



The Black Box

Spring 2024 Issue

THE BLACK BOX

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OUR MISSION:

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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We thank all those who submitted their work and made this issue possible!

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ABOUT THE COVER:

Called “the galactic core”, this is the brightest part of the Milky Way. With an array of between 100-400 billion stars, as well as planets, beautiful nebulae, and dark clouds, it is a striking sight on a moonless night, especially in New Zealand. With the right exposures, timing, etc. the camera can capture different depths and colors of its sheer beauty. New Zealand, however, is home to one of the darkest skies in the world. Couple that with very little, if any, pollution and from the southern hemisphere, especially in the wintertime (which is summertime here in the northern hemisphere), one can see the stunning core very easily with the naked eye, crossing, and at zenith. It seems to hover so close, and is so clear, that it feels as though you could almost reach out and touch it. An experience to behold like no other. Photo by David Rauch.

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I See Her

Rion Stevens

Sable Devlin was like my best friend. We'd been through thick and thin since we got into college. We both applied to the same place, and I remember the pure joy I felt when we got in. She was pleased to have been accepted, and immediately told her parents. I had watched her speak with her mom, who unfortunately did not share the same excitement. It made her anxious for a while, but Sable eventually decided to attend university regardless of her parents' thoughts. Her mom disappeared a few months later, so there wasn't much the old lady could do about the matter regardless. I couldn't think of anything better than going to college with Sable. I was so excited because, admittedly, I had a raging crush on her. Yet I could never have told her that. It wasn't hard to fall for her. Her brown hair was long and luxurious, framing her perfect heart-shaped face like curtains framing a window. Her eyes were like a mountain stream flowing on a sunny day. Though she seldom looked directly at me, I could see the kindness sparkling within those eyes. College was going to be a wonderful experience with Sable at my side.

Sable was interested in books. I reliably found her in our school's library, paging through books on just about every shelf until she had accumulated a stack. I chuckled as her tower wobbled on the way back to her seat. She only had a few friends, including two girls in her major. I didn't care enough to learn their names, but I knew their importance to Sable. Compared to Sable's shining intelligence, the two girls seemed rather dull and superficial. Regardless, Sable often met with them on weekends to discuss their latest reads or to try on outfits at the mall. Despite the mundane nature of it all, it was entertaining to watch their interactions. I often found myself smiling or laughing along with them.

At some point during our second semester, Sable got a boyfriend. His name was Donovan, and I quickly found that I didn't like him. I remember that things started well; they were both infatuated. They'd chat constantly, spend time making out in some parking lot, and even go on cheesy dates. Their honeymoon phase was one of the most exciting I'd seen. Yet it only took a few months before the sour aroma of Donovan's real personality arrived and stung my nostrils. He was often angry. Getting quicker and quicker to lay a hand on Sable. She deserved better. She deserved to be treated like the amicable woman she was. Not shown off like a trophy when the time was convenient and berated behind closed doors. There was one particular instance that I won't soon forget. It led me to my breaking point.

Their five-month anniversary had just passed, and Sable was left disappointed by Donovan. He had done the typical flowers and

chocolates, but he had abandoned her shortly after to hang out with his friends. Presumably, she had confronted him over text, because I never heard the initial argument. But eventually, it led to Donovan waiting angrily and expectantly at the door to her dorm building. I looked on, watching as Sable eventually came down and opened the door, stepping outside to speak with her boyfriend. She was wearing one of my favorite sweaters, a thick knit cardigan in a lovely powder pink. The argument started almost immediately, with Donovan clearly on the offensive. It seemed just another sorry example of their failing relationship until he suddenly grabbed at her sweater to keep Sable from turning away. I was fixated on him, a strange feeling roiling in my stomach as I watched the interaction. He grabbed Sable's wrist next, squeezing to the point that her pale skin began to turn red. Similarly, my vision became a wash of crimson. I waited patiently until he left, watching silent tears stream down Sable's face. She wiped them with her sleeve, seeming to glance in my direction for a moment. It was as if she was quietly pleading for my help. As quickly as that moment came it was over as she returned to the safety of her dorm building. That's when I knew that Donovan had to go.

I knew exactly how to fix Sable's problem, but I didn't want her to hate me for it. I knew that her kind nature would blind her from the obvious help I could offer. I'd have to confront Donovan on my own- no problem. His schedule was second nature to me since he had been dating Sable for a few months, so finding him when he was alone was no issue. Donovan had a late lab on Wednesday, meaning he walked from one end of campus back to his dorm after the sun had gone down. I knew he took the back roads, avoiding the main campus sidewalks due to the higher foot traffic. He didn't like to be approached by the annoying sorority girls chattering loudly about whatever party they had just been to. That night had been like any other Wednesday for Donovan. Lab, brief chitchat with his classmates, and then the walk back to his dorm began. I stood outside the classroom, idly looking at my phone as if waiting for a friend to exit. Donovan didn't spare me a glance as he left, also staring down at his phone. He made things too easy. It brought a smile to my face. I pulled my hood over my head, black cloth obscuring my features as we both headed into the umbra of the night.

