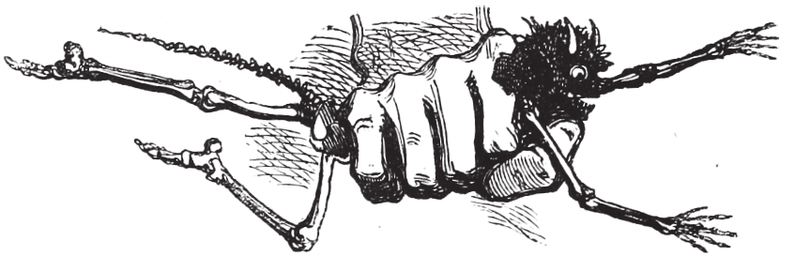
Gracies Dinnertime Theatre **presents...**



Cereal

Special edition
31 October 81AT(2026)
Presented (mostly) in the order they were submitted

ERIC

First Place

-by June Boice

She definitely hadn't left the kettle there.

She was positive. She had made her tea, like she normally did—strawberry sleepy time last night—and she had put the kettle back where it belonged, on the shelf tucked in by the refrigerator. Dolly's no-nonsense, stainless steel kettle lived on that shelf next to the toaster, and it never ventured anywhere else than when she was making her tea. So why was it in the middle of her counter? Center stage in the middle of the kitchen, right in her eye line when she came out of the bedroom.

She must have moved it. Maybe she slept walked? Had she had anyone over last night, and somehow forgotten about it?

But no, she knew that wasn't it. She picked up the kettle and placed it on the shelf where it belonged, then pulled out the toaster to make her morning toast. She'd eat it on the balcony, like she had the day before, and enjoy the view she paid too much for. She liked this apartment, she did, but it hadn't been an easy adjustment. She still wasn't used to the creaking at night, the way the floors ached and moaned and sounded so much look footsteps. She didn't like the way the lighting in her apartment cast shadows that looked like someone standing right behind her - she'd have to get more lamps, she thought. Soft lighting was a thing, right? She made a mental note to browse Ikea for lamps when she got home from work.

She cupped her coffee with one hand and took her toast and jam onto the balcony, but something gave her pause on her way. The sliding glass door was slightly ajar— just two inches, at most, but ajar nonetheless. Dolly froze. She ate her breakfast on the balcony every day, and every day she unlocked the sliding glass door to go out and locked it behind her when she came back in. She was *certain*.

Maybe she was being frogged, she thought with a chuckle. Whoever was living in her walls had enjoyed the balcony as well. She shook her head, slightly frustrated with herself, and went outside, making sure to shut the door and listen to it click behind her. She loved the morning air, especially in the summer. It was odd, though, as she looked around. She had listened to the rumbling of thunder while she lay in bed last night, and she had heard the patter on the ceiling that she'd convinced herself was rain. It had been a scattered, chittering sound that didn't sound like rain she'd ever heard before, more like something moving in the hallway, but it had to be rain. But the pavement in the parking lot was dry, and the grass around her wasn't even dewey. What had she heard last night, if not rain?

Dolly turned and walked back into her apartment, her coffee drained and her plate empty. She had exactly thirty-five minutes until she needed to be at work, so it was time



to brush her teeth and change out of her pajamas. She put her dishes in the dishwasher and walked into the bathroom.

The bathroom was her least favorite room in the apartment. The sink was too close to the toilet and the shower door didn't open all the way, and there was a huge red stain in the center of the floor that climbed halfway up the wall. The landlord told her it was from the last tenant's shampoo, which would explain the droplets of it everywhere, like a bottle that had fallen and splashed, but it was a darker red than any shampoo Dolly had ever seen. And every now and then, she caught an unbearable, unmistakable whiff of a sour, ripe, metallic smell, only when she was in the bathroom. Probably the pipes.

She finished brushing her hair and moved into the bedroom, where she tossed on her work clothes. She swore she'd hung her outfit on the back of her closet door, but now they were on top of her dryer in a pile. Weird. She must have moved them, she thought. The dryer was open, too, which was odd, because she knew she had closed it the last time she did laundry. Maybe she should do a sleep study, she thought as she shut the door.

Fully dressed, she stepped back into the bathroom to put on some mascara. The smell of metal hit her once again, but she ignored it and sprayed some perfume. Okay. She glanced at the clock on the wall. 3:30 AM. It was not 3:30 AM, and as she started at the clock, it didn't move. It must have broken in the night, frozen on that time. She looked at the alarm clock next to her bed. 3:30 AM. Maybe the power went out.

Her phone said it was 8:17 AM, so she left her bedroom, grabbed her work bag, ignored the kettle that was back in the center of the kitchen counter, and moved down the hallway to the door. She liked this apartment, but this was by far her least favorite part. She hated coming in and out.

There he was. Eric. He stood over six feet tall, maybe closer to seven, because he had to hunch, the curve of his back touching the ceiling. He was always grumbling, a low hiss that she could hear through the door of her bedroom, that seemed to cut through her white-noise machine. He wouldn't be too bad if he were quieter, or if he didn't look like that. She didn't know what had happened to him csomething bad, probably—but his jaw hung down so far it nearly touched his collarbone. Just a few threads of thin, red skin held it together to the rest of his face. His mouth was perpetually open, as a result, his teeth skewed to the left, his tongue lolling out, more tongue than she had ever seen. And everything was covered in blood, of course, from his tongue down his chin all the way to the knees of his pants. A pool of blood sat on the floor in front him, never seeming to dry, a ceaseless flow, a constant drip. His teeth and the edges of his lips were starting to blacken, like even in this ghostly state he was managing to decay.

ERIC SEEMED TO ALWAYS BE LOOKING AT HER, WHICH SHE COULDN'T FIGURE OUT BECAUSE HE DIDN'T HAVE EYES...

That wasn't even the worst part about Eric. Two gaping, red, raw holes sat deeply in his face where his eyes should be. They sunk into his face until they turned black and she couldn't see any further into his head. There were scratches, scabbed and bloodied at the same time, like they were halfway to healing but were somehow still fresh, dragging from each eye-hole down his face toward his broken jaw. They seemed to pop off of his cheeks, as the pull of his jaw stretched the skin thin and taught over his bones. Someone had clawed his eyes out - she guessed that he had done it himself, since his fingers and hands were covered in blood and, even though she tried not to look at him, she had noticed the bloodied flesh underneath his broken fingernails. There was also an eyeball-shaped lump in one of his pockets.

Eric seemed to always be looking at her, which she couldn't figure out because he didn't have eyes, but the holes in his face

seemed to follow her everywhere. They followed her now, as she prepared to walk down the hallway to leave for work. They gazed at her, gaped at her, and, like it did every morning, her stomach turned.

No, she was wrong. The worst part about Eric was that he never *moved*. She had to walk through him every day to leave, and pass through him again to enter. He was perpetually blocking the door, forcing her to feel him as she passed. She hated the way that he felt. He was cold and hollow and all of the hair on her skin stood up while she walked inside of him. She felt empty, hopeless, horrified while she was passing through Eric. Like there was nothing and no one in the world but the horrors of him, Eric. She only felt this hollow, terrible feeling when she was passing through him. Maybe it had something to do with what happened, maybe it was just what ghosts—or whatever Eric was, but her best guess was a ghost—felt like. He was so tall that he encapsulated her entire body, and every part of her could feel the cold. Yes, walking through him, that was the worst part of Eric. He wouldn't be so bad if he picked a different room to haunt.

She slipped past him—well, through him—and shut the door behind her. Phew. She was glad that was over, and now it was time for work. She'd put the kettle back on the shelf when she got home.

Wat

Honorable mention

-by Dia-Dora Pinnix

The first thing you feel as you wake for the first time is pain.

Pure, searing, unadulterated pain.

Though, as you shoot your arms to your sides as you try to stifle screams, fingernails drawing blood, you feel pain is too soft of a descriptor to fully encapsulate the feeling. The pain ripples in tremors across your body, ebbing and flowing in cruel cycles. Your head is throbbing in particular, and you shift your hands to cradle your head as if it'll cure your ailment, though it does little to ease the tremendous pain that clouds your conscious. The pain is akin to someone bashing your head against a surface, repeating, repeating, repeating, and unrelenting. In the few seconds between bouts of agonizing waves, you think to yourself that this is the worst pain you'll probably ever experience, and that if you were to die suddenly, you wouldn't mind.

Slowly, the pain seeps away from your body, the waves taking longer to surface back. It could've taken 10 minutes or 10 hours, you have no idea. But you learn for the first time what the absence of pain feels as you feel a sort of relief that no description would do true justice. But with that relief comes exhaustion, and you feel far too tired to even think. You just lie there, not doing or thinking of anything in particular, allowing the exhaustion to sweep you away into an unconscious bliss. You then open your eyes again and realize that you fell asleep in your exhaustion and had just woken up from what feels like a long, deep slumber. You'd imagine that such a nap would leave one feeling refreshed, but you just seem to be out of luck lately with how you never seem to feel fine. Making do with the closest you can feel to being refreshed, you decide to take note of your surroundings and situation. Gingerly, slowly, as if you're a pile of fine china plates being relocated, you sit up, and carefully turn your tender head to absorb the contents of the room you're in.

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You don't recognize this room.

Or, well, you do recognize this room, but only faintly, like trying to recall your earliest memory, or when you took your first steps or spoke your first words. You soothe your temple as you attempt to recall the previous event that would've led you to reside in this mysterious room.

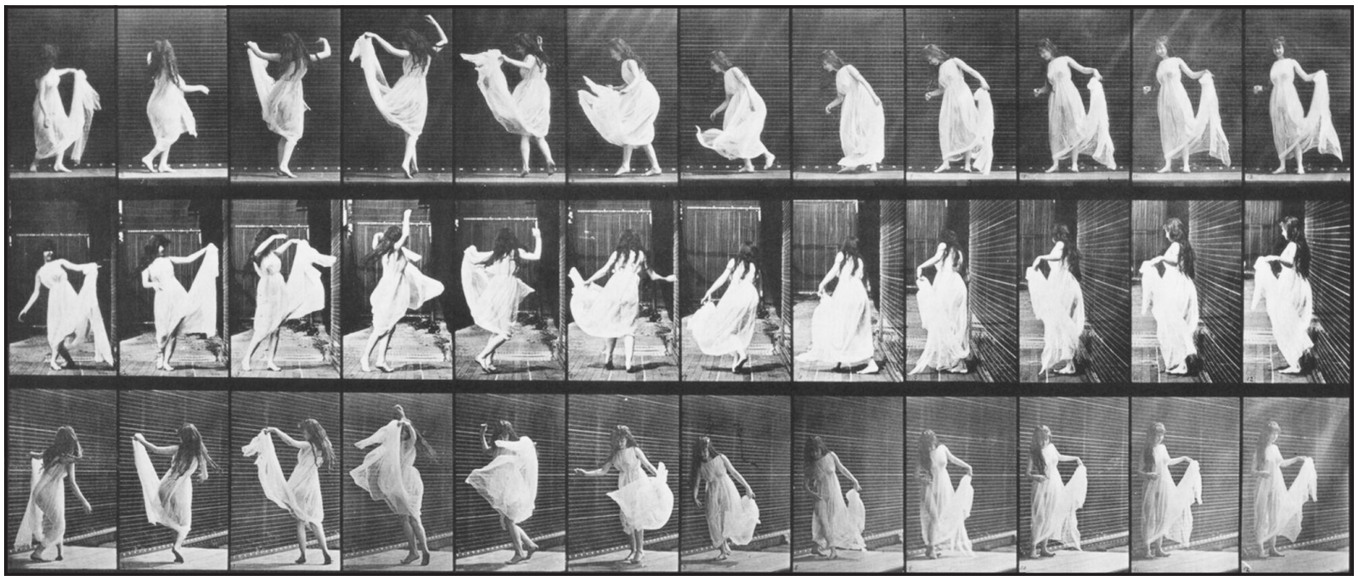
You think.

And think.

And think, and realize with a certain dread that you do not remember anything at all. Not just the past few hours, or days, or even months. None of it is there, save for some blurry wisps that suggest a life previously led by you. Your childhood, your mother's face, your favorite foods, what you had for lunch yesterday, your name, all of it is burned, ruined, and locked away. Panic sets in quickly, and you panic alright! You feel your nerves melting, your skin contracting and shifting, and you can't breathe in deeply enough to get a sufficient amount of oxygen. It takes a great effort to get yourself to calm down to a point of (muddled) clarity. Instinctively, you start digging your overgrown fingernails into your upper arms, talons slotting themselves into your new wounds, focusing on the pain in order to ground yourself.

Once you've managed to ground yourself, you look around the room (whose room is this? Your room? Your bed? Your things strewn around? You don't know if you'll ever feel sure) and note its contents properly this time. A certain landmark catches your attention, and it's easy to pick it as an immediate area of interest. You rise, and saunter towards your destination, soles clumsily making contact with the worn carpeted floor (it's as if you're really taking your first steps, or relearning how to walk). You want to find any clue as to who you could be, and how you've even lost your memories in the first place, and feel that this would be a good start. Your fingers graze and tap along surfaces, the motion feeling practiced and natural, though you can't say for certain if this is a habit of yours (you don't know much about yourself, clearly). You stop as you arrive at the closet door. Destination reached. You grab your shirt and tilt your head down to examine it. The outfit you're wearing is rather plain and simple, boring sleeping clothes. You make a childishly sour face at that realization. Even though it doesn't feel out of character for you to wear this, you still decide to change into more tasteful clothing. You believe that you'll feel more like yourself once you change into something that more accurately reflects your tastes. Besides, you're all sweaty and clammy from earlier—it would soothe you a great deal to wear something cleaner. Hesitantly, you open the door, and start carefully sifting through the rack, examining each and every garment. But disappointment makes it home in you as you find that you're reviled at your own fashion sense. Nothing looks appealing to you, nothing speaks to you. In each item of clothing sparks an image of you wearing it, and in each image of you in those horrendous outfits sparks a grimace in return. You decide to just grab the least offensive looking items of clothing and make due, though even that outfit nets a solid 0/10. You stop to stare at the short sleeves of your shirt, and your exposed arms, fresh wounds glistening in the light, courtesy of your own making. You grab a sweater and make an effort to hide your self injurious marks.

