows on the left and a giant cabinet on the right that unfortunately lacks a television. Just ahead is a short hallway (if you can even call it that) with a door on the right with the bathroom (With an actual toilet! Hurrah!). Funny enough, the bathroom has a pretty massive window. I mean, it's got a curtain, but still not much of a private space. The hall then cuts to the left and leads to my new office—which I've already set up and gotten ready to go. It actually has a pretty sizable window that lets in a ton of natural light. I keep my bed in here across from my desk, I really like how the light filters through the

window panes in the morning. Even though I'm in the valley, the cabin is on a relatively tall hill that lets me see a bit of a distance away. It's no lookout tower, but it'll do.

Date: 10/15/07

Nothing much of note so far. There was an illegal campfire last week I had to report, but that's about it. Even during my patrols the most action I get is a startled deer or two. Not that I'm complaining—I've really come to enjoy this little cabin. I don't even need to set an alarm anymore—the sound of the birds in the morning always wakes me up within the same 15 minute timeframe. I think the local wildlife has gotten more used to my presence as well—Just two days ago I saw a herd of deer led by a HUGE buck, just walking right past the front door while I was by my truck. The forecast is heavy snow for the next couple weeks though, so I have to start prepping for that. Despite being a ranger for years, this will be my first time working through the winter. It's not like I have to take off for the holidays anymore anyway.

Date: 10/25/07

I woke up late. Like, really late. That hasn't happened even once since I've been here. Not really sure why the birds were so quiet this morning - or why the sunlight didn't wake me up. I surely would have felt it, but my blinds were up. Maybe a moose was sleeping by the window or something. Regardless, today I have to start updating the park signs for winter weather warnings. The last thing anybody wants is some teenager biting off more than he can chew and getting stranded out here. Glad I bought snow tires.

Date: 10/27/07

Something is out there. I don't know what it is, but it's here and it's bad. Worse than bad. It's not something stupid like a bear. That's because I saw the goddamn corpse of one TORN TO SHREDS! A BEAR! I was out by a small campground beside the river, putting up a fence on the road when I heard it. There was growling—presumably from the bear, and this awful wail that sounded like a wooden chair being raked across a chalkboard. For whatever reason I thought it was a person, so I ran over to where I heard it. Stupid. Expecting to see a mauled tourist I instead see the decimated corpse of a fucking GRIZZLY! Part of me wishes it was a person instead. I don't know how I got out of there. I'm back in the cabin, but I don't feel even remotely safe. I need to think.

Date: 10/28/07

I couldn't sleep last night. At all. How could I? Writing this doesn't even come close to conveying the gore... Its stomach was torn through like

tissue paper, with huge, clean lacerations. The neck... I could see some of the spine protruding out of the skin and muscle. It was twisted like it was snapped more than once. I can't even write about the amount of blood and fur without throwing up in the journal. I have to lock down. Winter is coming, and I can't try to leave. If THAT is what happened to a grizzly, I doubt my truck is much more of a challenge.

Date: 10/29/07

I realized something. Whatever it was obviously saw me. Heard me. That's why it wasn't guarding the corpse. At first I thought it might have been a trap for me, luring me in for a second kill, but if that was the case I would be dead right now. It KNEW I would run away. It KNEW I would retreat back to my safe space. Oh god, it knows I'm here. It's playing the waiting game, and it intends to win. That bear will likely sustain it for some time, but it has me lined up for its next meal. I've never heard of an animal this intelligent. This patient. I'm carrying my shotgun with me EVERYWHERE I go from now on.

Date: 11/05/07

I saw it. It was brief, but I saw it. I was outside beside my truck, loading some supplies. The forest had gone unusually silent. No birds were singing, no wolves howling. The wind was stagnant and heavy—as if God was holding his breath. It felt like a city that suddenly went dark. It was the kind of silence that dropped your heart to the pit of your stomach. When I turned around... there it was. Right beyond the edge of the brush. It was taller than me, at least by a couple feet. Lizard-like, yet it tracked me like an owl. It stood completely still. The only perceptible movements it made were from its slow, deep breathing. Its huge, black claws glimmered in my peripheral vision. I couldn't bring myself to look at them. Its murky eyes and devilish red crests perched above its brow sent cold lightning through every tendon in my body. If I tried reaching for my shotgun, I would probably be inside its throat before I'd even get it off my back. If I ran, it would surely take me down in seconds. God, how I wanted to run. I've never been more terrified than at that moment. This was a different kind of helplessness. Not a "getting fired" kind of helpless. Not a "domestic court" kind of helpless. The dread that makes you think a singular primal thought in the presence of a killer: "I'm going to die."

But somehow, by the act of God—or maybe Satan—I managed to make it inside the cabin by slowly backing away, keeping my eyes on it. It never broke its gaze on me either. The instant I closed the door I heard its heavy footsteps retreat slowly back into the forest.

The snow starts tomorrow.

Date: 11/12/07

It's still out there. I haven't left the cabin since the encounter. I KNOW it's there. It's started to make these horrible guttural groans just outside the windows through the night. I can barely see outside with the storm, while it's gotten more comfortable. I haven't slept in days. I know this winter is more of a problem for me than it is for that monster. All I can do is hole up. Today I managed to get online to try and identify this thing. I'm not really sure how to write this without feeling senile. The ONLY match I could find was a fucking dinosaur. Something called Allosaurus. Am I mental?? A rationale that applies more readily than an apparent 60 whatever million years of extinction shouldn't be hard to come up with. This is not the retreat I wanted. This is not how I wanted to heal. This is not what the failure of a 20-year marriage is supposed to reap. I wanted to be ok with living alone, but it seems the only solitude I'm going to get is in my death.

Date: 11/??/07

IT'S AT THE FCCKING DOOR. It started banging, I don't think the old wood will hold out. I'm in the bathroom with shotgun, hopefully it doesn't fit and I can blast it in its face. Fuck. If I die, I'll go out with a bang. Wait, banging just stopped.

Living Room Security Camera Audio Recording Transcript

Date: 11/19/07

File Name: Edward_Hughes_Attack.mp3

Note: Automatic recording triggered due to excessive noise

00:00 [*violent banging*]

00:14 [*banging ceases*]

00:16 [*muffled breathing*]

00:19 Sh*t sh*t sh*t sh*t. Why did the banging stop?

00:24 It's not gone. It's decided... Today is the day I die. Today it feasts. It's done waiting and playing games. F*CK!

00:32 [*sobbing*] Mary... I'm sorry... I didn't want this. I didn't want to leave you like this. Maybe we could have tried harder. Maybe I could have [*inaudible*]. Just maybe—

00:40 [*muffled stomping*]

00:43 Oh God, The Windo—

00:45 [*glass shattering*] [*gunfire*]

00:49 [*crunching*]

00:54 [*silence*]

01:30 [*silence persists until 5 hours 4 minutes, when camera ceases automatic recording*]

Witness Report Transcript - Jameson Parks

Date: 12/15/07

Data Source: CrimeScene_Edward_Hughes.mp3

00:00 [*sigh*]

00:04 This is Jameson Parks, today is December fifteenth, two-thousand-and-seven.

00:10 I received word on November seventeenth that Edward Hughes—whom I previously worked with at outpost Beta—had not sent in any daily reports in over two weeks.

00:22 The snowstorm was still going strong at this time. The initial assumption was that the storm interfered with his communications, so it was a while until they sent me to go check on him.