The pursuit was thrilling. Every turn he took was predictable. Left past the bookstore, right past the coffee shop, and finally straight ahead into the alley near his dorm. That was my chance. I'd finally confront Donovan and make things better for Sable. I pulled my hand out of my pocket, a glint of silver flashing in the pale moonlight. I was about twenty feet behind him before I began to speed up, accelerating from a brisk walk to a jog, and finally to a sprint. The sound of my footsteps pounding on the concrete must have tipped him off because Donovan finally

lowered his phone and began to turn his head. All too late it seemed. My hand was on his collar in a flash, knuckles quickly turning white. The next few moments happened in seconds. The glint of his phone cracking on the ground, a fist hitting my jaw, and finally the sound of a knife entering his throat. It was a satisfying popping sound like teeth biting through sausage casing. He couldn't make noise at that point, other than the gurgling of that crimson liquid gushing out of him. Only when his body went limp and his eyes glazed over did I release his collar. His body crumpled, looking more like a discarded towel on the floor than a human. I didn't typically take pleasure in these things, but I had to admit that he looked good in red. I laughed aloud at that, my head tilting in wonder as I admired the scene.

I saw great improvements in Sable after that night. Sure she was upset that Donovan had abandoned her and the university, but I didn't see bruises on her after that. Now that I'd fixed Sable's problem, I felt that it was time to take our relationship to the next level. I didn't want to just watch her life pass by anymore. A few weeks later I decided to follow her to our campus coffee shop. The bell above the doorway rang as I entered a few steps behind her, the sweet, smoky smell of coffee hitting my face. It smelled like a fresh start. We wait in line, and as she orders I wait behind her in determined patience. As she turns around, I bump into her, dropping my wallet as I do. She gasps in surprise, leaning over to pick up the wallet. As she stands back up with it, we make eye contact and she finally is looking at me and only me for the first time. I grin, nodding my head as thanks while taking the wallet from her. I return it to my pocket before extending my hand to shake.

"Sorry about that, and thank you! I'm Jack. What's your name?"



Éstre. Artwork by Eileen Kim.



Mesa dwellings. Photo by Aharon David Allina.



Located in the heart of the North Island of New Zealand, Mt. Ruapehu rises above the landscape at 9,176 feet as the North Islands' highest peak. It is also one of the most active strata-volcanos in the world. The last substantial eruption took place in 2007, and currently it remains at a "level 1-state of unrest" status.

Photo by David Rauch.



Elk by the lake. Photo by Alex Nie.

Villanelle #1

James Bradley

Air circulating itself does no good.
Wind over water is loveless in flight.
I hold onto things longer than I should.

If I build you up from straw and clay would
that suggest I make too much of hindsight?
Air circulating itself does no good.

The weather 'round here depends on my mood.
I'm the weatherman, notating the night,
holding onto things longer than he should.

Disasters desist! The coming of flood
is easy to quell with proper foresight.
Water in-and-of-itself does no good.

Stream cuts through canyon as only it could.
Erosion is a force sent here to fight
everything that lasts longer than it should.

The mind to the heart, the termite to wood,
in detoxification or in blight.
Air circulating itself does no good.
I hold onto things longer than I should.

Villanelle #2

James Bradley

Last week I betrayed your trust in a haze,
on a barstool, in a bar, in the back.
I've walked around in this dream now for days.

For no good reason, for nothing that pays,
abstractions encircle like wolves in a pack.
Last week I betrayed your trust in a haze.

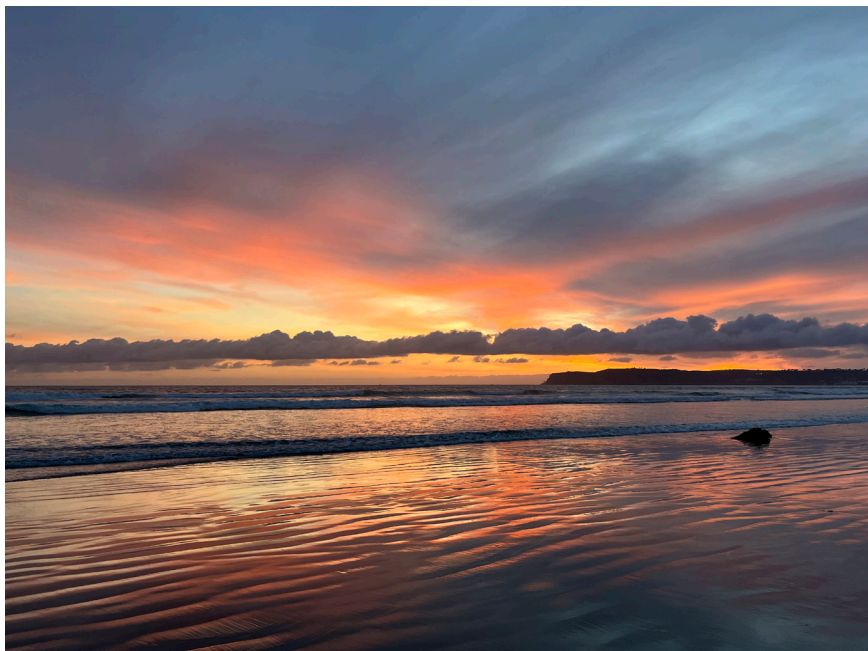
With words, with a sign, in so many ways,
you can try to figure out what you lack.
I've walked around in a dream state for days.