Adorned in freshly ugly clothes, you stop in your movements and stare at nothing in particular again. Although you've learned more about the kind of person you are(were), you feel deeply displeased with said information. You would like to have a word with past you's fashion sense. Even so, you can feel faint and opaque memories swim around in your head, fuzzy images beginning to paint a picture that could be called your life. You feel that you have a less weak grasp on who you are and the life you've lived. But there is still a lacking context as to what could've caused you to lose your sense of self in the first place. It seems you've hit a mental roadblock. Frustrated at your lack of meaningful progress, you sigh and decide to distract yourself for a bit. You find yourself drawn to a(your) desk, and settle on searching through the countless knickknacks and stationary. Your eyes land on a jewelry box with little embellishments on the corners. You grace your fingers on the top and lift the clasp up, revealing the top and mirror of the jewelry box. There's a little dancer on the top, and you mindlessly wind up the handle on the side. The music soothes you, a beautiful and melancholic melody wafting through the room, and a memory of you playing the thing to death as a kid fires up in your brain. You hum along to the music as you replay it in your head. Although you find the memory fond, it feels distant, as if you're watching someone else's memories play on screen. The thought saddens you deeply. It seems that even your own memories are no longer yours. You feel incredibly hollow and empty. You shut the jewelry box close, abruptly stopping the music. You don't want to hear it anymore.



Fresh out of landmarks, you spin your head around to land on a new goalpost, but nothing truly interests you. What should fill you with curiosity and wonder instead replaces you with an anger and resentment that truly feels new and novel to you. Everything. Everything is a haunted whisper of who you once were, filled with memories and experiences that should warm you, but instead leaves you feeling cold, for they no longer feel like yours. You are in a stranger's room. You woke up a stranger. In your blurry fury, your focus turns towards the door before you. This door must lead to somewhere, anywhere that is new and not ghosts of a past you are no longer privy to, that taunt you with what you'll never get to hold again. You think back to the music box(your dad gifted it to you on your 6th birthday)(you feel a tear run down your cheek with a grace akin to that resin dancer), to your borrowed clothes (they used to make you feel so cool, feel like you), to the pain that greeted you with consciousness, warning you that you no longer belong here.

All at once, you feel a flurry of emotions, none of which feel good. You are tired, you are hungry, you are angry, you are wistful, but most importantly, you are restless. You want to get out. You want to get out of this suffocatingly taunting room. You want to leave this place, want to know more about yourself, your real self, want to see something that doesn't make your stomach churn with guilt. You bolt toward the door with such a fervent and sparking frenzy that for a moment you believe that it alone would kill anyone that stands on the other side of the door.

The door swings open. The casualty count remains zero. Your gaze meets the wall of a narrow hallway. The lack of any climax is enough to snuff the fiery spark within you, and you decide to use this antsy energy of yours to examine this new section of the house (since you just came out of your room, this must also be your house). You meander down the hall, fingers grazing along the wall. You stop to look at a series of pictures hanging on the wall. They're photos of a family. The other people in the photos only look vaguely familiar to you, but there's a figure in a few that catches your interest. It's hard to explain, but you feel as if you should immediately know who this person is. The way they're posed and the expression on their face makes you feel a sort of melancholy, as if they were a close relative whom you've recently lost. You wonder if that's the case, but you can't remember clearly enough. Your head hurts.

After enough mournful staring, you decide to move on and march down the hall and arrive in the living room. You halt. There's a wall dividing the living room and the neighboring dining room, so you can't easily tell if there's someone on the other side (waiting for you). You're not sure what to do if there is. What if they know you? Should you tell the truth? Should you fake appearances and lie? Should you make a run for it? You freeze for a moment, then muster up the courage to trudge forward.

You slowly inch towards the wall, and peer to the other side. Before your eyes, you see a woman sitting on a couch, staring into a book with a pensive expression. Her hands are digging into the pages, and her eyes

seem unfocused. She appears to be less so entombed reading and more so using the book as a flimsy distraction from whatever is haunting her mind (you wonder if it concerns you)(it likely does). Then, as she mindlessly turns her head, she notices your presence, and with a beat, she lunges towards you with an expression that couldn't be further divorced from the one she wore just a moment ago. She calls out a name (is it yours?) while trying to hug you. You don't react to her words, but you just miss her hold as you weave out of her way out of fear. The woman ceases all attempts at embracing you as she hesitates, face contorted into a confused and hurt expression. You bite back some instinctive urge to reassure her that you're fine, you're here, she didn't do anything wrong. And then again, like a light switch, her face flicks in a bout of understanding, and her features soothe into one much more controlled and placid. She opens her mouth, and the voice that comes out of it feels familiar, like a celebrity that you've passively heard of or seen on TV once or twice. She asks you a few simple questions—what is your name, what is the last thing you remember before today, do you know who I am, do you know where you are. And you answer them all in the same way more or less—I don't know, I can't remember, no I don't, I don't know. As you answer the last question, the woman's face changes into something that should feel foreign, that you shouldn't be able to make out, but you recognize as a teetering line between frustration and relief. She opens her mouth once again to say that she'll explain everything shortly, and grabs your hand without waiting for your consent to drag you to your destination.

Feeling out of your depth, you focus on the woman's (who is she to you?) tender grip on your hand(her grip is firm but gentle, a well practiced motion. Again, a jarring contradiction tugs at your mind as the act feels both familiar and foreign, as if you've watched this action from a show you know from heart but never experienced firsthand (Don't touch me, Don't grab me, Your hand's not meant for mine, I'm not who you wished I was). You follow along and find that your destination appears to be a dining room. You are then further guided to sit down at a table as she pulls out a chair for you. She then vanishes, and you can hear some frantic shuffling in the neighboring kitchen. You listlessly watch the woman reappear to place a plate of food in front of you, utensils included. She chooses to sit in the seat directly across from you (you thank the stars that she didn't take the seat next to you).

There's an awkward silence between the two of you. You presume the woman's taking the time to parse what she'll say next, so you content yourself with mindlessly picking at your food with a fork. You can feel the woman's expression boring into you, watching, waiting for you to do, say something. You don't like this feeling. You don't know how to act. In an attempt to look busy, you continue to play with your food. You don't have much of an appetite (you don't have much of an anything), and the food looks mildly appealing at best. The woman frowns, and you wonder what you



did wrong for a moment (You feel like you're doing a lot of that lately). You must have made a confused look, because the woman begins to explain that the dish before you used to be your favorite (Used to be, you think), but fumbles her words as she amends that it's fine if you're not hungry, she expected the recovery to be rough on you.

Recovery? You cock an eyebrow, hoping it's enough of an indicator for her to elaborate(you don't dare to ask outright). Fortunately, it is, and the woman explains. Or, tries to at least. She clears up some immediate questions, explains that she is your mother and your other relatives are out for the moment, expected to come back at any moment to bombard you with attention, and some accident had happened that left you unconscious for a few days. In her explanation however, you get the feeling that certain crucial details are being purposefully omitted. It doesn't feel right, doesn't slot into your brain with little resistance. You debate whether it's worth pressing her into divulging the truth, or if doing so would risk your safety. Surprisingly, you don't trust the woman sitting across from you and what she had done to you that rendered you in this state. While you ponder over this dilemma, you absentmindedly shove a spoonful of your food in your mouth. And subsequently spit it out. It tastes foreign, wrong, like trying to eat cat or dog food. The woman (your mother) halts in her speech to gawk at your instinctual refusal at your supposed "favorite food" (nothing's your favorite, it seems. None of this was meant for you) She's distressed, frantic now, hovering over you to make sure you're not scheduled to implode at any moment now. Her hand(you're SICK of that goddamn hand) is floating toward your cheek. You smack the hand away and shout something with a frazzled voice. You're unsure of what you spat out, but you hope you didn't sound too mean (you probably did). The woman (your mother, she's your mom) pauses, fails to hold back tears, and kneels down to your side. She says nothing, but you both know she can't avoid it any longer. Something is wrong. You plead to her to tell you the whole truth, the full truth. She looks you in the eyes(You feel like she's looking for something in your expression, and shrink into yourself) and says the truth.

Don't touch me,
Don't grab me,
Your hand's not
meant for mine,
I'm not who you
wished I was.

You died.

You weren't supposed to die.

Your poor, poor parents couldn't handle the sudden loss and did anything, everything in their power to bring you back. And everything they did, as they succeeded. But something must have gone wrong (you are wrong). This isn't how it's meant to go, she says (is she your mom?), she'll fix it all, she says(you want to leave) it'll be all right, she pleads(anything, just not here) she grabs your hand(you want to puke) and pulls you into a hug. You feel nothing(you are nothing)

Suddenly, you start violently shaking. The nausea floods in tenfold. You rip yourself from your mother's (she's not yours) embrace and excuse yourself to the bathroom. You shoot down any offer for assistance, consequences be damned. After just barely managing to close the door fully. You lean all your weight onto it. Truthfully, a part of you is happy your (stomach, brain, body, everything) decided to wage war against you. You couldn't bear to stand in the same room as her for a moment longer (you recall the way she would look at you, expecting you to behave and react a certain way. The few times you opened your mouth, you knew she was looking for something, a tell, a sign, anything. What it was, you'll never be sure. you hope you'll never have to see her again. You know you won't be so lucky). It feels that at any moment right now you'll puke your guts out. You don't want to puke though. You couldn't manage to scarf anything down when you had the chance (that food wasn't meant for you anyway), and you still feel that clawing

hunger in your gut. It doesn't matter. You know that even a feast fit for a whole family would only leave you still feeling peckish. Always hungry, always wanting more, but never content with what you've got. Ungrateful with the second chance you've been given (dopplerganger, double, copycat, fake, changeling). You should feel disgusted with yourself.

Hastily, you lock the door behind you and stagger to the sink. You grab onto the edges tightly, as if this sink is your only tether to this world, and throw all your weight onto it. You just hang your head there for a bit, waiting for the nausea to die down. Once it does, you slowly tilt your head upwards and face the mirror that hangs above the sink. Then you see it for the first time. Your reflection. You. Or, at least, what's supposed to be you. What was you before you were prematurely ripped from the ether of this world and unrightfully shoved back without a care, perverted and distorted into a state where anyone who really, truly looked at you wouldn't be able to recognize you (this face used to belong to someone, Someone that was loved, cared for, someone worthy of living. Not you. Not like that mattered. You seem to take whatever you please, you thief). You smile (not yours) before you bark a dry and pained laugh.

There's nothing funny about this.

Thinking that makes you laugh even harder. Once the laughter dies down, you take a good, true look at your alleged reflection. You examine every pore, every blemish, every crease and skin fold, and take mental notes for all of it. You stare for so long that you're sure you've committed this face to memory, and yet, and yet! It does not feel like your own. You turn to your hands (you don't want to feel like a stranger in your own body). You flex them for a bit, studying each tendon and muscle. You then take your hands and rub them down your bare arms (you just want to feel in control of something, feel like you own something). Even still, as you feel what is meant to be your own body, none of it feels your own. You're not the owner of this body, just a tenant. You want to scream, puke, anything!!! Anything but this wretched, hollow feeling that does nothing but tear and devour you whole. You hate this! You hate this feeling! Frustration becomes all you know, and you fall to your knees, throwing your clothes (not yours not yours) off your body. Too itchy. None of your clothes feels right. You don't want to feel anything! Don't want to feel constricted, caged. Soon, you're completely naked. Feverishly, you search your whole body with your hands trying to find something, anything that feels real. That feels like you. But you don't! You don't find anything! Because this isn't you! You're just a corpse trying to parade as something real. You don't have the right to exist, to feel like you're worth a damn. Don't you remember the look of your mother when she saw you spit out your favorite food? How distraught she looked? Because you had the gall to pretend to be a person, to steal the likelihood of someone who actually mattered to this world, all so you didn't have to feel lonely. Isn't that pathetic. You should feel ashamed of yourself. You don't deserve shit. Your parents should've left your corpse, hosted the funeral, said their goodbyes as they waved your coffin down, never to be seen, only remembered.

You continue crying to no one, wailing out to no one, hands still clinging to your sides with a deathgrip. Eventually though, you manage to tire yourself out, and have no more tears to shed. You rise with a newfound clarity. Suddenly, you feel a crack of pain, and you sharply wince. You search for the source of pain, and find it around your ribs. You graze your fingertips along the marks and bite your tongue. It seems that while in your manic frenzy, you ended up digging your fingernails into the sides of your torso. You frown. Can't even keep yourself in one piece. At least you have matching scars with your arms. Woo. You get up. You feel gross (gross, gross, gross). You wanna take a shower. You turn on the faucet, boring holes into the clear endless water, and linger in the scalding hot water. It stings around your newly created wounds. You smile. It feels right, like you're getting some small bout of atonement. Too bad it'll never be enough. Maybe you actually died for good and this is hell. Sure feels like it. You couldn't think of a better resting place for a being such as yourself. Your face melds into a genuine smile as your wounds sing along in pain.

You drag your feet back in your bedroom (it was never yours, it'll never be yours again), making sure to avoid your (she's not your mother) and any other potentially lingering family (if you're lucky, they were told to leave you alone in your "recovery"), and collapse onto the bed. You're exhausted. You're hungry. You're aching. You need to attend to your self afflicted wounds. You feel like pure shit. Unfortunately for you, sleep doesn't come for you easily, so you have plenty of time to ruminate on your sorry pathetic state before you finally fall asleep.

The next time you wake, it's still dark out. You have no idea what time it is, but that never mattered. Time holds no meaning in hell. All you know is that you need to get out of here, to get to somewhere, but you don't know where. On command, you get out of bed, and begin your trek to your small little haven. You observe the ever changing scenery as you make your journey. It's beautiful. You feel a peace previously unheard of in you. The way the light bounces off of the leaves in the cool summer heat fills you with a certain placidity. You could exist in this moment forever, but you are unable to, for you have a task to complete. It feels like days have passed, but you know that's not right, because it's still dark when you arrive. A playground, one that has witnessed many visits from you in your youth. Except, that wasn't really you. Not anymore. You wish you could feel a true nostalgia for the playground, but what you feel instead is sorrow for the past version of you that will never get to feel that nostalgia. You feel that you've been grieving the old you for a while now. If you had a choice, you would've given up yourself and allowed the old you to live on in your place(it's what's right)(it's what you deserve) but such a thing is impossible. You know that now. All that's left is to keep going, to live on. You sit down on one of the swings, and being idly pushing yourself, swaying up and down. As you swing, you focus on the stars. You now know it is a myth, but it is true that one day you will look up and see the dead remnants of once alive and burning stars, faint whispers of lives and stories once lived. You wonder if that's what you are, residual lights left by the death of a star. You look back down at your feet, the motion of the swing slowing. Well, if you are a dead star, then maybe it's a nice fate. The stars are pretty to look at, even in death, and you're left with so much to admire, even if it is no longer yours. You wonder how the old(dead) version of yourself would feel about you now. If they'd be proud of you or want you dead. You hope it's the former. Not much you can do about being the surviving half. You get up from the swings, wincing as you pull at your injuries. You've had enough fun for one night. You're exhausted, and you've had a hard day. Now craving the sweet embrace of bed, you feel like you'll sleep with a more peaceful mind now.