00:34 [*silence*]

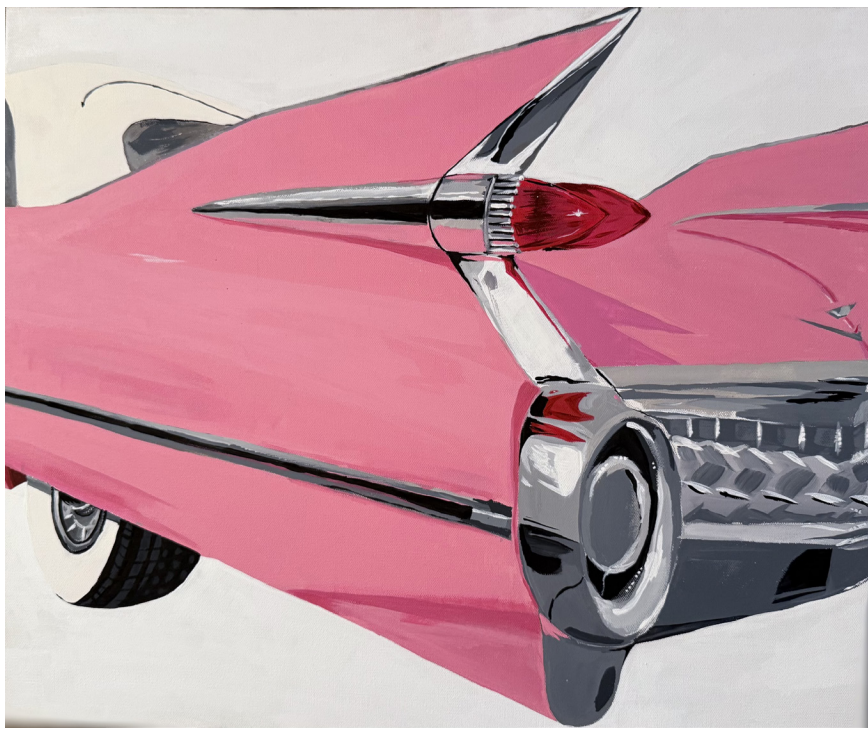
00:39 On December first, the storm cleared up enough that I was able to drive down. When I arrived, the first thing I noticed was his car—it was completely covered in snow, and it looked like it had not been used for a while. But then...

00:58 I noticed the front door was damaged—It looked like it was swung at with a sledgehammer the size of Manhattan. I walked along the side of the building to the bathroom window... and...

1:15 [*pause*]

1:17 It was completely destroyed. Inside was just... blood. Everywhere. On the bathroom walls, the sink, especially the toilet. Most of it was frozen over from being exposed to the air for what I assume was for days. After clearing some of the snow, I saw more blood trailing away from the window—like he was dragged out. I've seen bear attacks - and this was much, much worse. There wasn't even a body.

01:35 [*choking up*] I... I wish I went down there sooner. Maybe I could have reached him in time. Before... that. I recovered a notebook that looked like his diary. We'll cooperate with local law enforcement to figure out what happened. Edward was a good man. We worked together for a while, and I knew he was troubled, but he always had a strong spirit. He never had something like this coming—not in a million years.



Pink 1959 Cadillac Coupe Deville. Art by Vanessa Munoz.



1967 Ford Mercury Cougar. Photo by Andrea Taylor.

Time Marches On

Stetson Miller

The commander cried out:

“March on”

As the cavalries trampled over the forgotten

Never turning back to pick up the lost

I once heard a story of a man at the front of the line

He berated the commander with questions:

“Who are you?”

“How long have you been here?”

“Where do the lost go?”

“Why do we march?”

Each was followed with silence

The man then asked one final question,

“Where are we headed?”

For the first time during the trek the commander looked back at him

He paused for a moment, let out a slight chuckle, and pointed forward

Epistolary

Anonymous

Subject: Internal Memo – Rebuilding the New Orleans Vipers from the Ground Up

From: Jacob Masters, General Manager

To: Ownership & Baseball Operations

Date: February 14, 2026

All,

The Vipers have been stuck in mediocrity for too long. We've been chasing big contracts, missing on player development, and ultimately, failing to build a sustainable winning culture. That changes today.

Our rebuild will begin with a single pillar: Luke “The Southern Heat” Harlow.

Drafted out of Jesuit High School in 2023, Luke has dominated at every level of competition. His fastball regularly clocks in at 98 mph, and his breaking ball is unhittable. He is the franchise cornerstone we've been waiting for, but he won't do this alone. We must surround him with the right pieces.

Make no mistake, this is going to be a war. We are fighting old-school scouting, skeptical media, and an impatient fanbase. Our plan is simple: invest in data analytics, target undervalued prospects, and create a system that produces success at every level. Luke's rise will symbolize the Vipers' return to prominence.

We are all in. No shortcuts. No excuses.

—Jacob Masters General Manager, New Orleans Vipers

ESPN REPORT – March 10, 2026

"New Orleans Vipers GM Doubles Down on Unorthodox Rebuild"

The New Orleans Vipers, long considered one of Major League Baseball's most irrelevant franchises, are attempting one of the boldest rebuilds in sports history. General Manager Jacob Masters, known for his progressive approach to player development, is betting the future of the team on 21-year-old phenom Luke Harlow.

Despite struggling in Double-A last season, Harlow enters 2026 as the projected ace of the Vipers' rotation. Critics argue it's too soon, but the Vipers are embracing a high-risk, high-reward strategy. "Luke isn't just a player; he's a movement," Masters said in an exclusive interview. "We're building a team that will thrive for the next decade, and Luke is the foundation."

While some detractors remain, many analysts and former players believe the Vipers are on the right track. "This is the way modern baseball works," said former Cy Young winner James O'Connor. "You build a team around young, elite pitching and smart analytics. Luke Harlow is the real deal, and New Orleans is finally making the right moves."

Text Message Exchange – March 30, 2026

From: Coach Reynolds (MLB Pitching Coach) To: Luke Harlow

Coach: How's the arm feeling? Any soreness?

Harlow: Felt good today. Slider was sharper. Coach, I know I can go 7+ innings.

Coach: It's spring training. No need to rush. We need you in September, not just April.

Harlow: I get it. But I need to prove myself. Every. Single. Start.

Coach: You've already proved you belong. Now prove you can sustain it.

Player Evaluation Scratch Notes

April 2, 2026 – Luke Harlow, Starting Pitcher

Velocity: 102 mph max, averages 99 mph

Breaking ball: Tight, sharp break, unhittable in the right sequence

Mental toughness: 9.5/10 — Kid is fearless

Work ethic: 10/10 — First one in, last one out

Subject: Harlow concerns

To: Jacob Masters, General Manager

From: Andrew Collins, Team Owner

Date: June 15, 2026

Jacob,

I've been patient. I believed in your vision. But we are 24-41. The fans are restless. The media is calling this a failure. Harlow is struggling—his command has been inconsistent, and he's leaving too many pitches over

the plate, leading to hard contact and big innings. The jump to the majors has exposed some weaknesses in his approach, and he's struggling to adjust to experienced hitters. What's your plan to fix this?

We are hemorrhaging money, and I need to see progress. If this experiment fails, it won't just be your reputation on the line.

Andrew Collins

Text Message Exchange – July 3, 2026

From: Luke Harlow To: Daniel Harlow (His father)

Harlow: Dad, I don't know if I can do this. I gave up 6 runs in 4 innings. Crowd was booing. I feel like I'm letting everyone down.

Dad: Remember when you struck out 14 guys in that state championship? Pressure is part of it. You fight through.

Harlow: This is different. These hitters don't miss any mistakes.

Dad: Then stop making them. Adjust. Work harder.

Harlow: I feel like I'm failing.

Dad: Then get up tomorrow and fix it. That's what you do.

Press Release

Vipers Announce Historic Contract Extension – November 10, 2028

BREAKING: The New Orleans Vipers sign ace pitcher Luke Harlow to a record-breaking 12-year, \$480 million contract, largest in MLB history.

Despite a rocky start to his career, Harlow has emerged as the most dominant pitcher in baseball. His 2028 season (21-3, 2.19 ERA, 276 Ks) solidified his place among the game's elite.

"This is where I belong," Harlow said in a press conference. "This organization believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. Now, it's time to bring a championship to New Orleans." GM Jacob Masters reflected on the journey: "This wasn't easy. The criticism, the doubts, the failures—we felt all of it. But we never stopped believing. This is just the beginning." Former players and analysts now praise the Vipers' strategy. "People called this crazy, but look at the results," said baseball analyst Greg Martinez. "Harlow's the best pitcher in the league, and the Vipers are finally relevant. This is how you rebuild the right way."

Journal of Jacob Masters, General Manager December 25, 2028

We did it. Three years ago, this felt impossible. We took a raw kid from Louisiana and turned him into the highest-paid pitcher in baseball history. We built a team around him, not just with talent but with belief. The sacrifices were real. I almost lost my job. Luke nearly broke under the pressure. But we stuck to the plan. The Vipers are no longer a joke. We are contenders.