I had to be carried home through a maze
of concepts and feints. I slipped through a crack
on the night I betrayed you in a haze.

We're all divided, like the shop displays
and the real bargains buried in the back.
I've walked alone in this dream now for days.

Zero hour. Le déclenchement. Enough praise:
Attack! Counterattack! Attack! Attack!
Last week I betrayed your trust in a haze.
I've walked around in this dream now for days.





Sunset in Coronado. Photo by Cat Walker.



The rural beauty, Bangladesh. Photo by Rubaiya Murshed.

Flying in the Third World

Mariana Castillo Casal

Flying in Guatemala offers a thrilling blend of modernity and adventure, where every flight brings unique challenges and rewards. While our largest airports enjoy paved runways, the occasional pothole adds a touch of excitement to taxiing. Wildlife encounters, like herds of deer crossing the runway, provide pilots with unforgettable moments that add to our rich tapestry of flying experiences.

Venturing beyond the city reveals a network of grass and dirt airstrips hidden amid the picturesque landscapes of the Guatemalan countryside. These cater to private aviators, offering a taste of exploration and freedom not easily found elsewhere. Navigating the regulatory landscape overseen by the Dirección General de Aviación Civil (DGAC) requires adaptability and skill. While enforcement can vary, it creates an environment where pilots must rely on their training and expertise to ensure safe flights. Despite occasional distractions on the frequency, pilots embrace the camaraderie of shared airspace, connecting with fellow aviators amidst the backdrop of Guatemala's vibrant culture.

Flight planning takes on a nostalgic feeling, escaping high-tech gadgets for a more hands-on approach. Pilots must carefully chart their course, mindful of the rugged terrain and changing weather conditions. The presence of towering mountains and majestic volcanoes adds an element of awe and reverence to each flight, reminding pilots of the importance of vigilance and respect for nature's majesty. In the event of unforeseen challenges, Guatemala's search and rescue operations stand ready to assist. While resources may be more modest compared to wealthier nations, the spirit of solidarity and determination among aviators ensures that help is never far away. Pilots flying in Guatemala understand the value of preparation and contingency planning, embracing the adventure with confidence and resilience.



A Volaris Airbus A321 taking off from PHX runway 26. Photo by Riley Calimlim.

Flying in Guatemala is more than just a journey from point A to point B; it's an immersive experience that ignites the spirit of exploration and fuels the imagination. Amidst the challenges and uncertainties, there lies a world of possibility waiting to be discovered, making every flight an unforgettable adventure in the heart of Central America.



Sky perspective. Photo by Aharon David Allina.

Lucky Day

Jonathan Adams

I slide down the stained grey couch to the floor like so many goldfish crumbs almost caught between the cushions. The five-year-old and my wife are still in bed, so it's egg time. Pro parenting tip: the easiest way to entertain a 6-month-old on a Saturday morning before the whole house is awake is to find the box of Easter decorations, dump the colored eggs on the floor, and let the tiny, pudgy fingers sift through the pastel orbs—Color plus movement equals smiles—parent math.

The distraction buys me enough time to slip into the kitchen and make a cup of my favorite coffee—banana rum with caramel cream. I check the fridge and see that we are out of the cream. Peering around the door, I can still see my son's tiny form wiggling on the colorful blanket. I have a few months left before he can crawl into trouble, but I see that stage coming in his eyes as he smiles and coos. I drink. Without the cream, it's too bitter; I put it down, disappointed as the bitterness jolts my senses.

I return to the couch as the birds outside begin making a racket. My son looks up to see two small grey finches squabbling over the remains of the bird feeder I filled a week ago. The sunlight intrudes through the window, making me squint. My son rolls over to get a better view, but his neck,



Dutch angle of the ocean, Hawaii. Photo by Amelia Chesley.

still not accustomed to supporting the massive weight of his head, fails him, and his head bumps gently against the wood floor—Not enough to injure him, but an atrocity nonetheless.

The crying starts. In him, it is always a slow, building process. It begins with the eyes—shock, as if he can't fathom how god would design humans in a way that feels so much suffering. This philosophizing spreads to his lips which begin to quiver. Then, a short squeak, a remembering that he has some power to fight back in this world if only to make himself heard. Finally, total commitment. A high keen at the loss of all the world's joy.

The bump is the worst thing he has experienced.