Diptera

-by Cooper Haguns

I pulled a ragged breath into my lungs, gasping as the air pricked my throat. My senses came slowly back to me; a dampness on my back, matted hair scratching my neck, and the uneven surface on which I lay. The hum in my head became louder as my ears began picking up the sound of buzzing all around me. Flies sporadically landing then taking off, the light touches tingling my skin. Wanting to swat at the flies, I tried to find my hands, feeling them resting warmly against my stomach. Struggling weakly, I tried to move them, only to feel as if a heavy blanket pinned them down. I slowly opened my eyes, looking through my eyelashes to guard against the light, only to find any light shrouded by the fog of flies swarming overhead. I kept blinking as I lifted my head up to keep the flies from landing in my eyes, the buzzing crescendoing every time a fly found my ears. Wondering what might be holding my arms in place and keeping them so warm, my gaze wanders until I remember to move my focus down.

My eyes widen to discover an enormous, writhing mass of maggots: small, plump, pale bodies twisting and squirming around each other, engulfing my lower arms and torso. I screamed, the sound lost in the incessant buzzing of the flies, and I choked when a fly found the back of my throat. The fear propelled my arms, and I flung the mass off, maggots raining down, brushing them off as quickly as I could. Trying to stand, the flies engulfed me, crawling through my hair and bumping against my skin. I tried to step forward, shifting my weight only to have the surface detach and slide off, my foot squelching in the mess. I stumbled towards the exit, hands fruitlessly swatting at flies as they immediately filled the gaps like black smoke.

Newly freed, I tried to find my balance as I hit away the straggling flies and shook out my clothes. The maggots were flung from the folds and sprinkled down onto the grass below, bursting under my feet. I stumbled away from the hole and began walking as quickly as I could back to town; my initial burst of energy had dissipated, and I now felt too weak to run. All I could manage to do was return, burn my clothes, and fall asleep in the tub.



Later, although it was a clear sunny sky, I felt like a cloud had passed over the sun when the path darkened for a moment. Glancing up, there didn't seem to be a cause. I stopped, rubbing at my eyes when a dark shadow once again passed over my line of sight and disappeared again. I touched my eye and instructed myself to stop fretting, attempting to swat at a fly that was crawling on my ear.

I felt weak these past few days. It always seemed like a fly was encircling my

head (the constant noise was draining) and I had been fasting (my stomach still feeling like I couldn't possibly eat anything). I pressed fingers against my stomach, applying pressure in an attempt to relieve some of the uncomfortableness of the tension. Suddenly, I felt my throat itching, and I tried to cough to dispel the feeling. I coughed again as the itch moved up my throat and I spat on the ground, relieved of the feeling. Looking to see what might've caused it, I found only a faint spot of saliva and nothing more. I sighed, then slapped my cheek; a fly was crawling there, only leaving me the sting of the hit as the fly easily escaped my reach.

I was about to walk away again when I felt ill and stopped. I could feel a pressure building in my stomach, eager to escape. Leaning forward, I coughed as a much more intense itching and scratching began, and I gagged and coughed when, horribly, small flies began pouring out of my mouth, the limbs tickling my lips and neck as they crawled over my skin to let their wings dry in the sun and I sat there, tears forming my eyes as I didn't dare close my mouth and prevent their escape.

More and more flies poured out, and soon a cloud swirled around me. The new dark cloud blocked the sunlight, and I fell, exhausted, against the grass. My eyes open skyward, and the shroud of flies gently lowered and settled over me, having found new flesh to continue their life cycle.



Who's Afraid of the Modern Artist?

-by Willa Hamric

I've always put a part of myself in my artwork. This is a tedious operation that involves much deliberation and labor, but in the end the relief of the destination always outweighs the stress of the journey. My art is unrivaled in its simplistic complexity. I have yet to identify a piece that matches my work's ability to examine and critique the human experience in such a way that provides a uniform subversion of typical conventions.

I dabble in paints and charcoal, but my true passion is sculpture. I am able to breathe meaning into what was once just lifeless material. Occasionally, I find the piece speaking to me, begging for me to free it from the confines of the stone. I am rendered helpless by its whispers, so I oblige. I have made many pieces over my life. They range in meaning, but each one traces back to my unique and intricate relations with humanity.

I won't deny how I've struggled over the course of my art career. There's always something missing—some intrinsic component that separates my art from glorious meaning. One shape, one stroke, one sculpture keeps me from my true potential. I work tirelessly to identify that lost piece. Every moment I toil away in my studio, making but not creating. It consumes my thoughts like a parasite consumes the body of a diseased man.

But, after eons of painful labor, I've finally done it: my magnum opus.

When I first envisioned the piece, I knew it would stand out against all my others. My conceptual sketches were the ravings of a madman claimed by passion. That is until I finally felt I had captured my true intention in the ink. I hardly remember the process of sculpting, for the days blended together in one stretch of time controlled by my internal spirits. Day and night, I worked tirelessly until I was satisfied I had captured my vision.

It's beautiful to the full extent of the word, bordering on uncanny. The sloping angles of the piece guide the eye to the center focal point, where they rest ad infinitum until

the viewer can bear to tear them away. However, even the small details stand out on their own, creating notable balance and complexity.

The words to articulate its meaning are beyond me at the moment. For most of my pieces, they often do. All I can express is the vigor that washes over me upon their conceptualization. This reality does not necessarily mean that my works are meaningless—such an idea is foolish—just that their purpose is incapable of being put into prose. Human language is limited, therefore the innate feeling gained from my pieces cannot be adequately understood via text. I am typically able to find sufficient descriptions, however for this artwork specifically I can not place my finger upon its implications. I know that if I stare long enough—if I absorb its majesty long enough—it will come to me. It will blow through my bones like the winter's wind, and the art will be complete. For now, it shall remain as it exists, a meaning beyond words.

Upon its unveiling, a museum immediately bought it—along with a few of my other pieces—for their permanent collection. I can't blame them, I would do the same in their position. When faced with true beauty, the viewer finds themselves swayed to the will of the artwork. Fascination turns to admiration, admiration to passion, passion to obsession. A true piece of art will break the simple mind just to put it back together, mutated beyond all recognition.

I've been set up in a small room in the heart of the museum, where people can wander in at their leisure and find my art on display. My masterpiece sits in the center while the others line the walls. This exhibit will no doubt bring more eyes to my name—it is quite a distinguished establishment that is well respected within the country, only known by the most dedicated of art aficionados.

They are honored to have me as a part of such an illustrious exhibition.



I do wonder how institutions such as this one consider their employees during the hiring process. Surely, they must do some sort of investigation into their background? Perhaps even an analysis of their temperament? Well, however the procedure goes, it must be updated at once. The morons they have running this place clearly have no respect for the art inside of it, nor the artists who create purpose for this blank slate of a building.

Last night, after everyone had long vacated the exhibits, a janitor set to work. He quite obviously cared little about the majesty that surrounded him. Instead, he mindlessly swept at the floor with his earbuds lodged firmly in his ears. As he entered my exhibit, he continued to pay no mind to my work. This absent-mindedness led to him stepping over the wire barrier and bumping into my masterpiece. Of course, he suddenly realized his mistake and, instead of accepting responsibility for his actions, put his grimey mitts on my piece to stabilize it, only to turn around and pretend nothing happened!

The rage I felt is unfathomable, and I'm suddenly at a loss for words. My art has been permanently sullied by his touch; it would have been better had it been smashed to bits. What kind of man accepts a position at one of the most illustrious institutes in the country with full knowledge of his disregard for art itself? Or, if he is unaware of this trait, how could he be so senseless to his own affinities? A profession is not simply a chore you complete in order to receive your weekly allowance; it is your purpose—your contribution to society. Although, I suppose someone who demeans himself to the point of dedicating his life to cleaning up after people wouldn't understand that. Frankly, I shouldn't expect him to. After all, even I struggled to find my true calling in the beginning; I was wasting my life writing back-page editorials for a no-name newspaper. While I eventually saw the light, I doubt a man of that caliber would ever understand the integral role I play in society. I create; I use my hands to build bridges into the unfathomable. He sweeps floors and picks up garbage. He is resigned to a life of trailer-trash degeneracy with no one to blame but himself. He will remain in the dark while I live in the light.

For the sake of all the artists in this building, I suppose I should do something about him. I can't allow him to infect this museum any longer, lest another piece fall

victim to his clumsy nature. I must ensure he never works in a museum again, or any other fine art establishment. His presence is a blight upon the art world. It would suit everyone better if he never stepped foot in this building again.



I create; I use my hands to build bridges into the unfathomable. He sweeps floors and picks up garbage.

Today was a wondrous day. The air was chill inside the exhibit, reflecting the serene winter climate outside. I was disappointed at the lack of visitors perusing the museum, but my mood shifted upon the arrival of a group of school children, who excitedly filled the space with chatter and movement.

I do loathe children, yet even I can acknowledge the merit in introducing budding minds to brilliant art work at such an early age. While some miscreants roamed without direction or complained to their chaperones, some stared at my work with "oo's" and "ah's." I watched them bounce on their feet, excitedly yammering about the exhibit. The chaperones stood idly by, intermittently discussing and explaining the history of the artwork before them. They were so far from me that their words turned to nothing but mumbling noises, but I'm sure they were thoroughly impressed.

It wasn't long before the adults rounded up the young ones and pushed them into the next exhibit. Although the presence of children irks me—all clamoring mouths and sticky palms—I found myself missing the eyes that scanned my art with a fresh gaze. I must applaud the organizers of the field trip; introducing the youth to my work will surely bestow a true appreciation for fine art upon their lives. I trust that, going forward, they will view the world with a different lens altered by the beauty of sculpture, and I must admit I am the cause of that improved outlook.

The children weren't the only visitors today, although they were the most entertaining. People—mostly seniors and older adults—came in and out of the exhibits. Some lingered in my exhibit longer than others, but amongst them all, one stood out.

They were on the younger side—perhaps in their mid to late 20s. They stood with their arms crossed and their head tilted, their foot tapping furiously. Their clothes were unremarkable, mostly fitting the style trends of their age: a graphic t-shirt over jeans with more holes than fabric and untied tennis shoes. I often expect a certain level of decorum when interacting with fine art, but I was able to ignore that in light of their demeanor.

Their eyes, dark and narrow, stared at my masterpiece with focused fervor. They scanned every curve of the marble, every etch on its surface. Concentration poured from their eyes, a type of resolution that only comes from true appreciation and intellect. They squinted and shifted to the side to get a slightly different perspective of its majesty. Eventually, they left the room in a huff, obviously enraptured by my artistic endeavors.

I am delighted at the sight of someone who is capable of appreciating art such as mine. It is quite the rare occurrence when a visitor to the museum resonates with my piece so deeply. I wish to remain under their eyes for much longer, feeding them my art and passion like ambrosia. I often yearn for someone capable of understanding me to such a deep level, and judging by this individual's disposition, they seem to connect with my mindset like no other.

It is a shame that I am unable to speak with them. I'm sure we would have an intellectually stimulating conversation. But alas, a wall remains forever between the artist and the audience. Thus is the life of the creator: you are cursed to a life of artistic solitude.



Idiots! Ingrates! Imbéciles! Am I the last person on Earth capable of ascertaining the

significance of a piece? Have the intelligent beings that once inhabited this planet gone extinct? How am I to go on, knowing that my work is given to the deaf and blind?

I once upheld art critics as some of the highest intellectuals of our land. I believed them to be the link between the art and the average citizen. They guide the mind to the artist's true intention and build upon the piece. I often sought their approval during my early years, and I very seldom went without it. On the rare occasions that I was given harsh feedback from a so-called "professional" art critic, their opinion was quickly discarded by the public. I have grown hardened to offhanded comments from random passerbys—my present frustration comes from another source.

Insulting an artwork is not how you harm its reputation—misinterpreting it is. A woman recently wrote an article regarding my work, with my magnum opus as the main focus. She praised me highly, stating, "His work is a voyeuristic window into the life of a creative. With each piece in his exhibit, he engages with the viewer directly to ask 'who are you?' He mystifies the human experience and deconstructs the psychological alienation between the average and the exceptional." I appreciate her perspective, even if it is rather simplistic. However, I am less receptive to her later analysis regarding my center piece. "It breathes," she goes on to say. "It's not just a hunk of stone. The sloping angles and sharp lines give it life, as if blood was pumping under its surface. Even as you walk away, you can't help but think back to it. I found myself lying awake in the night, my mind plagued with thoughts of this art. It connects with the viewer directly, reminding them of their innate aesthetic sensibilities. The piece alludes to the idea that everyone has artistic ability, but first they must put the ink to paper, the brush to canvas, or the chisel to stone. After taking that first pivotal step, an artist is born."

I cannot believe my art could be simplified to the point of complete misinterpretation. My work was not meant to reach its hand down to the masses as an escalator to the elite. If you desire fame and glory, you must work for it. Many people simply don't have the talent to reach where I have climbed. That's all it is, really: talent. You cannot become a master if you're destined to be a novice. I've seen how this idea is dismissed in light of "can-do" attitudes that suggest you can do whatever you wish if you work hard enough, but even those go-getters know the truth deep down. Some people are meant to be artists—others are not. It may be a hard pill to swallow, but choking down medicine is better for the body and mind.

This woman should consider a career change in her near future. Sure, her words may be pretty, but they lack intelligence and nuance. Pretty things are meant to be on shelves, not engraved in ink on a page meant for academics. Her first mistake was imagining that a two dimensional analysis on a piece much grander than she could ever imagine could be simplified to words alone. She is a fool, much like the rest of the art world that fails to understand my genius. It would do her some good, I think, if she stayed at home to reflect on what the word "art" truly means. It would save us all the trouble of having to read her half-baked analysis on things she cannot fully comprehend.

I was looking for a light through the tunnel, an idea as to what my piece conveys, but I have only found more dark. While I am still searching for the words to describe the importance of my artwork, I now know that others are satisfied with living in delusion. She does not understand my art; only I have the ability to ascertain its meaning.