There is still more work to do. But tonight, for the first time in years, I'm allowing myself to enjoy the moment.

Tomorrow, we get back to work.

Baseball Writers' Association of America
Contemporary Baseball Era Hall of Fame Committee
25 Main Street
Cooperstown, New York 13326

July 17, 2039

Luke Harlow,

The Hall of Fame Induction Committee is pleased to invite you to the induction ceremony on July 27, 2039. While we cannot confirm whether you have been selected for induction at this time, we believe your presence will be essential in making this year's inductees truly unforgettable.

Sincerely,

Baseball Hall of Fame Inductee Council

The Last Call

Margaret Colwell

Arvin was alone in the quiet of his small apartment when his phone rang. A prickle of hesitation shot down his spine as an unfamiliar number popped up. Arvin's heart pounded, something told him this wasn't one of those telemarketers or wrong-number calls. He answered with some reluctance.

"Arvin... it's me," came a familiar, wavering voice.

The room seemed to close in around him. It was Rishab, the father he had shut out from his life. Rishab's voice was thin and ragged, barely a whisper. "Don't hang up, please. I... I don't have much time," he begged.

Memories pummeled Arvin. The moment that had ended their relationship. The moment when the truth had come crashing down around him. Arvin was just fifteen, when he had discovered the secret that shattered their family. He had walked in the door of their house, slightly earlier than normal. He heard an unfamiliar voice and peeked around the corner into the kitchen. In that painful instant, Arvin had seen Rishab with another woman, his hands placed on her in ways one only holds someone they love. This moment, when Rishab's promises dissolved into empty air, was all burned in his memory.

Arvin's voice trembled with anger, sorrow, and the desire for answers. "Why now, Rishab? After all these years, why call now?"

There was a long pause. "I... I'm dying, Arvin. The doctors say I don't have much time left. I needed to tell you ... I'm sorry."

Sorry. The word landed like a stone. Arvin remembered the day after even more clearly: the day his sweet mother had wept silently in the kitchen as Rishab packed a suitcase for a life with someone else. Leaving their family in a storm of abandoned promises. Rishab hadn't tried to be there; he hadn't fought for their family. And now, as Arvin stood on the other side of the phone, all those years of silence, abandonment, and heartbreak surged up once more.

"You left us, Rishab," Arvin stated simply. "You weren't there when Mom needed you, when I needed you. You broke every promise you ever made."

There was a hollow sigh on the other end. “I know. I was a coward. I thought I could run away from the pain. I thought that by disappearing, I could spare you more hurt.”

Arvin’s fingers tightened around the phone. The familiar ache tightened his chest. “You didn’t just leave me. You left the family.”

A pause “I... I know nothing can make up for that day. But please, Arvin will you stay here, just for a while?”

Silence.

“I don’t think I can forgive you,” Arvin whispered.

His father’s voice cracked. “I’m not asking you to forgive me. I just... I needed you to know that I loved you, in my own terrible, flawed way. I was too selfish, too weak to be the father you needed.

Arvin inhaled, memories flashed, years of missed birthdays, recitals, and moments when he needed his father. Yet, beneath his layers of anger, there was a fragile ember of longing, a wish things could have been different. A lump formed in Arvin’s throat as he recalled a picture he had drawn. The two of them, soaring together to the moon.

“Do you even remember; do you remember that drawing?”

“I do,” Rishab replied softly. “I kept it with me all these years. It reminded me of the boy I once wanted to be—the man I failed to become.”

This admission, raw and unguarded, stirred something within Arvin. His anger warred with sorrow, and for a moment, the past seemed to soften under the truth. Yet the scars remained, too deep to heal in a single conversation.

“I’ve spent all these years thinking you didn’t care enough to stay,” Arvin said, his voice steadying despite the pain. “I waited for a father who never came back.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rishab repeated, each syllable a confession of regret. “I know I hurt you, and I know I hurt the people I claimed to love. I can’t change the past, Arvin, but if you’ll let me, I’d like to share what little time I have left with you.”

The silence that followed was thick with memories and unanswered questions. Arvin's mind raced, could this call, this final connection, bring even a sliver of peace? Could the unspeakable betrayal be softened by understanding, if not forgiveness?

Finally, Arvin exhaled shakily. "I won't say I forgive you," he said, voice heavy with the weight of years. "But maybe... maybe I can listen. Just for now."

A faint smile trembled in Rishab's voice. "Thank you, Arvin. That's all I ask."

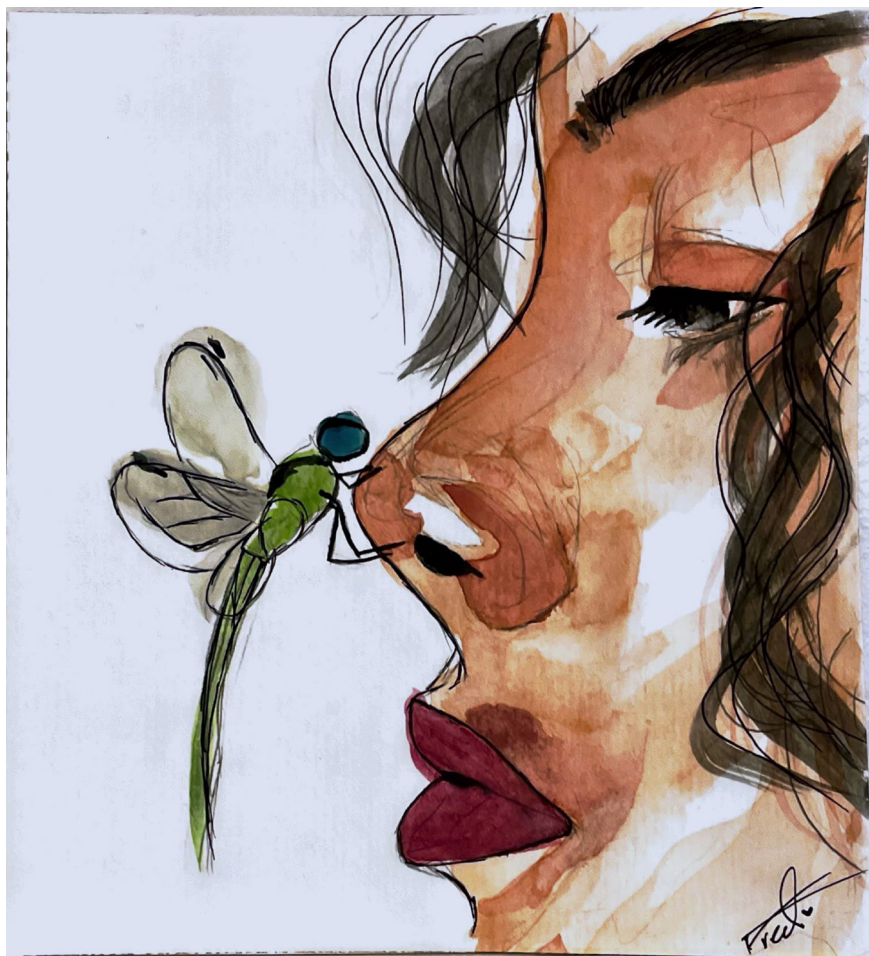
They spoke slowly, hesitantly, weaving through the tangled emotions of the past. Rishab recalled the moments he regretted most, the mornings he missed, the promises broken. Arvin listened, the sound of his father's voice a bittersweet reminder of what was lost. There was no magic in this conversation, no miraculous evaporation of hurt. There was only the raw, unvarnished truth, shared between the two souls who had been separated by years of silence and betrayal.

As the night deepened, Rishab's voice grew softer, eventually trailing off as he fought the darkness. Arvin stayed on the line, his own emotions a tumultuous blend of anger, grief, and an unexpected tenderness. In that quiet, fragile space, the distance between them narrowed, if only for a fleeting moment.

When Rishab finally slipped into silence, Arvin felt both a profound sadness and a small measure of peace. The scars of the past were not healed, but in the pain of that final call, they had shared something real—a final, human connection before the final goodbye.