I shush and try to shake the eggs in front of his face, but it is no good. The eggs have lost their magic in the face of tragedy. What next? Cuddle? No. Singing? No. Stuffed bunny? Absolutely not, are you crazy? It's time for the final resort: TV time. I turn on the show I find least annoying. Bright colors, fast movements, and funny voices bring almost immediate calm. I sip my coffee and contemplate what failure as a parent means.

His calm lasts all of five minutes. The TV shifts from an explosion of bright colors to a crimson banner—BREAKING NEWS. The images now flash in a chaotic blur: A warehouse explosion sends a column of black smoke towering over the region, emergency vehicles rush to the scene, people wear gas masks, and those who aren't cough and struggle to breathe. Men and women flee the chaos as the fire grows before an enormous explosion rocks the camera, and the feed is lost. The TV blinks back to two news anchors, a man and a woman sitting behind a desk, commenting on the footage and shaking their heads with concern.

The man summarizes, "As you can see, the explosion has affected a fourteen square mile area, and the resulting clouds may have an impact on other towns on the western side of the state." His well-parted hair starkly contrasts a picture of a playground shadowed with insidious-looking clouds appearing in the corner of the screen. "Further developments and recommendations will be provided by the EPA as we—" My son's screaming fades into my awareness as I click off the television. This is not the show he wanted; it's a catastrophe.

I scoop the tiny bundle up in my arms, looking around my house on the state's eastern side. My arms squeeze gently around the rolls on his legs, and I kiss his forehead, scrunched up with redness and tears. I take another sip of my coffee. Outside, the sky is bright blue and cloudless as the birds in the trees continue to sing back and forth to each other, matching the pitch of his cries.



Flower Boy. Photo by Jordan Stephens.



Moody. Photo by Jordan Stephens.



Deluge. Photo by Alex Daniels.

A Winter Evening

Stephanie Hannis
Snow falls quietly,
Falling sun clings to twilight,
And I... fall asleep.

A Pondering

Stephanie Hannis
Hatred, common
Empathy, a rarity
The question is why?

Mountaineering

Stephanie Hannis
Trek to the summit
There, it awaits you.
Freedom from this life.

Thankful

Stephanie Hannis
Why am I a human?
Why not a fox or a badger
But then I remembered
Humans get to know you



I Saw

Brandon West

Out of pain, beauty—
A finished puzzle reveals fractures
Jagged lines crisscrossing to remind
Of union and separation



An End Once Uttered

Brandon West

With every breath, we risk a thousand deaths
But only one need take.
Life's a game of dodging blows
Until one strikes.

So, time your luck with your breaths
And know
All your life you've been counting
To an unseen number.

Braille

Brandon West

Emotions are lingering little bastards
Scars etched in our souls
Legible on our skin

So, trace your fingers cross my flesh
And decipher my grief



To be continued. Art by Naomi Borg.

Fractures

Brandon West

We fit together
Jagged edges
Where trauma broke us
Shards of porcelain
Set adrift
To mesh our mismatches
Pair the sharp
Against the dull
To grind away the blade
But perceive the difference

Sunday Rags

James Bradley

Dressed in my Sunday rags,
I fell down
and then fell down again,
then got up,
the tequila still ripe
in my gut,
to the sputtering of an
entire planet's atmosphere.

The sky is unlively,
empty, blue,
the smell of smoke is faint
as I stick out my tongue
to taste a falling ember,
then spit it
as my stomach reminds me
that is stupid.

Shadows of trees,
like spilt ink censoring
sensitive documents,
soften the blow,
express the cruelty
of the light,
showing exactly
how to hide from God.



Pangea. Art by Naomi Borg.

Ghost of Tsushima Haiku

Phil Chaveau

Ghost of Tsushima, a 2020 video game from Sucker Punch, blends gameplay and art in many ways, including beautiful yet forlorn sceneries, classical Japanese music, a version of the game entirely in black and white (to replicate classic samurai Akira Kurosawa films), as well as in-game haiku. Below are some of the haiku composed in-game by the main character, Jin Sakai (as controlled by me), as we reflected on different aspects of life.

A REFLECTION ON FEAR

Whispers draw near
Shifting shadows beckon forth
Guided by night's glow

A REFLECTION ON SERENITY

Feel the earth below
A cool bed beneath the stars
Growing ever strong

A SECOND REFLECTION ON SERENITY

Endure together
Chop wood and carry water
Stand tall and resist



Gargoyle. Art by Zoe.

Excerpts from the Exploits of a Royal Halfling Rogue

Amelia Chesley

(THREE SEASONS AGO)

Until this spring, the young Lady Lidda Woodsweep had always separated her memories into two heaps— those from before the big famine, and after.

Before, she was small as could be, eating up everything her gnomish tutor could teach her about the saints and the stars and history and dance and art. She was also eating up everything she could nick from the kitchens.

And after, her mother and aunts and grandparents (the Thistlespurs, on her mother's side) were all the tutors she had. They tried to teach her to temper her halfling appetites, and eventually she did learn.

Before, they had feasted grandly, hosted guests from the other keeps and villages, and shared celebrations of even the smallest holiday without much care at all. And the family traveled— diplomatic visits to Ambauen and Taris, even Südkupfer one summer. Lidda barely remembers those trips now.