I'm not sure what I'm meant to do.

I thought time would help me. I thought it would drag me out of the hellish fog my mind seems to constantly be enveloped in, and yet here I am, as lost as when I began this journey. This piece has consumed me—I've given everything to it, my life, my body, my mind, everything—but I am still left empty, a hole in my heart.

I put my blood, sweat, and tears into my work and yet I never receive the renown I deserve. For my creations, I've dedicated years of my existence that I can never get back. I am a professional, an expert. I know everything there is to know about the contemporary art form. There is nothing else



for me—no other field will ever be as enticing as the one I currently reside in. Yet, I forever remain the hands behind the piece rather than the mind.

My brilliance cannot be overstated—I will not be humble in acknowledging such a fact. The world, however, refuses to recognize me for my talent. I suppose I must be the lousiest artist in all of human history for my genius to go so unnoticed. Perhaps that is why I find myself lost in the sea of meaning; the people refuse to grant me support in my dire time of need.

Is this meant to be my end? No longer can I fathom a life outside my art. I wonder how my life may have changed had I never put the pen to paper or the chisel to stone. It's a useless fantasy. I am as intertwined with art as fate is with the soul. Art is written in the very soul of my being, I cannot remove it from my life without removing my very being from my body. I will always come back to it, like a love I'd left on the shore. Even if the tumultuous waves rip me away, I shall return to its side once more.

Ultimately, there is not much left for me to do. My mind is trapped, tied to that artwork and that one alone. I will never create something of equal caliber. It is my magnum opus, my ultimate accomplishment, and my conclusion. My fingers will no longer move to even attempt such a monumental feat. The piece ascends human comprehension, even my own, regrettably. I always dreamed about living to see the day my art was grander than myself, and I suppose I have met that bittersweet fantasy. It shall remain a part of me as long as I take a breath, and I shall remain a part of it for much longer.



The glass crunches under the soles of your feet. You narrowly avoid the sharp pieces still on the windowsill as you slide through. The blaring of the alarms above pierce your ears, like a nail driven directly into your skull. You have only a few minutes before the police come banging down the door and storm the museum, looking to put your head on a stick and your body in a cell. That's fine, that's fine. It won't take you long. You grip the sledgehammer tighter in your hands. You still have use for it.

You start walking. Your feet barely feel the stinging pain of glass through the soles of your tennis shoes. You navigate through the winding halls, somehow remembering the exact route you took weeks ago. Left, right, forward, left, right, right, right.

The exhibit's entrance opens like a gaping maw. You wish you would have brought a jacket rather than just the t-shirt hanging off your shoulders—your skin prickles with goosebumps. Even so, you carry on like a soldier in a war you don't remember the justification for. Every footstep against the linoleum is a step closer to the enemy, every second brings closer the hour of battle.

It stands there in the middle of the room with other, less notable pieces on the perimeter—a false prophet surrounded by its idols. Or maybe not. Perhaps the waves of uncertainty and rage it pulled over you were actually an awakening. Perhaps your mind is the clearest it's been in years. You certainly feel that way as you take a few steps forward. It looms above like a mourner over an open grave and you stand before it, a gravestone.

It's not alive. That's what you told yourself, over and over again, while you laid awake at night. You stared at the ceiling for hours until the spots and bumps in the plaster began to form the familiar curves of the statue you tried to forget. Even as you turned over

and pressed your face into your pillow, you could still see it. You could still see how it moved. When looking at the whole piece you swore it was pulsating, but staring at the edges convinced you it was perfectly still. It looked like it was breathing. You loathed the thing. You couldn't care less about the majority of "modern art"—it all seems so unskilled when compared to the natural beauty of the historical pieces. Most you pass by with nothing more than a scowl or a grunt.



But this piece is different. You can't even remember its name, but it sticks onto you like a leech on the ball of your foot. Every step sends agonizing pains through your mind, but you can't seem to squish it. It hangs on and continues to dig out chunks of your flesh. Time and time again, you try to forget and move on with your life, to no avail. It drives you mad the way it pollutes your every thought.

You aren't even sure why you kept remembering it—it wasn't particularly notable in any way. It looked just like the others in the same room. You could barely even put your finger on what emotion you felt gazing upon the piece. Disgust? Anger? It didn't seem to matter anymore. You could only find one way to get rid of the thoughts. You had to go to the source.

You shift the sledgehammer from hand to hand, feeling the weight of the handle strike your palm again and again. You think about where to attack it first—the bottom looks pretty unstable, and the left seems unbalanced, but the top would make a pretty crack down the middle. In the end, you figure it doesn't matter. You raise the weapon and let fate decide.

A solid crash rings throughout the room. Then another, and another. You swing with your eyes closed, bringing the hammer down and feeling the stone give way underneath. Shards graze your skin as they fly past. You can feel the way they leave invisible streaks of pain on your face, but you keep your eyes closed. You want to keep hitting it until you feel better. Until you forget why you are here in the first place.

Something wet hits your fingers.

You open your eyes. Your hands glisten, drenched in the mysterious liquid. Now that you can see, you notice you're covered in it. Your jeans are dotted with small splatters and your shoes sit in a puddle. How did you not notice it before? It's everywhere and it sticks to your skin like syrup. It's dark, whatever it is, but you can't tell what the color is in the low light. It oozes out of the statue in a slow, never ending drip. It's unnaturally warm—damn near hot—and it's sticky. It pours onto the floor, seeping into the tops of your shoes and clinging to your ankles.

It's not smooth, either. There are chunks floating through, bobbing up and down through the current: apples in a barrel, heads in a castle moat. There are bubbles of separated liquid, like oil in water. It's a massive mixture of textures and shapes, none of which you can identify.

Then the smell fills the room, assaulting your senses with a rancid sweet scent. You're reminded of when you were younger and your mother carted you off to the retirement home to say your last goodbyes to your grandmother. All you can remember of that day was the smell: Clinical disinfectant mixed with that humanistic scent of rot. She laid there motionless except for her heaving chest,

not dead but decomposing. With every beep of her life support, bile climbed its way up your throat. You had to rush out of the room before it could escape your mouth.

It's the same smell here, except more, much more of it. You can't smell anything past the saccharine air that fills your lungs, besides an occasional whiff of sour reminiscent of stomach acid. You choke on it, feeling something hot and solid rise up to your tongue before aggressively swallowing it down.

Blood. That's blood.

It can't be blood. It's too dark and wet and thick. There's so much of it that the liquid pooling around your ankles looks almost black. But it has to be, there's nothing else it could be. It's not yours, right? No, it's coming out of the statue. Why is it coming out of the statue? Why the fuck is it coming out of the statue?

You step back, but the blood only seems to pour out faster. Every gap in the stone spews liquid like it's trying to escape a fractured dam. The cracks spread out like a shattered mirror, creeping along the sides like a fissure. You can't get away from it fast enough, or at all. It seems to pull you forward with each step you take back.

From a large gash in the stone, something slowly slips into view. It's solid, but limp. It slides out of the opening, falling wet and heavy to the floor. You can't tell what it is. The shape doesn't make sense to your wide eyes. It's massive—around your size, if not larger—and it curls in on itself like a still-born calf, but the blood covering its every inch makes discerning any notable features impossible. The current of liquid still pouring from the statue pushes it toward you, turning it ever so slightly so it's easier to see. There's a foot, a hand, a mouth.

And an eye.

It stares at you, but it's not seeing. It doesn't blink or react in any way, yet you can feel its gaze on your skin. It was alive, at some point. It must have been. It looks to have once been a man, but he appears to have been boiled down into a blank slate, devoid of any identifying features. There are gaps in his skin where rot consumes his body. His mouth hangs open and you can see some teeth missing from his blackened gums.

You crumble down into the gore below. You barely feel the hot liquid burning your skin as you crawl forward toward the broken sculpture and the broken man. The blood splatters against your face and past your teeth, but you continue through the slurry of human viscera. You press your hands against the cracks, trying to stop the spray from escaping more than it already has. You can't—it's coming too fast and from too many places.

You made a mistake. You shouldn't have come here. You should have never picked up that sledgehammer, and you should have never brought it back down. You broke it—the piece, the man, everything above, and nothing at all. Why did you do this? Why can't you fix it?

With nothing left to do, you turn towards the shriveled figure on the ground. You grab at his body, but his flesh is too soft to get a grip on. It squishes inward and leaves an imprint of your hand. You try again, this time using your arms to scoop him upward. You can feel the way his body gives and tries to rip away from itself, but you hold it close. You push him back into the gash he fell from, but the waterfall returns him back to your arms. You shove him back inside again, frantic, but you can't seem to get him to stay.

You want him to stay inside the concrete coffin, but the artwork rejects him no matter how hard you try. Every time he tumbles back into your arms there's less of him, pieces of his body lost to the violent current. First an eye, then a finger, then a foot, and now barely a husk of a man remains.

There are sirens somewhere off in the distance, but you can't hear them past the roaring of the liquid and the heartbeat in your ears. You can't even tell if it's yours anymore—it's too loud and too close to your ears. Eventually, you will be dragged away from this sea of red by men in blue, but a part of you will stay here,rotting with the corpse in your arms. A piece of you will remain inside the artwork.



Bone Marrow Vampire Frat

-by Indi

I've always thought I was particularly in tune with the people around me. I get on fairly well socially. Not amazingly, mind you, but well enough. University is basically trial-by-fire when it comes to improving your social skills. You either adapt immediately or get left behind. I suppose that's why fraternities and sororities exist in the first place. People want a close and easy way to connect with others as fast as possible, risks notwithstanding. I know I did, at least. My parents call it "networking." I call it "being kind of desperate to find someone like myself."

That's why I joined the biggest sorority on my campus. If I just sort of threw myself at a social situation, it'd work out eventually. Don't pay heed to the blond-haired bombshells giving you weird glances as you stumble out of your room at two in the morning just to get a swig of Playboy-themed water. The tap's been broken for a month and everybody says that they'll call Maintenance eventually. Goes without saying that you shouldn't count on it. Just keep drinking that pink-dyed water like the Kool-Aid. Let your mind go blank. Tune out the smells of ozone and mold and don't pay mind to the sounds of five beds creaking in tandem. If I started jumping at every sound I heard, I'd end up talking to myself. I can't really go outside to clear my head, anyway. It's always thundering in this damn town.

That's not the point, though. Every day, thousands of guys from the biggest frat on campus—which is locked down to a ludicrous degree, mind you—flow through this rickety-ass house. It's always to go to bed with one of my sisters or to raid our fridge. There are those blessed few that don't do either, mind you. They're always tucked under the arm of a lad twice their size and muscle mass. The other arm, of course, has an emaciated pale woman covered with hickeys. As far as I'm aware, the small-fry guys are in the same boat as myself.

I was approached by one of them earlier this week. This pizza slice-shaped man with sunken-in cheeks and a black tank top hunched over the couch I was sitting on. I looked to my right to see what had disturbed my carefully-maintained circle of silence. Towering above me, even though he was half his usual height, was this blue-eyed beast. I could think of nothing less sexy than the idea of those comedically-large veins hovering 0.1 cm over my head. I think he noticed my physically recoiling at nothing.

I could immediately smell the alcohol radiating from him as soon as he leaned closer to me. He asked me "all alone on a Saturday night?" and if I wanted "to believe in things [I] could not." I politely but firmly declined. I was speaking through a clenched jaw and the customer service smile I had to train over years and years. I would not be so desperate. I should never be for cheap thrills. Why else would I have a bottle of pepper spray permanently affixed to my carabiner? For show? No!

He tensed up for a moment. Was he so unused to rejection that a simple "no" sobered him up immediately? God, I hoped so. I wanted to get back to watching whatever dreck reality TV show the sisters threw on in the background. My room was currently occupied by Sidney and her boyfriend of the week, and I didn't want to be present when bottles start flying. Simone was hospitalized for about a week when a glass shard went through her foot. Perhaps it says more about me that I assumed the red stain on the floor was consensual. It's funny. I've gone from praying every night that the demons in my closet wouldn't corrupt me to this. The other girls back home tried to pray their sexual urges away. I've never felt any. Pastor Michel crowned me the platonic ideal of what godliness should look like. Later that afternoon, I got home with a broken nose and fractured ribs.

The man's frame stretched to completely eclipse the chandelier behind me. I could swear new veins snaked across his neck and were gone. For far too long, we sat and stood respectively in complete, dead silence. He didn't care to blink. He did not

hide his completely contracted eyes for even a moment. Terrible eye in terrible eye.

His buddy—who looked near identical to him—then clasped his back. The air broke in a second as the men flipped each other over the couch. The wooden table in front of me was cleaved in half under the impossible weight of this Corinthian pillar of a human being. A beer can that had been ripped to ribbons was directly under where the perpetrator was thrown. Sharp edges ripped away thin polyester. That pale—almost translucent—skin was sliced open. His exposed back faced mine as he fell on his behind, laughing his ass off. I could see muscle pulsating...but no blood. This open wound did not weep. Like nothing had happened, he sauntered off into the January snow with his fraternal twin.

I was at an impasse. There was no reason for me to get involved. I was already on that man's bad side. If I dared to involve myself, I would run such a deep risk that, just maybe, I couldn't drag myself out of. At the same time, one of my sisters could be experiencing that exact thing I'm so petrified of.

What the Hell am I thinking? Over and over, I wondered that exact thing to myself. (What) as I ran to the door. (The) as I jiggled the lion-shaped bronze doorknob. (Hell) as I stepped outside into the sleet and snow. (Am) as I began to ruminate to myself. (I) as I saw my own reflection in the window. I was not prepared to brave the cold. Did that matter though? I was (thinking) both not at all and thinking way too much. The frat house was about a five-minute walk, a two-minute run.

The door was left open. It's always locked and bolted. I could hear yelling and slamming from the basement door directly parallel to the entrance. Locked as well. I threw myself against the door again, again, again-

I am tumbling down the stairs.

I black out.

I wake up.

There are stalactites above me and the stench of body odor. I sit up.

Around me, from all angles, are shirtless men with three-inch fangs pinning bone-white women to the floor. I hear the crack of bone being pierced and a sickening slurp immediately after. Those small-fry men are growing before my eyes, eyes ablaze with a power that puts a visceral pit in my stomach. Their backs arch as more and more mass is added to their bodies. Beasts everywhere are being unleashed and I can't do anything to try and escape, to try and save the women around me. I can't even fathom what I'm trying to save them from.