The phone lay still in Arvin's hand as they stared into the silence of the room. He knew that nothing could bring back the years lost or mend the broken promises. But perhaps, in that last lingering moment, he had taken the first tentative step toward understanding the man who had once been his father.

And maybe, that was enough.



Dragonfly. Art by Fred Phillips.

Butterfly

Autumn Cooper

Inspiring traveler on painted wings.
Creature so agile and fragile.
Hope that flutters and flies,
And will probably die.

Oh butterfly, tell me no lies,
About my fate, and please don't hesitate.
I say hope drifts like wings in flight,
But they say that I'm not too bright.

Oh butterfly, ignorance is bliss,
But so often they miss.
Ignorance is cheap and comes in heaps,
And right now, it's all I can afford.

Oh butterfly, where will you go, what will you sow?
Can I come along; I'll sing a song?
I don't want to hide,
But I wish to go outside.

Oh butterfly, flying high with your friends,
With them you don't have to pretend.
I'm alone like her clone here.
Sometimes her shadows bring me fear.

Oh butterfly, around the house is broken glass.
They cut deep but I cannot tell my class.
I'm sitting at the window trying to be super still,
Admiring and aspiring to be you.

Oh, mom's yelling again.
Got to go.
Bye-bye butterfly,
Hope to see you another time.

Fairy

Cordelia Cep

Sparkle dust ignited
I felt a little entranced
In your dreary light
Someone whispered in my ear
And told me what you wanted to hear
Everything just felt so right

The fairy disappeared and is now long gone
Now I don't know what makes you tick
I spite you to get a reaction but you just shake your head

It's All You

Stetson Miller

I tried writing a sonnet today
Started with some imagery and turned to the sky for advice
The sun reminisced your warm radiance Swallowing all desperation
The moon, your quiet resolve holding steady at the darkest of times
“I can't keep writing about you”
So, I switched to the foreground, saw a tree, and wrote:
“The twisted willow branches stretched out as if yearning for the clouds”
But I could only see myself as the branches, and you as the clouds
Again, nature was merely echoing your beauty
I'd write about the leaves rustling in the wind and it was your hair
Oh, and how quickly the lakes' tranquility turned into describing your
turquoise eyes
The metaphors just kept leading me to you

It's all you
All I write
All I see
All I am



To the Moon. Photo by Solomon Sharp.

Mythical Skies

Spencer Savage

It began with a story.
The sky glittered like she'd never seen
in the small time she had been on Earth.
Her father pointed up at the stars
twinkling far above the campfire
and told her magical tales of gods,
warriors, lovers, and faith.

It went on with a car ride.
She leaned her head out the window, just
to see favorite constellations
as her mother drove endless streets.
And her laugh, though she never knew it,
Prompted a smile back from the stars.
It had felt like an eternity
since anyone honored them.

She studied astronomy
but could never care for her homework
when she'd been robbed of the Milky Way.
She felt angry, and though they were gone,
wondered if humans ever realized
the consequences of their actions,
or if they had even cared at all.
Did anyone take a second glance?
Did they know what they had done?

She never met anyone
who admired the stars as she did.
She never met someone who knew
the magical tales her father told.
She never met anyone who cared.
And though she never had to see it,
there would come a night when the last star
vanished from the Earth's skies. Long after
her death, science she devoted her
life to was as mythical as tales
she devoted her love to.

Deer

Isabella Rekemeyer

The road stretched on endlessly, winding through towering pine trees. Sunlight filtered through the canopy, casting golden patches onto the asphalt as Adele steered the car up the gravel driveway.

“We have officially arrived!” she announced, throwing the car into park.

The group leaned forward to get their first real look at the Airbnb they had spent weeks picking out. It was gorgeous—a sleek, modern lakehouse on the edge of an impossibly still body of water. Glass walls overlooked the shimmering lake, reflecting the sky in a way that almost made the house seem like part of the landscape itself. A wooden deck stretched out over the water, complete with lounge chairs and a fire pit.

“This is way nicer than I thought it’d be,” Corbin stated.

“See, I told you. I don’t pick trashy places,” said Adele.

Corbin, who had been skeptical of the whole “let’s rent a cabin in the middle of nowhere” idea, took a good look at the cabin and stated “Alright I’ll admit it, this place is nice.”

Jackie, the group’s self-proclaimed wildcard, had already grabbed his bags and was headed for the door, and yelled “This is luxury. We should just move here. Screw college.”

Corbin’s younger brother Oliver, who had been forced to join along in this spring break trip by Corbin’s parents, and who had been quiet the whole ride, stepped out of the car, took a good look around and muttered, “Why does it look so empty?”

“What?” asked Corbin.

Oliver did not reply and made his way to the house.

Corbin took a good look at the lakehouse; beautiful as it was, it felt oddly untouched. The lawn was perfectly manicured, the water undisturbed, the house itself pristine... and yet there was something unsettling about how still everything was.



Oxygen. Photo by William Panches.

The interior was even more impressive. Floor-to-ceiling windows flooded the space with natural light. The furniture was a mix of rustic and modern—plush couches, a huge kitchen island, and a massive flat-screen TV mounted above a sleek electric fireplace. Upstairs, there were four bedrooms, each with its own bathroom.

“Okay, I am never leaving,” Jackie declared, throwing himself onto the nearest couch.

Adele threw a pillow at him. “At least pretend to help unpack.”

Corbin was already in the kitchen. “They even left us a welcome basket. Fancy.” He noticed Oliver standing with his suitcase, staring fixedly at something outside with an odd expressionless look. “Everything okay buddy?”

Oliver turned his head slightly, not breaking eye contact with whatever he was looking at, and said “Yeah, I am good.”

Corbin looked out the window and just saw the pool, with the lake over to the side of the house and a dense forest that surrounded the property. He asked Oliver, “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” said Oliver quickly, he then broke his eye contact and hurried upstairs to begin unpacking.

As the evening settled in, the group lounged, sprawled across the couches and floor. The massive TV played some old reality show in the background while Jackie shuffled through a deck of cards, trying to convince someone to play poker. A soft hum of conversation filled the space, broken only by the occasional crackle of the electric fireplace.

Then, without warning, the wi-fi stuttered. The video on the screen froze, the little loading circle spinning endlessly.

“Ugh, really?” Adele groaned, as she made her way to check the router.

“Maybe it’s just slow,” Corbin said, scrolling on his phone. A minute passed. Then two. The loading symbol never disappeared.



“Okay, this is weird,” Corbin muttered. “Anyone else’s service acting up?”

Jackie let out a dramatic sigh. “Mine’s dead too. What kind of expensive Airbnb doesn’t have decent wi-fi?”

Adele frowned. “It was working fine earlier.”

Another minute passed, and the signal bars on their phones blinked out completely. No wi-fi. No cell service. Just silence.

As Corbin looked around at the group, he noticed Oliver sitting on the couch, staring out into the night through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Unlike the others, he didn’t seem remotely concerned about the loss of wi-fi or service. His face was blank, almost vacant, as he watched the darkness beyond the glass.

Corbin followed his gaze but saw nothing—just their reflections on the glass, the faint outline of trees, and the barely visible lake beyond.

Adele clapped her hands together. “Alright, this is dumb. The wi-fi’s out, but we’re not gonna sit here freaking out over it. We should just get some sleep.”

Jackie groaned, flopping onto the couch like a spoiled child. “This is so lame. It’s literally spring break.”

“I am tired,” Adele said, rubbing her eyes.

“Yeah,” Corbin added. “Think I’ve got a headache.” He didn’t, really. He just felt off.

“Fine,” Jackie huffed. Then his expression lit up. “Guess that means it’s time for drinks!”

Corbin groaned. “I’m going to bed. You guys have fun, but keep it down.”

Adele nodded in agreement and grabbed her bag, heading to her room.

As soon as they had disappeared upstairs, Jackie nudged Oliver. “What about you, little dude? You drinking?”

Oliver blinked at him, his expression unreadable.

“No way,” Corbin’s voice called from upstairs, his footsteps creaking on the floor above them. “He’s only sixteen. Don’t even try it, Jackie.”

Jackie threw his hands up in the air. “Geez, okay, okay.”