After, there were still feasts. But everyone in all of Timber Bailey shared what they had, and the Woodsweeps and other manorhouses shared the most. There were still holiday celebrations, but so much smaller. So much less than halfling tradition would have rightly required.

While her Lord father stayed busy dealing with his council and his treasurers, Lidda's mother brought her two daughters around the city visiting the commonfolk. They would fill baskets and carryalls with stored goods and gathered greens, and taking their time down from Sycamore Keep, through the boroughs and outskirts, all the way to Thistlespur manor in neighboring Villestein, they would make their rounds, handing out what they brought and sitting to listen to all manner of villagers' woes.

Before, she would tease the kitchen boy and stage playful battles in the pantry shelves— spilling flour and spices rather carelessly before getting told off by the head cook.

Since the famine, no one would dare waste even a pinch of anything. Even a scant quarter-cup of flour could help feed at least one family. Before, visits to Aunt Shaena had been carefree and sunny— food and gossip and games all day and all evening. After, more cheer was had in shared company than in shared wine.

And now, this past year since Coleena's wedding, a third phase was beginning. Lidda visited the Thistlespur estate alone. Instead of dancing and games— even instead of the housework and charitable visits that had marked much of her time in Villestein since the famine— now Shaena began teaching her how to fight.

Instead of ladylike fencing drills, there were challenges of stealth and evasion. There were nights in the woods studying secret calls and codes, practicing how to move silently through dark and unfamiliar places. And there were legends. Family history that little Lidda Woodsweep had never heard before, or at least never heard so smoothly, solemnly connected and reverently matriarchal, the way Aunt Shaena was telling it now. These stories thrummed with destiny. With the nascent power of a noble calling. With a whispered promise of the Black Cat's return...

(TEN DAYS AGO)

The Master of Arms receives credible reports that the thieves' guild have infiltrated the secure vaults of the South Dusklund Company to steal a large quantity of good. Some of the goods have been recovered and acquired by the Timber Bailey army, but most were lost to the escaping thieves. Luckily, not all of the thieves escaped.

Mr. Dirk Stirling himself, the wily prince of the thieves' guild, is being held in the dungeons.

We must interrogate him, Lidda's comrades insist. How else will they find out where the thieves have taken the city's goods? The city will not survive a siege without all was taken. What's more, her father's authority as Lord of Timber Bailey will not survive the anger of the South Dusklund Company if they aren't able to recoup their investments as expected. And though Lidda would almost rather let Mr. Dirk Stirling hang after all his presumptuous tricks, she relents and leads the party into the dungeons of Sycamore Keep.

The lone, easily-dismissed guard there confirms that yes, Mr. Stirling is to be hanged the next day. At dusk.

The dashing, dark-haired halfling thief is chained up to the wall, humming idly to himself as they approach. Lady Lidda assumes as tough and condescending a countenance as she is able to, confronting him about his crimes, demanding answers. Predictably, he refuses to say anything about where his allies have taken the stolen supplies. He is resigned to be hanged if it means his best people have gotten out of this as-good-as-ruined town, if it means they can be free to start a new life.

“You’ve given up on Timber Bailey?” she asks, her obvious disappointment pricking through her stoic facade. But Dirk throws this sentiment straight back in her face— “Timber Bailey has given up on its own,” he grunts. “It’s been like this for longer than you nobles think. Nobody is providing for the common folk anymore. What protection should they expect now, in the face of an orc invasion?”

“But it’s not too late— at least we know they’re coming. We will be ready. We cannot all simply run away like rats.”

“Can you not?” He gives her a sidelong glance. His lip curls as he provokes her. “You’re more the type to give chase, then? A noble cat, playing at bravery and stealth while a brimming saucer of milk awaits you in your well-appointed chambers?”

Lidda’s eyes flare and she flings the dungeon cell door open to charge toward him, her fists clenched and teeth bared. “How dare you, you pitiful—”

Her friends behind her urge calm, and as her rage falters she hears Dirk’s low laughter mixed with a rasping, dry cough. His shackles and chains clink against the stone behind him.

“It’s useless talking to him,” Lidda glowers. “He won’t help. The coward.”

Ayla glances at the others and speaks up. “I guess we can leave him to hang then. It’s not like he or his little guild would be that much help even if the Master at Arms had officially conscripted them all into the infantry seven seasons ago. Useless.”

Lidda sees the pride in Dirk’s face as he looks back at her. She waits.

Ayla reaches out to tug at Lidda’s sleeve. “It looks like he’s given up on himself,” the elf says, just loudly enough for him to hear.

As they turn to leave, the prince of thieves coughs, loud and defiant. “I care more about this city than any fancy career soldier on the line ever could dream,” he hisses.

Lidda pauses but doesn't turn back. "Then prove it. Help us fight." There is a palpable silence. The party waits. Lidda shrugs and steps again toward the door.