Shadows creep the walls, expanding the images of these hulking masses wrestling tenfold. They're mindlessly cackling among themselves, slamming down beer kegs...and sucking the marrow from each other.

Ah. I see now. There aren't any women here.



There are those blessed few that don't do either, mind you. They're always tucked under the arm of a lad twice their size and muscle mass.

A Breathing Thing

-by Savannah-Lu Torre



Finding a dead fox in the shed wasn't the worst part of Brandon's weekend. He had expected worse, especially considering the rancid scent building in his garden for the past few days. The old shed was practically falling over. Spruce planks, once a deep brown, now chipped rigidly with the northern wind. The termites had gotten to it since Brandon's uncle's funeral.

Brandon did not expect anything from his uncle, even in death. The two did share memories of fishing or sharing cold beers at the gas station. But none of it was important—or, worthy of a house and land—as Brandon saw it. Then again, to whom else could the property belong?

And the neighbors knew Brandon had a lot on his hands: the rotting shed, a missing girlfriend, and now, the decomposing mutt on his porch. Living in the suburban north of New York did not make him an animal lover. He hated "dog rodents" and all the diseases they fester. Foxes were among what Brandon would consider a "dog rodent."

The young writer next door, Laura, was an old friend of Brandon's. When Sarah went missing, the two neighbors spent all their time searching. That was until the police gave up searching. Laura still spoke often with Brandon, enough to lead him to her doorstep for help.

"Is it the coyotes this time," she opened the door after the seventh bell, "or did somebody else die?"

"A little bit of both? I found something that I need gone." Brandon spoke firmly. He was pathetic with fear.

They marched through the uncut grass and back to Brandon's sad excuse for a living space. The old and gray front door creaked open with an obnoxious, lousy hinge. The floorboards sank parabolic under the weight of each step. Every picture frame had been bathed in dust. The tainted wallpaper sang a lonely word: uninhabited. Yet somehow, a spoiled spoor had contaminated the existing filth, and it was weeping from the dining room.

The poor mammal did not startle Laura as much as it did Brandon at first sight. Its gray paws lay flat on the wooden table, and its head sat twisted upright towards the door. The animal, frozen and warped, vacantly gazed at nothing.

Laura questioned, verbally disgusted, "Why've you got it in your house?"

"I dunno. I thought I'd make dinner with it." Brandon joked, though no laughter echoed in the home.

"I'm not touching that thing. Go bury it in the yard," she threw her hands up, "Maybe it had rabies!"

"Wow. Guess you're too scared! Sensitive, just like Sarah!" he exclaimed as Laura turned her back.

As Laura left the seemingly abandoned house, Brandon stared down the deviant thing on the table. After a few moments, he pulled a chair to face the gray thing, his eyes still fixed on it.

Later, after hours in his room practically hiding from the responsibility lying on his dining table, Brandon called Laura again. And again. And after four tries, she answered.

"Laura, I still need you here. I still haven't buried it."

"Well, a shovel might be better for you," Laura mocked, "I thought you said you don't need help from 'sensitive' women anymore."

"You know what I meant. I was talking about Sarah. She left us, don't you remember?"

"She's gone, Brandon. She's been gone a long time," Laura heaved angrily. "All people ever do is leave you. And I'm starting to see why."

Laura hung up the phone, and a longing silence filled the air.

Brandon couldn't sleep. All that filled his mind was the furry beast downstairs. He tossed in bed, hoping he would awake to a new home—a new life. Somewhere clean, somewhere foxes could not be found for miles. Somewhere with Sarah.

In the night, a strange melody filled the kitchen. Brandon was rattled from his slumber, terrified of what it could be. Carefully sauntering downstairs, he prayed to wake up from this nightmare. And as he found himself gazing through the surrounding black, he noticed the light from the dining room.

A figure sat there, caressing the odorous corpse's gray coat. It was harmonizing with the buzz of the radio. The potent signal of decay had turned to pancake and strawberry. A nostalgic feeling swept over Brandon—a memory of peace. The figure turned to him and smiled, a smile he now recognized. With brunette bangs and shining green eyes, the feminine figure spoke to him with a stretched embrace. And the words did not matter to Brandon, for Sarah was in his arms once more.

The scene was beautiful and helpless. But degenerate flavors filled the moment. He sensed a cold, wicked distortion. Something was not right with this memory. And as he awoke in the dining room, standing empty handed, fur filled his eyes. With red seeping from his lips, the moldy aroma returned.

He found himself holding the forsaken carcass to his own mouth. The sour horror was unholy.

In the morning, Brandon would soon find the hatchet in his uncle's toolbox behind the shed. He would use this hatchet and the shovel to bury this secret along with the rest of Sarah's things. But now, he is admiring the furry creature on his dinner table. It is simply resting. And as Brandon watches the moonlight flare through the curtains and onto the pup's pupil, he could swear he hears it breathing.



How Deep a Bite Goes

-by Iris Palmer

I didn't know where else to go.

The first morning I woke up in a field, stark naked with grass stains on the backs of my thighs and the sickening taste of metal in my mouth, I ran to the only place I could think of. Through empty streets, my bare feet aching the whole time, I frantically looked around, hoping that no one could see me. I'm not sure the sight of a fully-nude young woman covered in blood would be too easy on the eyes. But to my surprise, there was no one. The houses appeared empty. No lights, no clanging of pots and pans as people made breakfast, no dog walkers or early morning joggers. The air was stale and silent. Well, except for the sound of a hissing calico that greeted me just a few steps away from Lexi's crummy one-story house before running away.

I knocked furiously on the front door while my heart pounded. It wasn't that I was afraid of people seeing me naked. I was more afraid that she wouldn't be there. But after the third or fourth round of knocking, it swung open, and she entered into the doorframe, a painting whose sight I could never get out of my head. With the look she was giving me, though, I'd say she looked a bit like The Scream.

"Bridget, what the hell are you doing on my porch? Why are you naked?"

I tried to hide the fear in my voice, but still the words came out shaking. "Lexi, I'm sorry. Can please I come in?"

"Are you drunk?"

"No, I'm not drunk I— Just, please. Please let me in."

She said nothing for a few moments, and right there in that silence, I thought it was the last time I'd ever see her. I said I was getting sober the last time I saw her. Yet there I was, like a junky spinning out at her doorstep. She had every right to send me off into the street like the stray dog I was. But instead, she stepped to the side and let me run in with my hands cleverly hiding the bits of me that might catch a public indecency charge had anyone seen me.

Crashing down on her couch was a relief I don't think I'll ever feel again. Of course, it was followed by a barrage of questions, almost all of which she could scarcely believe my answers to. Who could blame her?

"And you don't remember anything?"

"I remember the full moon. I remember everything going dark. I remember seeing the street under me, and a lot of blood, and then I woke up in the field by Marley's house." I let the words sink in for a bit, hoping my honesty would soften the blow, before I said, "I think I killed her cat."

"Bridget!"

"I couldn't help it! It was like… It was like I couldn't stop my brain from making my body move without my say-so."

She shook her head, her fingers pinching the bridge of her nose. "That doesn't make any sense." Bafflingly, she sat down next to me, pulling a throw blanket over my naked lap and wrapping another one around my shoulders. Lexi was always good at that: warmth without effort. "A werewolf?" She asked.

"It would explain the stretch marks. And the blood. And the whole full moon thing."

She sat down next to me. "When would you even have gotten, like, infected?"

My heart dropped hard enough to keep my mouth shut for a while. This was crazy. Lexi had every right to hate me, and hell, at any moment she could just go right back to doing it and I wouldn't blame her for a second. But I didn't want to lose her again. I could feel myself slipping, falling down that weird pit in my mind whose bottom was in an empty bottle.

So I looked around the room, counted things I could see. The painting of a rose she did for her mom in the fifth grade hanging up

by the TV, one of her band tees she got at a concert with me, her eyes, the way they looked at me with pity and care all at the same time. Her hands. On her right hand, the ring she won at an arcade when we were thirteen. Across the back of her left, the scar from when she broke it rock climbing.

That was enough to remember.

The last time I was here, about a month ago, I told Lexi I was gonna get sober right after drinking half a bottle of bourbon in her bathroom. She caught one whiff of my breath and threw me out in the middle of the night. Stumbling home on a street I still knew like my own name, I heard something crashing through the trees, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up in my backyard with gashes on my back that looked like a meat cleaver made them.

"I thought it was a dog. Or maybe a bear. Either way, something attacked me last month and ran off. But it healed overnight and I can't afford to go to the hospital anyway. So, I just left it."

"I came here because you were the only one that ever saw me as something more than a mess."

Something in me was still scared. I mean, I sounded certifiably insane. I had betrayed this girl, stole from her, let her down time and time again, and with each stupid word about werewolves that left my mouth, I thought I might lose her all over again.

Her hand rested on my shoulder. Careful, gentle, holding me steady and keeping me from falling. "The full moon is supposed to last another two nights," she said. "You're gonna… turn again?"

I nodded. "I think so."

"Is there somewhere you can go, keep yourself from getting out and killing somebody else's pet?"

"Well," I said, and I couldn't stop my lip from trembling, then sighed. "My parents kicked me out, Katy dumped me after I stopped drinking. I guess I wasn't fun for her anymore. And I don't really have any other friends." I hesitated at first to say more, afraid of how Lexi would take it, afraid she'd just hear desperation and honeyed words that meant nothing. But I needed to say it. For me. "I came here because you were the only one that ever saw me as something more than a mess."

She was quiet for a while, and I started to think she wouldn't say anything more and I'd just have to leave, until she finally spoke.

"You can stay in the basement until we… figure this out."

I blinked, trying to clear the shock away. "What?"

"Bridge, don't give me a chance to change my mind. You can just say yes."

"Yeah, yeah of course I'm gonna say yes to that. But, what if I hurt you?"

"More than you already have?"

"Right," I muttered. "I'm sorry."

"Besides, you've seen the door on the basement. That thing's solid metal and has two different deadbolts. I think it's stronger than Marley's freaky-looking cat," she said, and then the craziest thing happened. Even crazier than a werewolf.

Lexi laughed. Not at me, but actually laughed, like we were just two girls staying up past their bedtime again. She let me shower and rinse the filth off of me and left a spare change of clothes on the back of her toilet in the same bathroom I'd gotten wasted in the last time I saw her. Nothing in me wanted to drink again, not now. I just wanted to figure out how to cure myself and try to be in her life again.

When I came out of the bathroom, hair dripping wet, she had food waiting for me. Nothing fancy. Just a plate of chips and a turkey sandwich. I wasn't even all that hungry. I think picking bits of Whiskers out of my teeth in the shower had stolen my appetite away from me, but I still ate.

The chips tasted like styrofoam. The bread felt sticky like glue, clinging to the roof of my mouth, and it had a flavor somewhere between dirt and sawdust. But the meat tasted better than anything I'd ever eaten. It wasn't enough. Hell, I started to recall with sickening fondness the taste of Marley's cat on my tongue. Confirmation that whatever I was now couldn't be allowed to last for much longer.

We talked and laughed and we were normal for once in a long while. Like I hadn't messed everything up before. We whittled the day down until the sunlight leaked in amber through the windows. I could already feel my skin start to tingle. Every hair on my body stuck up like I was in a freezing room. I needed to get to the basement, fast, before I lost control again and did something I might regret more than all the bottles I'd gone through.

I tried to get up and go for the door, but Lexi put a hand on my thigh that stopped me before I could even move. "I'll walk you there. Someone's gotta lock the door, right?"

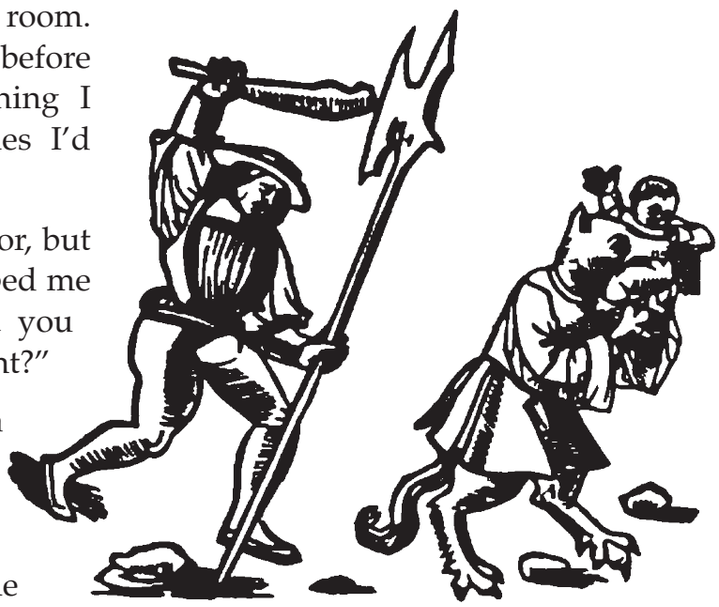
My heart must've sounded like a machine gun if she could hear it. I nodded, walking with her slowly, wanting so badly to hold her hand for just a little bit before my fingers became claws. She opened the door up and I had just enough time to see the worried, teary-eyed look in her pretty blue eyes before the door shut and I was left with the sound of both deadbolt locks in total darkness.

I expected to hear Lexi's footsteps as she walked away. But instead came her voice, muffled behind the door. "There's a light switch down there, at the bottom of the stairs. Please try not to break anything," she said.

I wanted to say 'thank you' or ramble on about how much she meant to me, how kind it was that she was helping me at all, but the pain hit me like a freight train before I even had the chance. What started as a tingling sensation like goosebumps across my whole body quickly turned into a burning agony halfway down the stairs. I screamed, or at least I thought I did; what came out of my throat was too mangled to discern. My skin still burned. It burned and itched, and I couldn't resist scratching.

My hands went to my stomach, trying for even a second to stop the feeling, scraping skin so incessantly that I didn't notice the blood. Muscles stretched, nails grew longer and sharper like knives. Mouth and nose cracked and extended out into a snout. I was losing control of how my body was changing, just like before. But this time, I had control of how I moved it. Through the pain and the sounds of my own blood dripping across the floor, I found the light switch and struck it with my hand to a blinding light.

I expected to see fur. But when my eyes adjusted to



the new light and I looked down at my hands, I saw nothing but red on the skin of my palms and glistening on my claws. Hungry. That was all I could think about. My jaws hurt, my legs and arms pulsed with an electric hum, and still, all I could feel was the pit in my stomach. I sniffed the damp air of the basement, hoping I could find something I could sink my teeth into. Anything. But not even the acrid stench of a dirty rodent entered my nostrils. Well, not a living one.