But as soon as Corbin’s door clicked shut, Jackie grinned and slid a red plastic cup toward Oliver. “C’m on, man. You’re practically an adult. One drink won’t kill you.”

Oliver hesitated, staring at the cup.

“Don’t be a buzzkill,” Jackie said.

Oliver took it, his eyes drifting back to the window, where he continued to stare silently into the night.

In the morning, Corbin woke up feeling worse. His head pounded, his limbs heavy, like he hadn’t really slept at all. The air in his room felt thick, stale—wrong. There was this nagging sensation deep in his chest, a creeping unease that hadn’t left since last night.

He rubbed his eyes, reaching for his phone.

No wi-fi. No service. No notifications.

His stomach twisted.

Something about the silence of the house made his skin crawl. He dragged himself out of bed, pulling on a hoodie before stepping into the hallway.

As he descended the stairs, a faint scent of alcohol lingered in the air—stale beer and cheap vodka clinging to the furniture, mixing with the burnt-out scent of the fireplace. The coffee table was still littered with red solo cups and a couple of empty cans.

The TV was still on, but the screen was frozen on the same loading symbol from last night. Jackie was nowhere to be seen, and the rest of the house was eerily still.

The unease in his chest grew heavier.

Shaking it off, he moved into the kitchen. Maybe coffee would help.

The quiet hum of the coffee machine was the only sound in the house as he poured himself a cup, taking a slow sip. The warmth soothed his throat, grounding him for the first time since waking up.

Then, out of habit, he glanced out the window.

And nearly dropped his mug.

Oliver was outside.

Standing in the damp grass at the edge of the pool. Still. Unmoving.

His hands hung limply at his sides, his shoulders stiff.

And surrounding him—dozens of deer.

They filled the yard, their bodies crowding near the pool, their heads poking out from the tree line. At least fifty. Maybe a hundred. All perfectly still. All staring.

Corbin's heart slammed against his ribs. His hands went ice cold.

He set his coffee down, barely aware of the sound it made against the counter.

Then, before he could even think, he ran to the sliding glass door and yanked it open.

“Oliver!”

The moment his voice cut through the air, every single deer snapped their heads toward him at the exact same time.

Oliver turned too, slowly, his expression unreadable.

Then, in one sudden movement, the deer scattered—a rush of hooves against the ground, bodies disappearing into the trees like they had never been there at all.

Corbin stood frozen, his pulse hammering in his ears.

Oliver just kept staring at him.

“What are you doing?!” Corbin shouted, stepping onto the porch.

After a long pause, finally Oliver spoke, his voice flat. “They were out here all night.”



The Blackbriar Berry

Jordan Stephens

“Do not break the branches, as she will take offense. She will come to you and offer you something simple—politely refuse. Leave quickly, and do not return. Do not look at her, else you will be caught in her spell. She will call, cry, and laugh out your name. Do not follow it. Do not eat anything grown in the forest. The longer you are in Blackbriar, the easier you will be to hunt.” The words of the Elder echoed through his mind as they walked.

“Alaric, why are you staring?” Sorin asked with a chuckle, balancing on a large fallen branch.

“I’m heeding the warnings Elder Tolis gave us. Why are you ignoring them?” Alaric hissed, jerking his head at a sound—a giggle? The wind?

Sorin laughed loudly, leaping off the branch and weaving between the trees with carefree steps.

“The Elder is a foolish old man who believes in folk tales. Much like you, apparently.” He grinned. “Besides, I wouldn’t mind if I met a nymph. Especially if she looks even half as good as these lovely woods!”

“Well, you would mind it if said nymph wanted to kill you,” Alaric muttered.

The forest was dense, its thick canopy letting in only slivers of light. Alaric had wanted to take the long road home, but Sorin insisted on cutting through Blackbriar to save time. While wary of the risk, Alaric had agreed—he was eager to see Annora again; to place the necklace around her neck himself.

“But she’s evil,” he muttered.

“Oh, shut up, Alaric,” Sorin sighed. “You worry too much. We need to get home, or we’ll be late for the weddings. Halla will love these gold-set pearls, and Annora will love your gift as well.” He smirked. “Though she might not love how easily frightened her betrothed is.”

Alaric ignored him, focusing instead on every whisper of wind, every creak of branches.

Then—*Snap*.

Sorin had landed hard on a brittle branch, splitting it in two beneath his boot. The sound echoed unnaturally, and silence fell over the forest like a thick, suffocating shroud.

Alaric froze. Sorin hesitated, glancing around. Then, from deep within the woods, a soft, echoing cry drifted toward them.

“Do you hear that?” Alaric whispered.

Sorin rolled his eyes. “It’s the wind.”

A low, haunted laugh wove through the trees. It was rich, melodic, and far too knowing.

Alaric swallowed hard. “You broke a branch.”

Sorin scoffed. “And?”

“She will take offense.”

“And what will she do, brother? Steal me away?” He spread his arms mockingly before stalking ahead.

Alaric followed, every instinct screaming at him to run. Hours passed, the silence pressing on his ears, until Sorin groaned, rubbing his stomach. “What I wouldn’t give for some lamb stew. Or even a crust of bread.”

“We can eat when we leave the forest.”

Sorin scoffed. “Oh, look, Alaric! My prayers have been answered—a blackberry bush! We shall finally eat!” He darted forward with a triumphant cry.

Alaric’s blood ran cold. The bush had not been there a moment before.

“No!” He yanked Sorin back, eyes scanning the shadows. A slow hiss, barely perceptible, coiled around him.

“We mustn’t eat anything from this forest,” he whispered. “Elder Tolis warned us...”

Sorin wrenched free, anger flashing across his face. “Elder Tolis is not here! I am starving.” He stomped toward the bush, reaching out—

The thicket shifted. From the brambles, a slender, pale arm extended, fingers stained deep red. A single blackberry rested in her palm, dark as ink. Sorin stilled. His breath hitched. Alaric felt his own lungs tighten.

The brambles parted further, revealing a face both inhumanly beautiful and utterly wrong. Wild eyes gleamed from the shadows, with pale skin and knotted dark hair. And her lips—deeply stained red—curved into a predatory smile.

“Would you like a berry?”

The brothers froze when she spoke, Sorin’s arm still outstretched to grab a berry.

“Sorin,” she sang, beckoning him from the tree across from them. “I know you’re hungry, Sorin. Have a few berries.” She tilted her head, dark locks tangled with brambles and falling over her shoulders. Her voice was sweet—coaxing—drawing him in.

His brother walked toward her as though in a trance, his every step slow and deliberate. Reaching out, he was about to accept the fruit when Alaric slapped his hand away.

“Sorin, no!” Alaric cried, desperately trying to pull him back. But Sorin shoved him away, too lost in the trance of the nymph.

“Just a taste,” she coaxed, her voice like honey, her face beckoning him closer.

“Sorin, please!” Alaric begged, watching as his brother froze for a moment.

“Just a taste,” Sorin whispered, unable to resist the pull.

Alaric watched helplessly as his brother accepted the berry, juice staining his face as he chewed in grim delight.

“You should have listened to your brother,” the nymph hissed from the bramble; her once-beautiful face twisting into something darker, more sinister.

Sorin froze, but it was already too late. Alaric screamed in horror as brambles surged from the earth, wrapping around Sorin's body and lifting him high into the air.

"Sorin, no!" Alaric shouted, frozen in place, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Alaric!" Sorin's shrill scream echoed through the woods as the bramble's thorns ripped through his flesh. "Alaric, plea—!" His cry was cut short as the vines crawled into his mouth, suffocating him, killing him as they filled every orifice.

The nymph's sinister laugh filled the air as his blood rained down in a grotesque shower. Suddenly, Sorin's neck bent unnaturally, his broken eyes fixing on Alaric as thorny brambles pulled his torn face into a mocking smile.

"Just a taste, brother," the nymph's voice whispered from Sorin's mutilated lips. *"A delicious taste."*



Alaric's legs shook as he found his feet and ran. He didn't look back as the woods seemed to close in. He leapt over fallen branches and crashed through the undergrowth, his heart racing in his chest, each beat urging him to escape.

"Alaric," she called softly, her voice like a haunted sigh. A cold chill ran down his spine. "Alaric!" Her cry, now twisted and tortured, echoed through the trees with a chilling wind. He screamed as he tripped over a branch, vines lashing out to ensnare him.