He chuckles once again, mirth thickly coating his next words. "So the cat decides she needs this lowly, cowering, dishonest rat after all." His smile gleams from his filthy face, haughtier than ever.

"It's your only way out of the noose," Lidda growls defensively. As the two lock eyes, each waits for the other to show some sign of willingness to trust. His face softens first, the smile of pride swapped for one of connection— the teasing replaced with gentleness.

Holding her gaze, he says, "If I swear to stick around and defend this home of yours, then you free me here and now. And grant me one good kiss." The smile is gone now, replaced with earnestness. His dark eyes crinkle as he lays out his conditions, betraying an almost innocent, playful anticipation.

Lidda scoffs. "You swear to fight for us, with all your heart, and you live." Her boldness makes room for the slightest undercurrent of pleading.

"Not enough," he sighs. "I neither fear your father's noose nor regret anything I've done."

In the long silence, Lidda breaks. Her eyes still hold Mr. Stirling's, but her vision fills with layers of the past and future: the mask and cape and shadowy honor of the Black Cat— all that her mother's bloodline has done to protect the people here from every evil— the orc armies massing to the east, with all their strange magics and reckless violence— her brother's injuries, her father's worry, the growing tensions among the royal advisors— and behind it all an unquenchable fire licking higher and higher up the ancient petrified walls of the city.

She does not know if she can trust him. Or that if she does he will make any difference in this war. But she unlocks his shackles, shoves him into the wall, and kisses him anyway. Seconds later, he's gone, a mere illusion in his place.

(THE PRESENT)

Lidda is no warrior. Without her companions she would not have survived these battles. To be sure, she is no mere lady of the Woodsweep clan, nor a common thief, nor even half as ordinary as most halflings, but her heroism is not the same as a soldier's or a paladin's— she is sure of that.

Above on the battlements, her Lord brother and his troops shout victory at last, embracing and staggering in exhaustion together. Darkness hangs heavy over the walls of Timber Bailey; cries of battle fade way to be replaced with murmured song, prayers of grief, and simmering silence.

Ayla, her tunic soaked red, her lyre face-down on the muddy cobblestones, lies still and helpless at Lidda's knees. Bright Ayla, moments ago so vibrant and fiery, is dying. The contents of their party's satchels are strewn haplessly amongst orc bodies and rubble. Lidda's entire frame is tense with panic. She grasps at Ayla's limp fingers, shaking and tugging at them as if some magic must be left in this skin and bone—something that would revive this young elf. *This cannot be how this story ends!*

A fraction of a moment later, Lidda's sword is in her hands, its blade struck deep and angrily through the last orc's throat. As his corpse falls aside and more of Ayla's blood seeps away into the earth, Lidda's eyes brim with desperate tears.

She casts all her spiritual energy out into the night, desperately pleading to all the halfling saints she ever learned the names of. Not Ayla— not her! *She is too good and glowing and I need her! She has saved my life too many times to deserve this death. This cannot be. This cannot be.* Is she screaming aloud into the sky or only into her own mind? Does it matter?

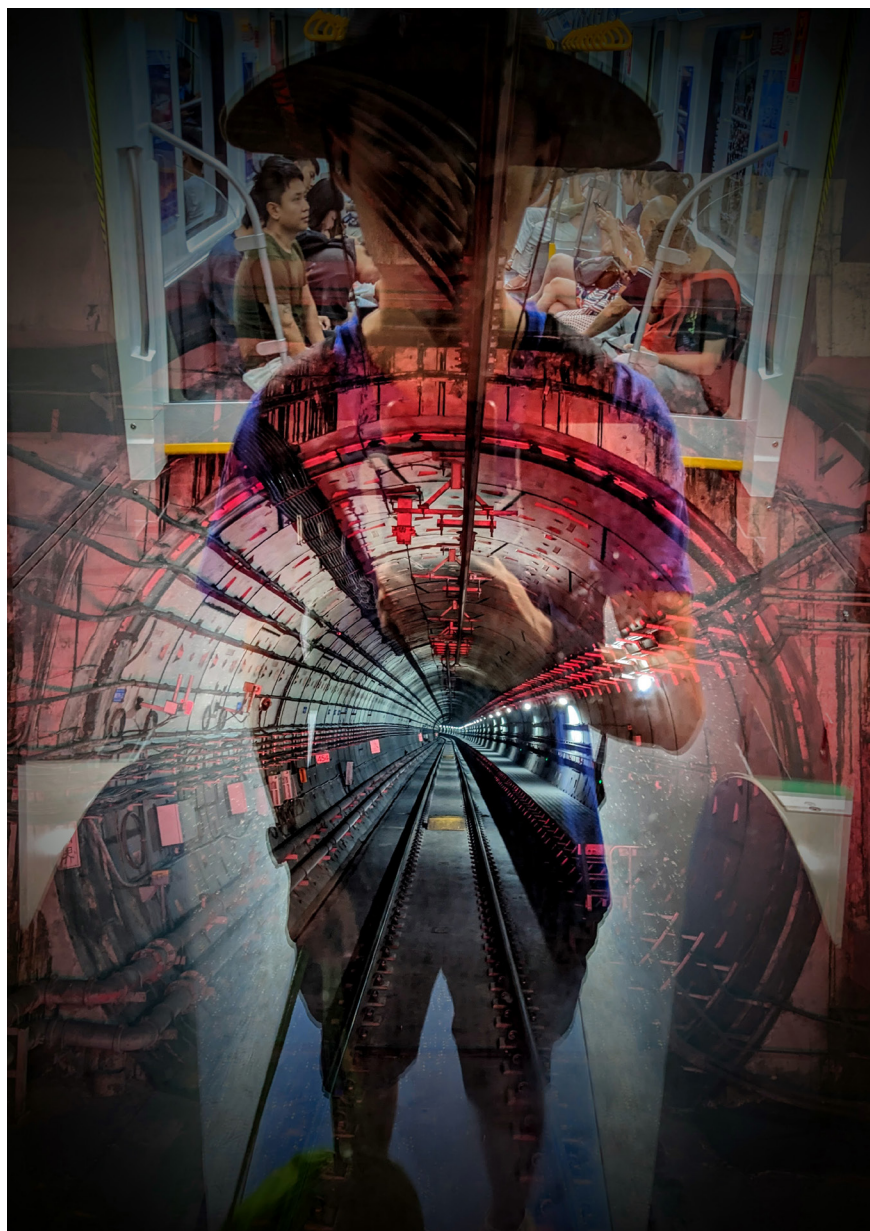
Lidda whimpers, dropping her weapon and sinking back to the ground next to her friend. She looks around to the others, unable to hold back her sorrow. The courtyard and fountain blur and the night seems to deepen, gathering in closer, colder, more bitter than tar.