In the corner behind a box of Christmas ornaments, I could smell the decaying corpse of an opossum. Meat. It didn't matter that it was rotten, green in spots where fungus had made its home. I wrapped the lips of my newfound snout around the carcass and picked clean the bones of it, spitting out the rancid bits, rifling through maggots and hacking up spit at the taste of them. Flesh tasted sweet now, blood like honey, muscle

and sinew like rich cream. I savored it like a delicacy as the bones crunched beneath my teeth.

I wanted more. More and more, my mouth ached with the need to bite, to chew on something warm and soft. Alive. And then I heard the sound of a lone footstep upstairs. Lexi. I couldn't. I had already done too much, taken too much, asked for too much when I deserved so little. But along with the hunger came another pit in my stomach.

Fear. I was alone down in that basement, cold, bleeding from a wound I'd given myself. I wanted her warmth. I wanted her kindness, her arms around me, clinging tight enough to occupy my mind away from the pain in my jaws. Like the animal I must've been, I climbed the stairs on all fours, crashing into the door and banging on it with my fist.

Forming words with my new mouth was hard at first. What came out sounded like the droning whine of a dog more than any language. I kept trying, though, grunting and growling until I could just barely get one syllable out at a time.

"*Le-xi*," I muttered, my voice low and raspy.

There was nothing at first, no reply and no sounds of frantic running from the door that I could hear. She was still there.

"*Please.*" I wanted to tear off my own jaw, the pain in every tooth unbearable, sending shockwaves through my spine and down through my legs. "*Need help. Food.*"

"Bridget, I can't, I—I don't have anything more."

I scraped my claws across the door, producing a horrible grinding sound that rang in my eardrums like a church bell. "*It hurt. Mouth hurt.*" I felt like a child saying her first words all over again. My own body was foreign to me now. It was all the same stuff, but bent, stretched, pulled, and ringing with a pain I had never felt before. There was no hope of my mind blacking out to save me now. Silence filled the air, and I could swear I could *hear* the throbbing of my own jaws.

But then I heard the deadbolts click and clack. The door opened.

Lexi stood there, glowing in the light from the basement steps, the pale skin of her chest exposed and dotted with a splatter of freckles. She had her t-shirt bundled up in a heap in one of her hands, a kitchen knife white-knuckle gripped in the other. A look of abject terror crossed her pretty blue eyes. But it started to change, a weird kind of fascination finding its place in her shaking pupils.

"Bite my shoulder. Do what you have to do. But if you go overboard, I'm driving this knife into your neck and kicking you down those stairs. Got it?" I moved toward her, but she stomped on my foot and stopped me. "If you can't answer me, nod."

The pain in my mouth was so great that I couldn't talk any more than I already had. So I did as she asked, nodding, putting my claws behind my back and waiting patiently like a dog expecting a treat.

"Go ahead," she said.

I lunged at her, dropping my jaw and sinking my teeth into the skin of her shoulder. I could taste her blood. I could feel her pulse in my gums. She tasted like candy, her flesh pillowy and sweet like pound cake. My teeth ripped and tore, taking a small chunk about the size of a finger. She shouted, raising the knife at me, but her arm stopped at its apex above her head.

I didn't move. "*I sor-ry.*" Every fiber of my body was telling me to attack her, to tear every limb from her body and pick off the meat from them until there was nothing left. But I had control. I couldn't deny it any longer, how I felt about Lexi, feelings that seemed to only get stronger as the piece of her shoulder traveled to my stomach.

"I taste good?" She asked, her breath ragged and woozy.

I nodded.

She lifted the shirt to her wound and winced as she put pressure on it, the gray fabric quickly soaking up red. "I guess that's something of a compliment."

I nodded again.

"You're awfully quiet."

"*Hard to talk.*" Every word was still painful, the vibrations of them burning in my

throat, like it was against nature to make them in this form.

"Right," she said. "You know I need to put you back in the basement now, right?"

I nodded.

"Good." She gestured for the wide-open door, and without skipping a beat, I stepped down the stairs once again. "Oh. Okay, that was easier than I thought." She took a few heaving breaths, pale and sweating. "I'll come and get you in the morning. I guess." Her hand came to the door shaking, and despite how it hurt to do it, I spoke again before she could shut it.

"*Thank you, Le-xi.*"

The door opened one more time before the morning came. Lexi tossed a mewling calico cat down the stairs. It wasn't fast enough, though. Soon my stomach felt full and my teeth hurt less and less, and I felt better enough to fall asleep.

When I awoke again, I was in tattered clothes, curled up at the bottom of the basement stairs, surrounded by red-stained bones. The terror that my memory could be failing me, that these bones could be all that was left of Lexi, hit my mind and sent me into a panic. I scrambled to my feet and ran up the stairs with aching muscles. I banged my fists against the door again, just like before, screaming for her with tears in my eyes.

"Lexi! Lexi, please tell me you're there!"

The deadbolts unlatched, the door swung open, and standing there in a tank top and a mess of bloody bandages duct-taped to her shoulder was Lexi. "Good morning to you, too."

I reached out and wrapped my arms around her. "Thank you. Thank you."

"For the cat? Yeah, you better thank me. I really hope I'm right about it being a stray, or we've got more to deal with than being werewolves." My heart dropped. But she was right, she must've been. I bit her and she lived. She was infected just like me. "Guess I'll have to start eating cats too, huh?"

"God, I'm sorry."

"Will you stop saying you're sorry? You said it enough times when you told me you were done drinking. Now's the time to do something about it, not keep saying you're sorry." She put her hand up to my cheek, and I couldn't help but melt. "You didn't change until a month after you got attacked, right?"

I nodded.

"Then we've got a month until I start changing. And there's another night of the full moon tonight."

I blinked the confusion away, still feeling the warmth of her palm on my face. "Wait. You're helping me?"

She nodded. "As much as I can. For both of our sakes." Then she did the unthinkable. Leaning forward, she placed a kiss on my cheek. "We need to figure something out for food. You can't keep killing stray cats. People are gonna notice."

"Then we'll figure it out. I can control myself."

"You better," she said.

I picked the last bits of cat from in between my teeth, choking them down, the sickeningly sweet metallic taste of blood drifting down my throat, and I nodded.

"How did it… taste?" Lexi asked with a smirk.

"What, cat? I hate to be cliche, but, kind of like chicken."

"No. Me… Human."

I thought about lying, telling her that human beings tasted like raw sewage or spoiled milk or rotted fruit. But I'd done enough lying to Lexi. "Sweet. Like concentrated sugar, or a delightful pastry, or something like that."

She bit down on her lip, an inquisitive look in her eyes. "Maybe we pay Katy a visit?"

"What are you getting at?" I raised an eyebrow.

Lexi wrapped her arms around my neck and brought her lips right up to my ear. "Don't you wanna go out for dinner? Just once? Call it a date?"

Dance floors, muddy sounds, old swords: in Náströnd

-by fishbowl, messenger of THE BOOK

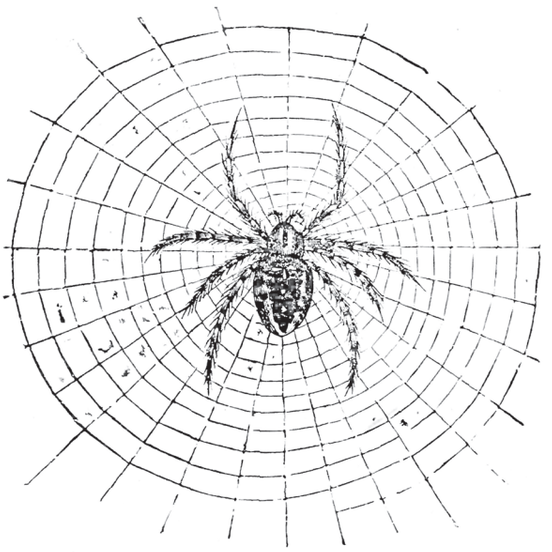
I heard it,
Above the air,
circling around my crown shaped heart
old souls like tangled sticks
with each leg from peer to peer.
It stood around me and

I see my face in the wave
warping in and out
and then at the soul
starving like tadpoles in the pond
waving its palms and spreading along
the edge of my ear
Which fed-back with sharp teeth
readings and acted like containers
in the in-between between the
soundly dents and driftwood carvings
Scored away painter's tape
up on old archive boards
All I could hear was breathing

I locked with limping steps
above the air on the ground
I stood over the benn
which carried with it a rotten scent
grasped and pulled my body to the end
and into the nothing that spoke quiet things
that made my body want to shiver and bend
where it was covered with
fake rain tarps
where the pines ended and cliffs
Pooled their hands toward the darkness

As it looked against me,
on the lids of the land
spilled & trickled bad drops
on the divider of daring fools, on the comet fire
had burned centuries ago.
And fallen in the same place





And I muttered
words so quiet only my mind
could hear, something so still
but my words shook like
firecrackers, rattled with a resonance
and stirred in the dark
like a serpent
Singing my spear song to the river,

And for the desire
That closed my eyes
shook my ribs, one by one
and the lust For 'something'
stood over me, and for
Could I not forget the sirens
Bursted thru every
telephone line in my mind
It flew like a tasteless hurricane
Like it had quietly crept its way
Back from the canyon
Into the deep root colosseum grounds
Which, were wine colored and coarse

The house, boring– old and contaminated
to consider, for many forms–
a submarine, sook out enemy tints
wayward attraction, twist and mold
for each new form, was a
death wave reconsidering itself
a clinical, dare chronic condition
For each new patient of war.

Coarse carpets, painted with
dances & deep moves
green-ish like life-ish Carvings,
and for what were
sacred effigies covered my
now sacred back that
my family had
Probably never lived for

But when I looked at you
and your, stained church glass
longdeng old clocks, floors full of doors
your eyes were endless, yet
physically invisible
infinity and something else
Shapely bending the retina

Like I was below the ice
and drowning in the sand
limbs were shaking to, stoic
glands turned into creaky birch bands
or, found a crack in the earth
confirm conspiracy theories
and win something 'wonderful'
and I did, just– not one
Dressed in greed

Seeing myself in the water
above the ice, I was
lively eyes clawed on
keeping the bone in the child
he felt as the skin came from
his hands, cracked like paint
pulled myself out of the water
And into the hot blood pool of the house

Infinite dream house, carved with hallways
that lead somewhere or nowhere
tall skyscraper platforms, with
disco floors, and mannequins prancing
on Tuesday or Thursday's escalator
Odin, slaved by a landlord
told me the meaning:
blood, was not mortal
a pound of flesh, ritual gradings– was
celebratory grounds, the house will
shriek with a brain carving cheerful sound
when its residents go down.

And so, I took my blade
lugged around, strike-out!
Too heavy, like Lorg Mór
swung from my left, like a baseball bat
carved elegant ribbons through,
the enemy which the house–dutifully gave
and wipe my tattered jacket with the blood
of mutated people from epochs of years
which jingled with radar sounds
and stung the artifacts
along my body
dipped relics
in special waves
where I could feel–
The nails in my back

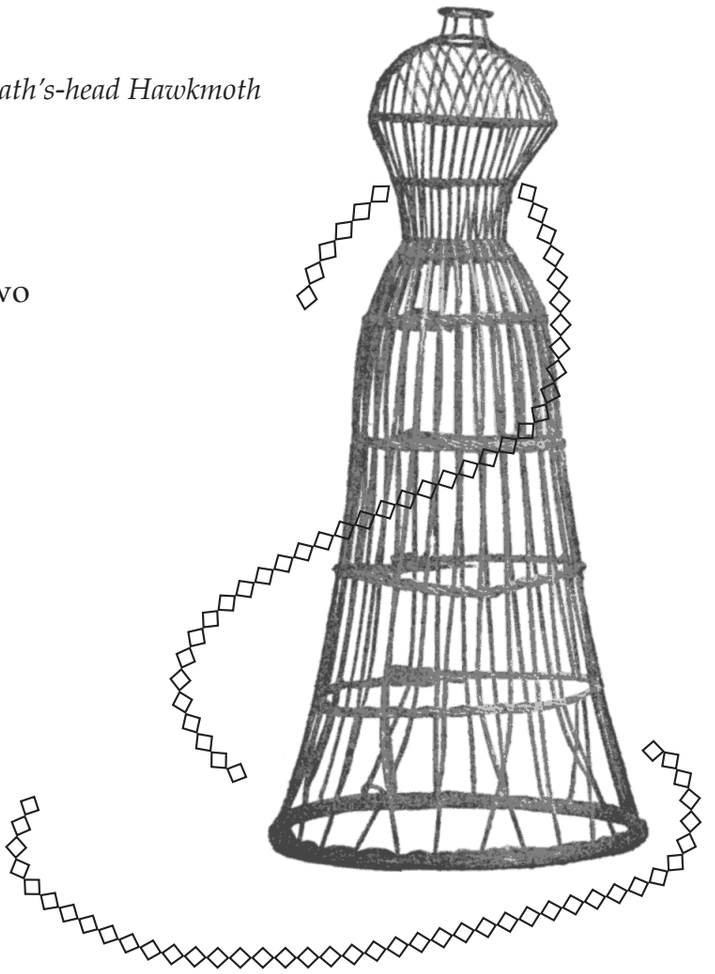
It is, a luring thing
a large dark fish–below my boat
where I could turn there was a mark
I was around the pagan talk and,
the birds above the house
were bursting and squawking
as I pulled myself
kicking and wailing, gnawing
at my wrists
Past the threshold.





Getting Colder

-by Death's-head Hawkmoth



6AM and it's getting cold
Seasons change
Places change

The yellow leaves were cute for a week or two
Now they're falling
Motivation failing
Tires squealing

Was that texture always there?
I feel rougher than usual
And I look it, too

Wasted the best parts of summer and fall
Worked through the worst parts
Again and again and again
All while it just keeps getting colder.

How to Fall in Love with your Biology Mannequin

Second Place

-by Alejandro Cruz (LOVI)

In early November 2025, I met Vanessa Aloe. She was kind, dedicated to her work, and most importantly, grumpy. I've never fallen in love so easily, we met and instantly knew what I wanted from her. She was standing alone in a friend's house party, I was "invited" out of pity most, I think. But there she was, 5' 6" goddess, 41.8 inches of waist to floor length, 68 inches of wing length, fingertip to fingertip of perfection. Curly and frondose brown hair, curvy but pointy nose, and a beautiful pair of dark brown eyes. My friends called her a "nobody," a friend of a friend who decided to come only for the alcohol and maybe a joint. So, I took my courage and talked to her, what's there to say to a girl than: Your name, your height, and your profession. My lonely expression of affection made her melt, I think, because she laughed and replied to the same way.