The fine silver necklace intended for his betrothed nearly fell from his bag, but he snatched it back just in time as a thorned vine reached for it.

"Alaric, hurry!" A voice broke through the madness—Annora's voice. "She's coming, Alaric, please!"

"Annora!" Alaric called out, rushing toward what he thought was the edge of the woods, his heart desperate with hope. He could see sunlight filtering through the trees. "Annora, I'm coming!"

But when he broke through the tree line, he found himself face-to-face with the nymph, standing right back in the middle of the woods.

"Alaric, hurry!" she called with a predatory smile, Annora's voice dripping from her lips. Fear coiled in Alaric's gut like a greasy black pit.

"You should have heeded the warnings of your elder!" she giggled, licking blood from her palms, her eyes gleaming with otherworldly hunger. "Such is the wishful thinking of man—simple, but delicious creatures."

Annora's silver necklace slipped from his fingers, falling to the forest floor with a quiet, fatal thud.

She paused from underneath her bramble, lifting her mouth from her feast as she sensed another presence in her woods. With a smile, she dropped the limb and silently ran through the shadows.

A fine silver necklace hung from her neck, stained with drops of red like her hands and face. She stood in the thicket, watching as the traveler passed by, unaware of the danger that was near them.

"Would you like a berry?"

The Eye of the Cat

James Bradley

The eye of the cat at midday,
yellow & slit down the middle
with its graceful allowance
of the abnegation of the light
& the abdication of the crown
of the world, like a sharp sword,
which purchases its hard-fought freedom
to choose its enemies with care,
to cut its friends without warning,
purring evilly in a pool of their blood.

I have known a cat or two in my day,
felt the weight of the feline lover
vibrating with contentment,
rising & falling with my breath
like the angelic feet that stomp
the winepress of the bitter harvest,
and if by chance I should cramp
& shift the warm, sunny bedding
of my body in the heat of the day,
the eye of the cat will strike me down.



Seeing Eye. Artwork by Martin Winiarsky.

Wildflower

Autumn Cooper

Exotic, rare, beautiful solo.
Boring, average, underwhelming when caught in a bunch.
Center of your counter, your table, your home.
Seemingly your world,
But not your heart.

Hurt by your shallow eyes,
Noticed only when someone else points me out,
Someone else admires me,
Or when it's time to throw me out.

Dead and rotting from the lack of love and attention.
Resting with memories of us,
Of you.
Saving me from my home.
Giving me a place in yours.
Sharing your time for a while,
Until it became like the water in my vase,
Dried up and vanished.

When was the right time for you,
To toss me aside for someone new?
Kicking me out of what I thought was my true home,
Into a mess of life without you.

Having to find a way to make it my new sanctuary.
Finding my beauty,
While feeling dirty.

Among the others you once called love,
Forever trapped,
Just one wildflower among dozens.

Thoughts From Across a Bar

Autumn Cooper

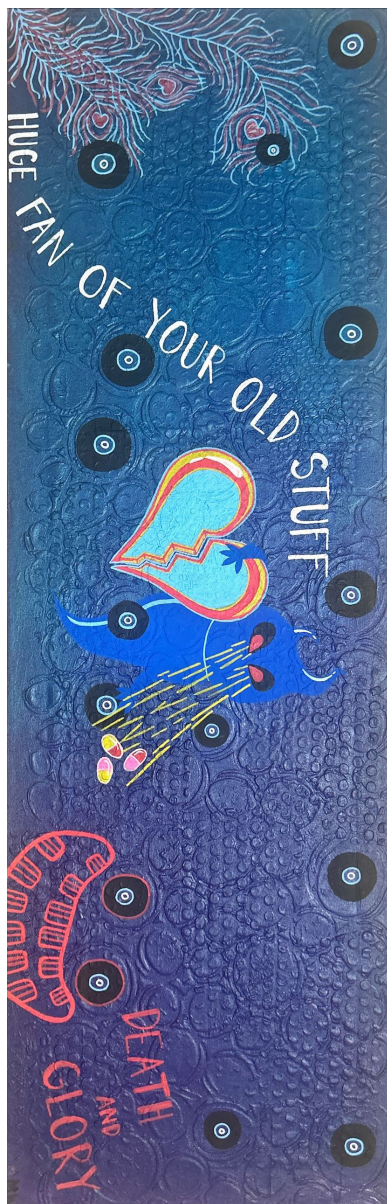
Are you happy now
I assume so
Your smile is brighter
And wider
You walk taller
And stronger
No longer sulking around me
Or stalking others

Are you happy now
No longer hiding
Or bidding your time to speak
No more talking in code
Or avoiding our home
No more keeping secrets from me
Or worse, keep me a damn secret

Are you happy now
Good
That's good

That means all my tears were worth it
Though my fears came true
I am the last one to get over you
But through the sorrowful
And painful nights
It makes my day somewhat bright
To know you're okay

Yes, I still love you
Yes, I still want you
But above all it puts me at ease
Though it stings
To know you're happy now
In ways you never could with me



U've Changed. Artwork by Martin Winiarsky.

Simplicity of Tranquility

Abigail Conners

Soothing as a summer breeze,
Idyllic landscapes draped in sunlight,
Morning dew delicately glistening in the grass like diamonds—
Places we all wish to return.
Life often persists in being bustling and chaotic.
Indeed, we are often clouded by tumultuous conflict,
Created in our own self-image.
Intense displays of violence, plastered on all screens,
Tell a tale of never-ending war.
Young hearts slowly become corrupted.
Oh, how I wish to return to the simplicity of tranquility!
For long, I have searched for solutions to this internal turmoil,
To revert to that once peaceful place, however now,
Returning seems an impossibility—
An insurmountable loss.
Never shall we return to that place, that
Quiet, peaceful place.
Unwilling do we dare venture further
Incontrovertibly possessing the primal instinct to return to comfort.
Life, as they say, is nothing without dissention.
In reality, this is not false,
Though no one can deny, we all wish to be
Young again once more.





Pip. Painting by Axl Burtleson.

Summer Peace

Nevaeh Allen

Honey drips down my brain as the lukewarm air blows from the car vents onto my face. Viscous and dark but sweet and clear. My thoughts are laid down to rest, for a short time.

The rumble of the engine grounds me as the yellow, green, red lights fly by, the stars looking down, watching as I close the eyes of my soul to be still.

Listening, I hear the voices of those I will never meet, run their cords over the strings of a fleeting guitar. Embracing the radio and riding the waves right into my ears.

Sound or silence can be the same as the weight of the world crashes down on my chest and my throat shuts off the water supply that flows in the present as I feel towards the future.

This moment. This peace. This melancholy bloom as a second in time lights the flame of my life and reminds me to live it.

In a clouded mind I mind my steps so as to not disturb the quiet that sits patiently in the corner of my heart waiting for someone to join them.



Overlook. Photograph by Alex Nie.

Prince Marion

Sam Costello

Eris made his way into the forest. As he went to pocket his keys, the small, metallic charm hanging from them made him pause. It was a bright yellow snake with two heads Lucius had gotten for him. The older man had brought it back for Eris, saying that it reminded him of him.

Lucius was one of the most confusing people Eris had ever met. On paper, he was everything that he had learned to fear. Every witch he'd ever met was a greedy, self-centered asshole who didn't care about anything but their precious spells and potions. Not other people, and certainly not other magical creatures. But Lucius... he was different. He was kind and caring and somehow managed to give Eris something he hadn't had for very much of his short teenaged life: a home.

Eris shook his head, his fist clenching around the charm. He finally put his keys away, trying not to dwell on those thoughts too much. It wasn't like him to get so emotional or attached.

As he walked, he heard a sound that caught his attention. It was a high-pitched giggle, followed by the sound of leaves rustling. Curious, Eris

followed the noise until he stumbled upon a clearing in the woods. There he saw a small child, no more than ten or eleven years old, swinging a stick around like a sword.

The child was dressed in rags, both his pants and shirt torn around the edges. A stained red cloth was tied around his shoulders like a cape and a crumpled paper crown sat atop his head. He still hadn't noticed Eris yet, continuing to wave the stick around as he battled invisible enemies.