She senses rather than sees the bear-ranger Osofyr reshape into a man, while Harlen in his shining armor moves solemnly towards the place where Ayla lies dead. That holy sword of his begins to thrum, glinting in what little torchlight remains. Through her tears, Lidda watches him turn the blade carefully in his hands, lean down, and wedge its hilt against a broken militia cart. Before anyone can say another word or move another inch, Harlen's heart meets the point of the sword, a green glow melting out from the mortal wound.

Almost in the same breath, before Lidda can blink enough to see what the paladin has just done, Ayla jolts and opens her elven eyes again to the quiet, death-filled darkness.



Textured Bear. Art by Kalyssa Polk.



Subway station reflections. Photo by Alex Nie.

Steampunk City

James Bradley

Emerald rainbow, dripping paint, broken masonry
Cellphone tower affixed to rotting, splintered wood
All politicized opinions will be tallied
At the last trump.

Steampunk city in a cyberpunk world
(The Czar's dirigible sighted over Mt. Tabor, two witnesses tell
reporters)

Each day I step out into you and,
Like dog paws in fresh mud,
Sink a little deeper
The more I allow myself to forget
That thing that is not
Myself.

Steampunk city
Hiding behind yourself
Hiding within yourself
Hiding with yourself
As accomplice—
“Trump” is the name you’ve given
To the inner dictator
Who rules inside your own mind.

Place the tea leaves in the strainer
And make the water hot.
Could making steam be any plainer
For steampunks? I think not.

The Sentinel

Aaron Laterano

THIS IS NOT A DRILL.

ALL COMBAT UNITS, REPORT TO YOUR ASSIGNED STATIONS.

I REPEAT, THIS IS NOT A DRILL.

The blaring PA screamed in an alarmingly calm voice, almost as alarming as the blood red sirens that threw light over the metal internals of the space station.

Soldiers ran back and forth, bumping into engineers and spilling important tools on the floor. There were commanding officers screaming for their soldiers to line up, men scrambling for their weapons, but the one common theme across all of the station was felt in everyone's mind:

Urgency.

Urgency and seriousness was everywhere, with people running quickly; everyone, it would seem, but one man. This one was not like the rest; he did not wear the default olive drab, nor did he wear the desert coyote equipment. He wore a full suit of black, thin tactical gear, and put his hand on his helmet with a sense of calmness no one could find anywhere else in the station.

Urgency.

He took a deep breath, focusing on lowering his heart rate to think with a clear mind. He picked up the helmet and flipped it around to look back at him. The smooth, matte black finish; the reflective, one-way-tint on the blood red visor. He rubbed his gloved hand over the word etched on the back of the helmet, taking note of how worn it was.

Sentinel.

He rubbed it with care before flipping it around and donning the remainder of his suit.

Immediately he was greeted by his boot-up sequence. Code scrolled across his screen as his helmet interfaced with the rest of his suit, the green checklights appearing before his HUD popped up.



City skyline. Photo by Alex Nie.

Bullet count. Grenades. Flashbangs. Incendiaries. Shells. Spare mags.

Sentinel reached calmly towards his weapons, his black armor almost invisible under the red sirens as he holstered his sidearm and slung his shotgun on his back.