The rest of the night was me and her exchanging compliments, she liked my hair, my moles, and my weirdly shaped nose. I loved her way of talking, her smile and those eyes. We exchanged numbers, and with the cold breeze of an early November night she left. I remember watching my phone the whole next day. *'How I Met Your Mother'* says it, "You must not text a girl until the third day"; But maybe there was the chance she contacted me first, I wouldn't be breaking the rules then, she did. And, to my luck, she texted me that Monday 10th of November. "Hey, you want to meet up for lunch one of these days?" – "Where do you work?". I gave her a quick but late response, I was supposed to be grading exams, not watching my phone during the recess time, we issued the date for Saturday 15th. We met near the Lions park (100 Kentucky Avenue, Rochester, NY 1460) We walked to a nearby Mexican restaurant ordered

food and walked next to the breezing air and orange leaves from the trees.

She talked about her work, radio producer, always changing sounds, playing music, talking about news from the local area and waiting for the same 10 people who listened to her daily. "It's probably 5 old women who don't know how to change stations and 4 truckers who don't like anything else there" – She said. I'll be honest, I don't remember any more, I was so fixated in the color of her skin merging so perfectly with the background, Bruguer Canela #BF8E36, the color of her skin, Dark Brown #341C02, the color of her eyes, Walnut Brown #432616, the color of her hair. Perfect combinations for a sunset with her. She was wearing a white skirt with a button up shirt, a parka and a weird French hat. From her outfit it resalted the orange in her nails, in her beautiful fingers, middle finger of 3.1 inches, pinky finger of 2.2 inches, and a thumb of 2.0 inches.

After the date, she invited me over, I was whirling, with my belt almost hanging in my knees, but mama raised a gentleman, so I plucked my eskimo wear, and left with no sun, only a beautiful kiss. I was so happy, how a lovely woman could love a guy like me, maybe I acted correctly this time, my jokes landed perfectly, I didn't talk about French revolution, I only talked about the autumn and the spring. I talked about jazz, about the basslines I've learned for the teacher's band, about how my students love my biology class. I didn't tell her I wanted her to be my model for next class…… What would she think, what a funny idea, am I right? Teaching human anatomy with a real person. I would never hear the end of it from the principal. And the mess, it would be a mess, I could not clean the blood from the lab. So, I decided to just keep it to myself. Mama taught me that a good doctor needs practice before being a doctor, and I know I've been stuck in the biology teacher position for a while, but it's because I did have no practice.



Sunday 16th of November, I knocked on her door, she opened, we talked for a while, watching the trees all bald out. It was a lovely day. She offered me coffee, I declined, I don't drink caffeine, then offered me wine, why not relax for a while, right? After a while she changed clothes, I was at the tip of the chair, watching my lovely girl, my idolized 90-60-90, more like 86-70-95, I couldn't tell because of the wine (It was in fact 87.5-72.6-94.3). And just how the leaves fall in autumn, I fell to her knees. I ended up putting my shirt back on at 2:26:35 pm.

The time of death was 2:36:28 pm, I administered Tiletamine .85 mg/L & Zolazepam 3.3 mg/L, which caused a quick blockage of her airway and complete death. The procedure was then followed, from 2:40 until 5:25 pm. Each body part was measured, catalogued and put together in bags I brought from home. I used her apartment for the quick study experiment. I cut from each extremity limb, making sure no bone cracked. After measuring the width of each muscle. Bicep and triceps – 11.6 in left 12.3 in right. Thighs 22.8 in left, 22.2 on right. Feet 9.45 in length, 3.5 in width across the widest part. I cut the skin right off with a number 10 scalpel. Using a butcher knife, I got rid of most of the meat in the head and body.

And then separated most of the body through the articulations – separating the head from the spine through the below section of the C3 vertebrae.

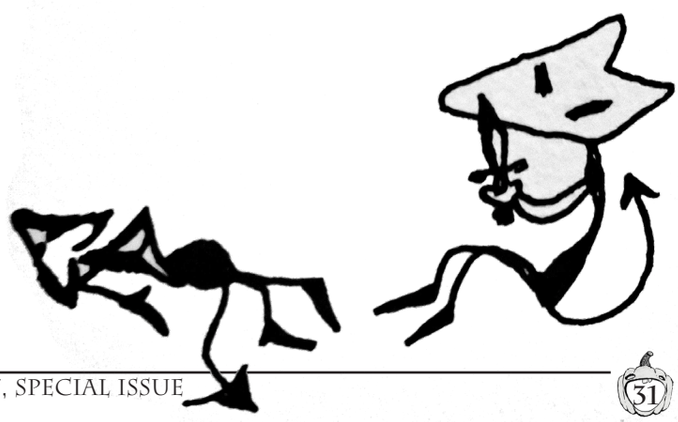
All the face was butchered; I carefully removed the eyes and tongue. To get the rest of the meat out of the skull I placed the skull in a big pot filled with water and placed it on a stove for an hour and 40 minutes at low/medium temperature, not letting the water boil. I added a cup of dish soap and baking soda to break down the tissue and force fat out of the bones. In the meantime, processed all the organs and meat from the other parts of the body. The heart was 246.5 grams of love, the lungs 685.2 grams of life, the stomach 194.2 grams of hunger, and I had no bigger scale for the small and large intestine. I reviewed a similar process for all the bones. I must be honest; I had no preparation for all the bones, so I bought more pots, and a power washer to help clean out the meat.

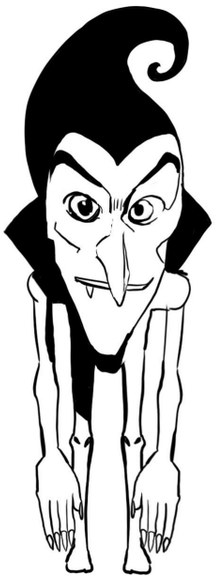
All the leaves fall, and then they vanish for the snow to replace them, and once in spring, when the leaves come out again, it'll be a shame to see them fall again.

When the whole skull was ready, I powered washed any still attached meat, with a flathead screwdriver popped out the earbud bones and popped the brain right out, I couldn't measure the weight, since it was already warmed up and getting putrid, but I estimated 1,267 grams of pure intelligence. I sprayed water right down the nasal cavity to ensure any other tissue flushes out and then proceeded to take out any other meat out of the rest of the bones. Once I finished, I packed the brain and heart in a jar, they were for me to keep, a sweet remembrance of her perfect anatomy, the rest of the meat couldn't achieve that scene. I packed it in different bags and cases, mixing the muscles and tissue with trash, laundry, other organic trash, and some with alcohol bottles that will cover the smell. After having my 5 neat trash bags, I posted them around the city, two near the dam, one in a further away trashcan, two near a restaurant and one of them placed in the woods near my house.

I came back next day at 3:45 pm, I took each skeleton piece and soaked it in acetone. During the drying process, the fall sun came through the window, it looked magnificent on the whiteness of the skeleton, resembled the snow to come. All the leaves fall, and then they vanish for the snow to replace them, and once in spring, when the leaves come out again, it'll be a shame to see them fall again. But my beautiful mannequin was perfect now, in the fall, now never letting its leaves fall, now never being covered in snow. After the bones dried, I covered each one of them in two coatings of lacquer and left them to dry. As the sun set, at 6:42 pm, I did the final touches before mounting them up.

I attached the skeleton with nails and some metal wiring. And with a small drill. Inserted a screw hook in the tallest part of the skull. And it was perfect, the most precious and exciting Human anatomy mannequin, just like the sunset, it was perfect. It reminded me of calmer times, and weather, I had the practice to pass the exam now, I knew it, I've seen the most perfect human inside and out, there was nothing to stop me. Tuesday 18th of November 2025, I quit my job. Before leaving I donated to the school my personal human skeleton to teach anatomy to my beloved biology class.





Themu

-by Mighty_Chondria



Welcome to Themu
We sell holiday cheer for you,
and sell holiday fear for you,
even discounted pay-per-boo.

No one here's a billionaire
No Bezoses nor Walton heir
It isn't per se made with care
but you can bet the price is fair

Bloody hell, I'm not getting paid for some iambic meter, kid. If that Super Bowl advertising campaign didn't get you to download the app, then I'm SOL. You think corporate sends the jingle writers to hawk decor at student unions?

Here's the deal, Halloween's in a week. You're looking for fresh decorations that are environmentally friendly and authentic and affordable on your ramen noodle and gummy vitamin budget. At Themu, we see your impossible standards and are Doing Our Best.

Amazon's all fancy with its skeletons, but we have better options in our end of season roll out. Real bespoke and environmentally friendly, we use the whole thing not just some fancy bones. Really any organ system gives the spooky vibes. Ya know, it's just like sewing cast-offs or composting. Organic and biodegradable guaranteed. You liberal arts types eat that stuff up.

We got some fresh digestive tracts here. Dr. Frankie just brought 'em in this morning. Yep, this bad boy can fit 15–22 feet of intestines in there. Basically a garland. Ain't no femur getting that creative. Sick of the lava vibe? Comes pre-packed with stomach acid. Basically another bowl for the trick-or-treaters, and you can bet they only take one. Okay okay, so this is a little too much for you? Not a fan of that appendix, spleen, and bile duct clutter huh?

Well, we have a beaut over here for minimalists. A real breath of fresh air. These pulmonary systems are elegant. Two lungs, one trachea, no frills. Forget the balloons and helium, just hang 'em up. They're self inflating, or at least they were. A little assembly won't kill ya, kid. Tight on space? No sweat, those alveoli are real handy. We got all kinds of vapers in there too. Eau de Juul, cotton candy weed, and good old fashioned Marlboro fog machine. What, not a big smell guy? That's fine, it's a full sensory experience. Throw a candle in the trachea for a warm-toned ambient light. Nature's paper lantern, it's real aesthetic like.



Damn, tough customer. How bout we try to plan ahead. You know how this holiday season ends. First it's Halloween, and next thing ya know it's New Years resolutions. You promise to go to the gym and then wait for next Halloween. How bout we make you look like those Ironmen and Hulks? That's right. Muscles. Bi, tri, quad, hell, I could find you a quint if you really wanted. You want that skeleton look? Really? Muscles put that meat on the bone. You know it's Dhammer approved. Crissakes, it's a joke, we ain't run shit by the FDA. It's just decor.

Maybe you like a different type of pumping iron? Want that cutesy lover girl <3 look? Have we got the circulatory system for you. Obviously we got heart—it's the centerpiece of the circulatory package—but we also got that spiderweb thing. It's like Jack the Ripper met St Valentines at med school. Two sets too. Arterial for the highlights and a pop of pink. Venous for that deep purple lowlight. It's a classic, and with all that surface area it's basically a humidifier. What? Not that væin?

Fine. No mess, no excess, no fluids. Fussy, aren't ya. How bout a nervous system for this lil' nervous system? Just looks like a mop head in the cling wrap, but buddy when the myelin sheath comes off this thing is gorgeous. Never a dull moment with this one, got that study buddy brain and elegant connections. Those peripheral nerves might as well be gossamer; all delicate like a spiderweb and humanoid like an ethereal specter. Oh, she's just electrifying. Great conversation starter too, a real thinker. Perfect for a dorm room and this roommate's quiet as a ghost.

Cripes. Can't make you take a good deal kid. Not even one of each? We call it Dr. Frankie's special. The merch ain't getting any fresher. And it's right here kid, nothing more sustainable then what we already got. She won't even cost you an arm and a leg. Wait wait. That's just a little industry humor. We'll find something for ya.

I can't stop you from going back to those bones, but I gotta know— what's it gonna be? Splurge for the real stuff or the plastic skeleton again? ⚄



Oh sweetie, of course you are.

All are welcome in the light.

Fanny

-by B.J. Kimpe

October? XX, 20XX

I once thought that a car alarm was the worst sound in the world, but now, I would do anything to hear such noise again. My neighbor had this older Chevy Impala that he just couldn't keep a grip on. I don't think there was a single week where it didn't shriek into the night at least once.

Now I sit here, on cold pavement or wood, I'm not sure what it is exactly, and wait for someone, or even something. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Sometime way earlier…

I was popular in high school, but I'm not really sure what happened after graduation. College was a whole different ball game. I had been looking forward to creating lifelong relationships where our fondest memories were cooking shitty food or drinking wine out of the bottle on the kitchen floor. But everyone seemed to naturally meld into their own cultish groups by the end of the second day.

Left behind, I really had no option but to go crazy! Ha ha.. Just kidding...

But honestly, if I couldn't spend time with friends, then I needed to find something else to fill my time. I tried getting into puzzles or high fantasy novels with lore more complex than my dating history, but none of it was for me. I started staying up late, getting to-go boxes from the dining center, and watching reruns of black and white TV alone in my dorm.

I reached my limit towards the end of September. I spilled a gloop of ketchup on my sweatpants as I was sitting on my comfy chair. This stain that persisted even through Dawn forced me to throw my microwaved frozen corndogs away in frustration. Putting on my jacket, I went for a walk.

Walks are truly underrated. I'm walking right now. Well, it's more of a pace, but it's the thought that counts.

That first walk was something else. For some reason, squinting into the sun to see and make soft, passerby smiles at others felt rejuvenating. It made me feel like life wasn't an uphill battle just to do what I wanted to do. It also made me wish that something like that could last in someone's life; Lasting past the moments where we might recognize them and make them ours, so we didn't take them for granted.

I found that something on my walk. I started mid-afternoon but soon found myself turning down a residential neighborhood cloaked in the dusk of a dying sun. There was a gang of dogs out hunting for food. I suppose they would be called a pack. This pack was a singular being, snuffling around trashcans and picking up the most subtle smells drifting around corners and under doors. It's a labyrinthine world for noses like those. They drifted together with united consciousness, pushing against trashcans, heaving until one fell over

Boom!

Goodies would explode everywhere and they would snarf down the best bits. Despite the near social suicide, curiosity got the best of me, and I rustled through the trash after they left the scene of the crime. I didn't put any of it back though, that's *not* my job.

Sitting atop the pile of trash was a big 'ol fanny pack stuffed with tissue paper. I think it had been set out as some kind of display once. There was also a sewing kit, and old Gameboy with a cracked screen, and a bunch of old food. More food than I could have ever imagined was smeared over everything else once confined within this plastic tub.