Eris watched the child curiously. What was he doing out here all alone? Most parents wouldn't dare to let their children wander into the woods with all the rumors floating around. Didn't they know that a very dangerous witch and his minions lived here?

Eris finally decided to step forward, just enough to gain the child's attention. He hoped to just scare him off, sticking to the shadows for now. The boy spun around, his eyes going wide at his sudden appearance. He pointed his stick at him, taking up a defensive position.

"Who goes there?!" The child asked, trying to sound authoritative.

"Just a resident of the woods," Eris replied, with a tilt of his head. "Who are you?"

The boy puffed his chest out. "I'm the brave Prince Marion! Here to protect people from all the dangers of the forest!" He paused, eyeing Eris' place in the shadows. "...Do I need to vanquish you?"

"...Excuse me?"

"I mean, you're acting all weird and stuff. Most people who do that are kinda evil," Marion replied, nodding his head like it all made perfect sense.

Eris sighed internally, already done with this whole conversation. Of course he had to get one of the stupidly brave ones. At this point he just wanted the boy out of their forest so he could continue with what was supposed to be a nice, peaceful walk. He stepped out of the shadows, ready to give Marion a piece of his mind, when the child gasped.

Marion's eyes locked onto the serpent side of Eris' face, going wide. The teen flushed red with anger, quickly raising his hand to cover the scales as best he could. Eris swore to himself, cursing his reaction to something so simple. Living with Lucius had gotten him used to being treated

normally, to not feeling like a freak. His lips pulled back, ready to snarl at Marion to stop staring when—

“You’re like me!” Marion said with delight, his face lighting up.

Eris stopped, his anger snuffed out almost instantly, and stared at him. “...Like... you?”

“Yea! See?” Marion hooked a finger inside his mouth and pulled his cheek back, revealing sharp, pointed teeth. “I have weird ears too, if you wanna see them!”

Eris’ eyes widened. Was this child some type of fae? He certainly had the characteristics for it...

“—and I can do this!” The child proudly proclaimed, throwing his hand above his head. Fire erupted from his fingertips, shooting into the air above them.

Eris’ eyes went wide as he staggered backwards, feeling the heat of the flames on his face.

A fire elemental. Great.

“Stop! Stop that!” He yelled, quickly looking around the clearing they were in. If anyone had seen it... “You’ll burn the whole damn forest down!”

Marion extinguished the flames, looking a little sheepish as he lowered his hand back down to his side. “Oopsie.”

Eris straightened himself out with a frown, grumbling as he readjusted his cape and hat. “Yes.... oopsie. What were you thinking, drawing that much attention to yourself?”

Marion looked down, digging the toe of his shoe into the dirt. “Well, my brother always likes it when I make it big. He said he thinks it’s ‘really freaking sweet’.”

Eris’ mouth flattened into a line. Great. There were not just one, but two highly irresponsible children sending out beacons for anyone to follow in their forest. What if these displays lead hunters right to them? As much as he didn’t want to admit it, Eris couldn’t lose Lucius, *he couldn’t*.

The teen took a deep breath, shoving his fears down as he approached the boy. Best to just get him out of here as fast as possible.

“And where are your parents?” He asked, trying to keep the sneer out of his voice. “I’m sure I could help you find them. Maybe your brother?”

Marion shook his head, the paper crown sliding down a little before he shoved it back up. “Nope, it’s just me and Malvis!” He thrust the make-shift sword out in front of him, swinging it around. “Some dastardly foes took over our home, so now we’re looking for a new place to live. I could have defeated them all of course, but the fiends took us by surprise!”

Eris took in the story. Two magical kids wandering around on their own, with no home or parents? He let out a long sigh, knowing what Lucius would want him to do. “And where exactly is your brother?”

Marion shrugged.
“He went to go get food! I’m supposed to wait here so I don’t get lost. Malvis always worries when he can’t find me.”

“Then we’ll wait here for your brother.”
Eris sighed, resigning himself to babysitting duty.

Marion tilted his head. “Why? I’m fine waiting on my own. I’m the best at making up stories to pass the time. Even Malvis says so!”

“I’m not leaving two kids out here,” Eris replied, crossing his arms. “I know someone who could help the two of you out.”



Dragon. Pencil artwork by Fred Phillips.

“You’d help us out?” Marion asked, grinning widely.

“Of course, I’m not completely— Ow!” Eris’ hand flew to the back of his head as something sharp struck the back of it. He spun around to find another small child racing towards him, teeth bared.

“Get away from my brother, asshole!” The kid snarled, jumping to tackle Eris once he got close enough.

Eris sidestepped Malvis, sending him tumbling to the ground. The kid quickly recovered, rolling to his feet and placing himself between Eris and Marion.

Malvis was wearing the same, threadbare clothes as Marion, but much dirtier. The boy was caked in mud, dirt clinging to his skin and hair. He had a wild look in his eyes, like he was ready to maul the teen if he moved even the tiniest bit closer. However, if Eris looked close enough, he could also see the fear that resided there.

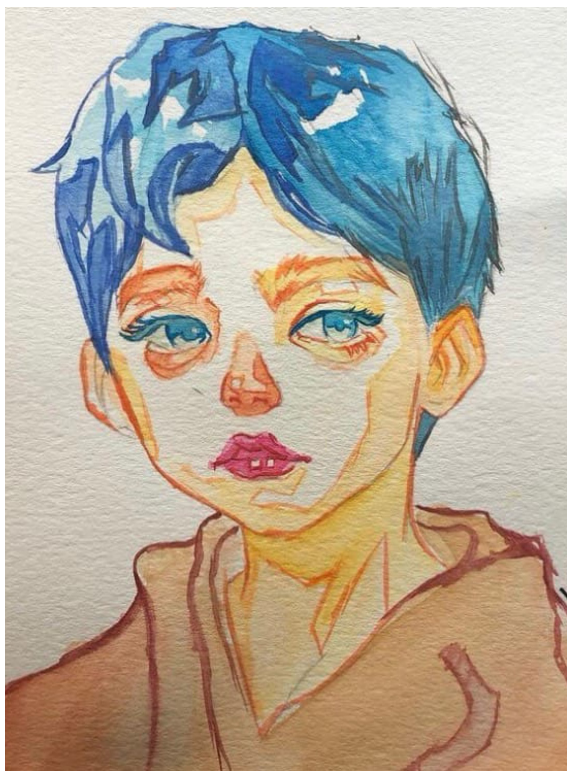
Lucius was going to love these two.

“I’m not here to hurt anyone.” Eris said, raising his hands in a placating manner. “I just want to help.”

Malvis sneered at him, ready to fire back, when Marion stepped out from behind him, pouting.

“Malvis! Stop this at once! I can take care of myself, you know!” Marion huffed, crossing his arms. “This happens to be my trusted ally... um...”

Marion looked back at him with wide eyes,



Lily. Watercolor by Fred Phillips.

realizing he didn't even have the teen's name.

"...Eris."

"Eris! He's going to help us out!" Marion finished excitedly.

Malvis eyed the teen warily, before throwing his head back and letting out the loudest, whiniest sigh Eris had ever heard.

"Marioooooooooonnnnn, you ruined my cool entrance!" Malvis moaned, grabbing his brother by the shoulders and shaking him.

Eris watched in stunned silence as the two boys began to bicker with each other, completely ignoring him. Marion eventually got Malvis in a headlock, sending them to the ground as they began to wrestle, still yelling insults as they rolled in the grass. Marion's paper crown went flying off his head.

Eris closed his eyes, counted to ten, prayed to whatever god was out there, and opened them again. He cleared his throat and brushed invisible dust off of his pants. "Now, both of you stay still and let me offer some help, you little bastards."

Malvis snickered at him as Marion climbed to his feet, shaking off the dirt that had gathered on his clothes. Malvis didn't bother.

"Alright," Eris took a moment to collect his thoughts. "My... guardian, shall we say, has a knack for helping little, down-on-their-luck magical folk like yourselves. I'm assuming you're both elementals? I know he would be very upset with me if I left you here all on your own, so... you should come meet him. He definitely won't fawn over the two of you."