FIRETEAM DHARMA, REPORT TO DROP PODS FIVE-THROUGH-SEVEN.

That's my cue.

Sentinel strapped his sword to his hip, seeing it interface into his screen before reaching to his helmet and switching to his team's personal radio frequency.

"Fireteam Dharma, report."

Two voices came back in quick unison.

"Sledge, reporting in."

“Reaper, ready.”

Sentinel waited for a group of soldiers to run past him before falling in behind them in a jog, hand on his comms.

“This is Sentinel. Five through seven, people.”

He took a left down a hallway, navigating the station with ease. The station suddenly took a lurch to the side, and Sentinel caught an engineer and his tools before stabilizing the man and handing the tools back to him. The man scurried off with much more urgency than he’d had five seconds prior.

“Sledge to Dharma, you guys feel that? What’s going on out there?”

Reaper’s annoyed voice was there before Sentinel could respond.

“Don’t know, don’t care. Not an asteroid, that’s for sure. We wouldn’t be deployed like this if there wasn’t something big.”

Sentinel rounded another corner when the side of the wall exploded in sparks, showering him in electricity. He held his arms up instinctively to cover himself from the blast, and was thrown to the side in a heap. He rolled to his feet and saw something he’d never thought of.

Purple metal had made a tear in the hull, but had patched it. Through the smoke, something seemed to jump down and roll, joined by three more entities that waddled about. Sentinel was on his feet in an instant, shotgun at the ready and swapping from comms to speaker.

“Identify yourselves!”

He heard one of the newcomers shriek, and suddenly the air was filled with tiny blue blaster bolts that melted the steel they hit. Sentinel shot the first entity in what he hoped was center mass, and the thing dropped like a rock with a bloody scream. The other three entities shrieked even louder and focused fire on Sentinel’s position, forcing him behind a nearby computer console for cover.

Something else inside what Sentinel marked as a boarding craft screamed. It was much louder and deeper than any sound a human could make. This behemoth slowly hopped out of the craft, hitting the floor just as Sentinel finished off the rest of the smaller enemies.

This monster was taller than a human by a few feet, wearing shiny blue armor that Sentinel could see as the smoke cleared. It held in its hands (or were they claws?) what appeared to be a weapon, a handgun of some sort that the monster waved around as if to shoot.

Rules of engagement be damned. They shot first. Your funeral.

Sentinel popped up and shot the creature in the chest with his shotgun, but the creature's armor seemed to... flare? The armor glowed blue around where the pellets had hit, the only sound in the room being Sentinel's fallen shell casing and the buckshot it had just distributed. The two warriors looked at each other in shock before Sentinel racked another round and fired again. The monster returned to its senses, bellowing a war cry before pointing the gun at Sentinel and pulling the trigger.

Blue-hot gel socked Sentinel in the chest, throwing him back and lighting his Kevlar on fire. He rolled and quickly put the fire out, coming up with his last shell in the chamber as the monster came around and took the shell to the chest. The blue on the monster's armor seemed to explode, and the armor underneath took a scratch. The behemoth took a step back with the impact, dropping its firearm as Sentinel stood up with his handgun at the ready. He popped around the corner and saw what he swore was a blue, glowing blade hanging in the air.

He emptied his magazine in the warrior as his foe swung the blue blade, slashing through the terminal like a hot knife through butter before falling over, dead. Sentinel quickly swapped to his sword and cut the creature's head off, panting before looking around to make sure no one else was there, reloading both his weapons, sheathing his sword, and examining the creature's weaponry. He pried open the creature's four-fingered hand, the sword instantly exploding in Sentinel's face. He rubbed the soot off his visor and examined the firearm instead, holding it in his hand as he radioed his team.

"Sentinel to Dharma, we've been boarded. Some sort of energy shielding and weaponry. Burns."

Reaper, as always, was quick on the response.

"Big guys have shields. Small ones don't. See any of the bird guys with phalanx hand-helds?"

"Negative. Meet at the pods. Sledge!"

“Sledge here. Caught in the armory.”

“How the hell do you get caught in the armory?”

There was a loud boom, then Sledge’s calm voice.

“Never mind. Rocket launcher acquired, boss.”

“Pods. Now.”

Sentinel shut off his comms and ‘appropriated’ the firearm, hefting its surprising weight before continuing to move towards his objective.

Just what the hell is going on? Why haven’t we heard anything from command? Fuck are these guys?

He squashed his questions, sweeping the area with his reloaded shotgun before vanishing down a hallway.



Fallen archangel. Art by Theo LaDue.



Fire captain at simulated car crash. Photo by Owen Davis.

Little Bell Jars

James Bradley

This is my lonely little defense
against that which cannot
be defended against.

This is the shock of the new
in a drop of water
millions of years old.

Water is old
and it keeps the world young,
and youth is our truest expression of beauty,
and beauty's an endless, unwinnable war.

Apartheid of river and ocean.

An accosting by young republicans at a bar,
clean cut and belligerent.

They keep the mugs in the freezer—
little bell jars full of snow.

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