The two boys shared a long, intense look, before Malvis threw an arm over Marion's shoulder with a grin. "Lead the way, old man!"

Marion nodded, placing a fist over his heart. "Yes! You seem to be quite a trustworthy ally. Lead us to this 'guardian' you speak of!"

Eris raised an eyebrow at them. He honestly didn't expect the brothers to agree so readily, to be so... trusting.

As Eris led the boys through the woods, back to Lucius's home, he kept a close eye on the two of them. Marion seemed entranced by the surrounding flora and fauna, continuously pointing out different things to his

brother. Most of the time, Malvis made gross or inappropriate comments, laughing at Marion's reactions. He seemed content to just egg on his brother wherever he could.

However, when Marion was too distracted and he thought Eris wasn't paying attention, the amusement would drop from Malvis' face. The few times it happened, he looked... tired. A hard, closed off look would enter his eyes that Eris couldn't quite figure out. And then suddenly, as if flipping a switch, he'd right back to his cheeky self as Marion babbled to him about something new.



Interesting. Eris thought as they began to approach the path leading up to the cottage. *Very interesting indeed.*

Marion gasped and ran ahead as the house came into view, yelling about how grand it was. Malvis went to follow him but paused, taking once last chance to glance back at Eris before racing after his brother.

...Eris would definitely have to keep an eye on that one.

Ironwood

James Bradley

The lone ironwood
standing leafless & twisted
on the desert plain
probably contemplates good & evil
just as I do,
though probably also avoids
the persistent dissuasion,
the impassioned pleas
for fairness & impartiality,
that even evil deserves a fair shake in this
world.

Too dense to float in water,
just like me,
but burning bright
if the fire gets hot enough,
just like me,
the ironwood tree
neither rejects the world outright
nor is impelled much to care
about the droughts & floods
always trying to get a rise out of it.

Lucky Rabbit's Foot

James Bradley

When the rabbit is killed
by the coyote in the tall grass
and devoured almost to the last morsel,
often the only part forsaken
is the bony, flavorless foot,
which will be left in the weeds
to be found by some feckless farmer
who sticks it on a chain,
gives it to his freckled son,
and tells him it's a lucky charm.

Whose luck is that, anyway?
Certainly not the rabbit's.
The coyote's, I suppose,
but the truth of the matter is that 'luck'
is just the inversion of someone else's doom.
I don't need that kind of luck.
I prefer to make my own luck
like the coyote, like the pack,
howling in the moonlight after supper,
embracing the luck of being what I am.



Two Ducks. Photo by Alex Nie.

One and a Half

Sam Costello

I sit alone in my room
The curtains are drawn
Light shines on my face
With you I'll never be alone
The curtains are drawn
We talk through the night
With you I'll never be alone
I wish you could remember
We talk through the night
Sometimes you get confused
I wish you could remember
So desperate I don't care
Sometimes you get confused
As my only friend I forgive you
So desperate I don't care
Not a friend in the world but you
As my only friend I forgive you
But I know you don't really care
Not a friend in the world but you
So I'll keep pretending you're really there

I Love You

Andreca Garcia

"I Love You" feel like empty words.
Not because there's nothing behind them;
Not because there's no meaning for me to hear them,
Not because we say it endlessly back to each other,
Not that it's become: a greeting, a goodbye, a good morning, a goodnight,
But because "I Love You" doesn't show or tell you how much I Love You,
The words themselves have no meaning.
Poets, I feel, are on the right track;
They don't say "I Love You"
They show it,
They feel it,
And they put it into words that will allow any audience to see it.
"I Love You" is a short way to me saying, I want to breathe what you breathe;
I want to hear everything you hear,
I want to be in your arms endlessly,
And feel the pressure you give me that softens my touch,
That allows me closer to you,
To see the world in a better view,
In the colors of your eyes that look like paradise to me,
"I Love You" doesn't show me that.
It doesn't give me the same warmth;
No matter how many times you say it,
"I Love You" will be empty words,
Unless you tell me what they mean for you.
I Love You and I always will;
I Loved You first,
I've said it first,
I repeat it endlessly in my head every time I see you.
But it's never, "If you cry, I want to be the shoulder to be right there for you;"
"I want to hold you endlessly wherever we go,"
"I want your hands to always be welcoming,"
"I want everything you can give and more,"
"I want to push you, to be able to do whatever you want,"
Because I Love You, even if you don't Love me.



Boat Kiss. Watercolor by Sheryl Gillum.

Captive

Andreca Garcia

You hold me captive.
Your words are the chains around my neck;
Your touch are the needles beneath my skin,
Your lack of presence are the magnets that cause me pain.
I'm locked in a metal box,
I put myself in.
I'm locked in and you threw away the key,
You ran away.
But you left me here;
"I want to see you" those twisted words
"Then come get me, you left me here"
You walked away,
You not Me.
Even with all that I wish for the key;
The one you hold so closely,
The thing you allow on your neck,
With the soft silver rather than the thorns you put around mine.
"I Love You" the words you say;
They aren't for my ears, no, but for a slave's.



Little Bird. Photo by Alex Nie.



Willow Lake at Sunset. Photo by Lara Ortelli.

Vulnerability

Cordelia Cep

You're never supposed to show it
No matter how much you feel it
An intense feeling of understanding
I can't bring myself
To say the word.

Fantasize of it being reciprocated
Yet when it is
And commitment comes knocking at the door
Reluctant to answer it
Hiding under the bedsheets
Praying they won't see me

I know
It's either a dare or a bet
Where even if they end up falling in love, they'll lose feelings or cheat

Are you scared of rejection? It's just redirection, but what if you don't
want to go to the next lane
What if you want to continue on this path
Why can't it just be a mere fling
All for fun and games
Yet I've walked two steps in
Though my heart is longing but fragile
It will only be an amusing diversion
From the real labor and agony

But what about that warmth
That giddiness of riding a rollercoaster not knowing what comes next
But daringly putting both hands up in the air
Embracing whatever turns come next

If you were blind
You'd guess you were on cloud nine
Yet at the end
You know, logically, it can never happen
Or can it?
Maybe that's the road needed to be explored
If only circumstances are right for you to explore it...

Pitcher of Flowers

Violet Barton

At one point flowers filled that vase of hers.
Gorgeous arrays of yellows and oranges.
Dandelions and buttercups,
Buttercups and Chrysanthemums.
These were the flowers which enriched her vase,
The flowers which she shared.
She shared and shared these florets
Shared with those whomst cared not to share back,
Those who only cared to take.
She shared and shared these florets,
Handing out dandelions and buttercups,
Buttercups and Chrysanthemums,
Until she had none left to share.
Her vase no longer overflowing with flowers,
What was she to do?
No longer to possess the flowers which she shared,
What had she to give?
Left with a vase with no flowers but rather,
A vase filled with water.
Water which she could share.
Thus she shared.
Though no flowers to bear,
She watered those which held flowers of their own.
She watered all of which she could,
But her vase eventually grew bare.
Thus once more,
What was left for her to share?
First stript of her flowers,
Now stript of the waters,
Which her vase once seemed to bear.
Left now with just a vase,
A vase in which was bare.
But that was just it,
A vase in which was bare?
She could share it with someone,
Someone who had not one of their own.
Thus that's what she did,
Shared that vase of hers.
Handed it to someone with care,
Yet they dropped it and watched as it shattered.
With nothing but porcelain remains,
She had nothing left to give but shattered glass.



Sunset Beach. Photo by Dylan Hamaoka.

Season of Staying

Navaeh Allen

The autumn wind whips me away as the tides of summer pull me in

I reach out for existence as it tangles me up in its grasp

Tugging me down, up, sideways, which way do I need to go

The call of the wild storms into my ears: the drums they reach are
prepped for war

Thump thump thump goes the drums of my heart searching for the tree
with the fall leaves falling

They whisper to me... Just be.

Why Do We Clap

Stetson Miller

Why do we clap?

“Good job,

Now let’s make some noise by slapping ourselves”

I know why

Because people before us have

Why the first guy did, beats me

But everyone else seems to be doing it so we might as well join in

It’s as simple as that

Do you really want to keep on clapping just because people before us have?



Albatross. Artwork by Fred Phillips.

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