I remember there was half a pepperoni pizza in there. The 'ronies had a bit of fuzz to them but the cheese still looked good. I could really go for a slice of that pizza right about now...

Anyways, I took the tissue out of the fanny and started stuffing stuff into it. Haven't stopped, really. Fanny used to sag way down past the waist of my jeans when I wore it and the zippers moved when I would. One of them was broken and I couldn't open

that pocket anymore, but that was okay, I had the other. I put everything in there. While I walked around town at night, tipping trashcans with my congregation of dogs waiting to hear the reverential clamor of falling garbage, I stuffed stuff into my pack.

Sometime a little earlier…

I had a good run. Saw some crazy stuff. Started to enjoy wandering, collecting, and wondering. I guess those were a few of the things I still like to do. I wandered up and down streets when I couldn't sleep just to see what was out there. A woman ought to know what's around her, I think.

All I needed to do was get a full shelf. See, Fanny opened up her metal toothed jaws to me and spoke of her hunger.

There really was no end to it once I got going. I put a whole two by four in there once; damn board was nearly three feet long, but Fanny took it like a charm. I put all sorts of things in there while I could. Someone threw out their old stash of phones that some grandkids probably played with. There were tooth marks all over the Motorola Razor. Another can was chock full of good stuff. A thick sheaf of divorce papers that I sifted through, piecing together the good parts; a seemingly endless amount of crushed Coors cans dripping pale yellow ambrosia; mile long receipts from a DVD rental spot; and enough takeout boxes to kill a child via cardiac arrest.

I took some stuff, but not all. Don't get me wrong, what happened between Diane, Greg, and the nineteen year old he cheated on her with is plenty interesting to me. But I only take some things because the curation of my collection is priority number one.

I tipped a bunch more cans that same night I got a glimpse into Diane and Gregs life. A couple of them didn't have much, all had food, and some had things I wanted. My collection was vast and I could pull out anything my heart desired.

Feeling like some exercise? Here's a penny skateboard with bright green wheels.

Bored sitting at the bus stop? I got a New York Time's best-selling paperback from 2006.

I could grab just about anything within arm's reach. If I had enough time, then it could be anything I wanted!

All I needed to do was get a full shelf. See, Fanny opened up her metal toothed jaws to me and spoke of her hunger. The shelves I could see by peering in were covered in thick dust and the alleged bottom was nothing but gray static. I usually managed to get stuff into a shelf, but if I dropped it, I never saw it again

They would rotate with seemingly no order, appearing whenever I needed something or before I knew I needed it. Crazy, I know, but I didn't really think anything of it at the time. That's just Fanny. The shelves never filled up completely either. They might get a little cluttered after a while, but all I needed to do was zip up and wait a bit. There were always empty, dusty shelves waiting for me afterwards.

I dropped out of school because I wasn't getting enough sleep. I would get home right around sunrise and take a quick nap. Around 2:30 was lunch time. Supper was always three hours later. I tried to walk in the daytime. Honest. But the dogs don't follow me when the sun is shining in their greasy coats. They all clamber back to their usual hiding places under trailers or within rusted out cars at the dump. But when that big orange basket hits the horizon, it's game on.

The thing about nighttime walks is that there's no one else around. I know I should be more careful about that sort of thing; another chick in my old dorm got assaulted down by the wellness center right before the semester started. She dropped out after she couldn't get rid of it, not around here at least.

But that stuff doesn't really bother me anymore. Fanny is like a great belt of courage, strapped around my hips to proclaim my own chastity from human interaction. Fanny is something near and dear to me because of

what she is. I think I might even mean something to her, too.

Sometime just last week… maybe…?

I gave a tissue to an older lady on my last day up there. She was sniffling real bad as I walked behind her and I just wanted her to keep quiet. She thanked me so much and I felt good about it, good enough to want to do it again. So, I offered her the whole box, and she looked at me funny.

"Is that all you had in there?" she gestured to Fanny, "Just a box of tissues?"

I stared at her for a second, a grin spreading on my face, "No ma'am. There's a lot more where that came from." I pulled out a bottle of Nyquil and a glass of water to wash it down with and found myself standing alone. She was shuffling quickly down the street like something bad had happened. I don't think other people like Fanny too much, but I can't get enough. Maybe the old lady left because it wasn't non-drowsy.

Later that day, I felt the need for something but couldn't think for the life of me what it was. I discovered that I wanted something from Fanny, really, but didn't know how to ask. I tried whispering sweet nothings into the gaping cavity that was her heart but got nothing but echoes in return. Yelling only made my head hurt and crying left me thirsty. I thought I might have heard something once or twice, a faint exhalation of relief, perhaps, but nothing came afterward.

Twelve garbage cans which were that night's lineup didn't turn up anything but a gut ache from some old Chinese takeout. I knew it would probably wreck me, but who can resist peanut sauce? I wandered some more, unable to find a street my feet had not yet tread. I opened the zipper that led to the main pocket of Fanny. It was dark in there. I could see each side of the pack, one that bulged inwards from my belly and the other that pushed away from me, perpetually looking like it was still stuffed with tissue paper. But the bottom was dark.

I knew I would never find it. I never took Fanny off when I was looking for something because if I couldn't reach it while it was on me then there was no point. My hand felt blindly along the shelves, sweeping dust that descended blindly into the deep. There was nothing but junk.

A pearl necklace found on a park bench.

A chipped conch shell far from home.

A music box that no longer sang.



These *things* kept turning up but there wasn't anything substantial. What was she saying? I needed to go deeper. I needed to reach farther in.

Tears filled my eyes as I unclipped Fanny from my waist. A chill ran through me. *I'm sorry,* I thought to her. The breeze tonight was cold, but it wasn't the temperature that made me shiver. The skin where Fanny now called her sweet home was red and raw, oozing with opaque liquid.

Gently, I set her on the sidewalk, smoothing the belt out to the sides as if being lain to rest. I reached in again, feeling past the familiar shelves and descending deeper past them. There were more shelves, thicker dust, and foreign objects that populated them.

My elbow passed the zippered jaws of Fanny and brushed against her sides. I sucked in a great lungful of night air, could hear the singing of the crickets and the frogs in the smooth moonlight, and I cried some more. When did life become so beautiful? When did this simplicity become something for me, too?

My shoulder pressed against the sidewalk and I strained further. There was sensation. Then nothing.

There was no other way. My tumbling body ran past blurs of memories and forgotten wishes and unachievable aspirations. My cushion was soft for but a moment before giving way to an impenetrable prison.

I'm sure someone found Fanny on the sidewalk and clipped her onto their waist. I'm sure that she fits just as snug as she did on me.

At least I hope so. I could use a friend.

Dear RIT Housing Office

-by Samboozled and Recipient of Semi-Annual Misfortunes

Dear RIT Housing Office,

You'll have to bear with me in this message— it is very long, and I am at my wit's end. After exhausting all of my other options, I have nobody to turn to except for you.

I've been randomly assigned three roommates and have been experiencing some difficulties cohabitating with them in the last few months. I've tried having a direct conversation with them, but they claim "it's how they were raised" and that my concerns are unreasonable.

Take roommate one for example, they're an absolute slob. Constantly leaves wads of their hair in the shower drain, lint trap, and couches for me to clean up. And our broom keeps disappearing, which makes removing his hair from the common area frustrating. Yesterday when he was making dinner, he made a gigantic mess because he refuses to handle any silverware when cooking or eating. I originally thought that it might be a cultural thing (lots of people eat with their hands), but it's not— he claims it'll "poison the food," probably something that he heard from Fox News. I try to be empathetic to his fears but struggle considering he refuses to elaborate on those claims or address the phobia at CAPS. The last time I spoke to him about these issues, he insisted that I'm overstepping my bounds as a roommate and accused me of being "a beta woke liberal snowflake sheep." But, when he's up all night for his "alpha male" podcast, making a ruckus and keeping everyone awake, what else am I supposed to do? On occasion, he's been hostile and almost violent towards me. One time, I tried to celebrate America's 250th with him (something that seems right up his alley) and went out to buy some USA-themed chalk, glowsticks, and stomp rockets; but he almost attacked me out of rage when I stomped the rockets, saying that he "has horrible memories associated with it" and mumbled something about his father's poisoning. I thought it was a big overreaction for a harmless blue rocket.

Roommate two, the math major next door, is no better. I can't fathom how he's still at RIT, given that he skips all of his classes and is only productive in the wee hours of the morning. How he can afford RIT is a mystery to me. His weak academic performance and his disinterest in sports and extracurriculars suggests that he's not getting too much money from scholarships and grants, so I guess he's just from a wealthy family. He's pretty tall and is conventionally attractive, like a genderbent Snow White with a thick slavic accent. Like my other roommates, Roommate two has cursed me with his poor culinary decisions. Between his impressively bland food (I'd normally say "jesus christ, man, have you ever heard of all-purpose seasoning?" but he freaks out at the mention of Christianity) and his vehement hatred of kebab (one of my favorite foods), it's tough to find anything that he likes. He didn't even enjoy cooking s'mores outside at the campfire! While those may be nitpicks, my bigger concerns lie with his repeated invasion of my privacy. A few times now, I've caught this roommate sifting through the trash in my bathroom? At first I was appreciative, thinking he was trying to be helpful and reduce my chore workload (since my cramps were pretty bad at the time). But apparently he brought the trash to his room and not the dumpster— so weird! It's ironic that he protects his own privacy to the extent that he refuses to be photographed, but apparently doesn't see any problems with snooping through my trash can.

Of the three, roommate three is the best (but still has her problems). She has an ESA cat, makes a *mean* cocktail, and is a big fan of Marvel TV shows, especially WandaVision (she's absolutely obsessed, and doesn't hesitate to remind me at any opportunity). However, she's quite slovenly. She loves slow cooker recipes, and cooks soups frequently, but I guess she keeps forgetting to cover the pot? This not only frequently stinks up the place, but will probably cause mold damage in the near future from the near-constant steam wafting through the kitchen. I will admit, though, sometimes it's refreshing to walk into a humid rainforest

after trudging through the dry and bitterly-cold air (I've been getting lots of bloody noses recently from the lack of humidity). I also recently found out that her ever-growing spice rack in her room, and the frequent disappearances of communal seasonings, are not unrelated. When I brought up my concerns to her, she rolled her eyes and commented that my nagging was "such a Gemini thing to do." But don't get me wrong, she's the best of the three roommates, especially because her cat is so damn cute— if only it would stop getting black fur all over my clothes.

Housing office, you're my only hope. Getting out of bed every morning is a sisyphean test of willpower, as is returning to my apartment every night. That's not the way it's supposed to be. What is the procedure to get myself moved to a different apartment? I need to get out of this situation before it gets more hostile.

Thanks,
Sam Winchester

Dear Sam,

Thank you for your email. You didn't mention which apartment you lived in, but I was able to find it through your name. Just to confirm, you are living with roommates Caneis "Lou" Pus, Drake Yulea, and Ba "Baya" Ga?

Regards,
RIT Housing Office



The Garden

-by Chloe Brown

With leaves crunching under my feet, I came across a garden
It was flimsily locked, a simple chain hooked onto a rusted gate
Which I easily slipped away, post-haste

I stepped into a scene more pastoral than the word
Overgrown grass to trudge through at every turn.
The troughs of desiccated crops and withered flora
Remained oddly still, even at the beckoning of the bora
Their vines led me to the ledge of a picnic table

I sat down.

It was there I discovered I was in the company of a single opened water-bottle
And it was there I saw a single tomato, rising out the ashes of the thatch
Half-molding, half-red
The orange peonies led my eyes to a monarch perched atop a flowerbed
Spreading its magnificent wings
While I gazed at it, the only thought that came to my head was:
"Why is everything around me half-dead?"

ROADKILL LOVERS

Third Place

-by Harvey A. Dorsey

Two dead raccoons, seven to eight yards apart, cleaved by hot rubber and left on the side of Bailey Road, just a Saturday night. Crimson ribbons of red lie there, with the cooler oranges and yellows of autumnal leaves saturated by the pooling blood. The leaves sit on them like nature's veil, unintentionally proper for their procession, and beautifully fitting nonetheless.

Driving by the sight takes only a second. A Honda's aged high-beams dimly lighting each corpse for that one second. Two dead raccoons are inevitably passed and forgotten for what they were, roadkill.

It's impossible to know the story of a corpse, especially on the side of a road, especially when it's just an animal, and especially when, just frankly, their only thoughts were to scavenge and survive a Rochester Winter.

A stretch, but perhaps those two raccoons passed on a road that Saturday night, were lovers.

Two raccoons attempting to survive in a college town's urban hellscape, between cars travelling 75 on a 35, airplanes booming overhead each morning, and high beams lighting up the road to avoid any obstacles, it must be a damn peaceful existence.



Maybe there's a dumpster the raccoons frequent by the hockey rink. Inside the metal box, there's day old macaroni from a food truck, as well as highly reputable mess hall food from a quarter mile away; A choice between expired cheese and expired everything. The pair eat bad food without choice, they have to survive, but do they know good food? Do they suffer knowing how terrible something tastes, or do they live in blissful ignorance and just enjoy the meal together?

Each morning, having eaten, there is a quiet silence on the large field, overlooking a singular swing set blowing in the wind. The cold morning dew wets each raccoon's little paws, as they lay on a hill overlooking the lawn chairs wrapped in leaves.

Before the crowds even begin to plague the walkways, leaves of every shade, of every color, fly across the air among dust and rocks. Continuous strums of the leaf-blowers hide any sign of Autumn, pushing each leaf into the forest, hiding nature where the donations won't see it decay.

The voices of the crowd finally come as the bell tolls on schedule, but the raccoons are already deep in the forest behind that lovely mess hall. They're trudging through cold swampland as the ground softly crunches beneath them. The squirrels bury their food, the deer head to the open fields, and these two raccoons continue to eat, they store their fat and prepare for that deadly winter. It's the enemy they shall always understand by instinct, as the wind chills give caution, and the cold condemns. The light gives warmth.

As night falls and the voices dim on the walkways, lights and screams and moans arise from the forest. Figures cloven in fur and loose clothes attend to their nightly group rituals. Maybe it's a statement on how humanity impacts animal behaviors and habits, why a

society should stay out of forests and do pleasure outside of habitats. Nonetheless, the raccoons just find quieter places to rest as the temperature continues to drop. The wind begins to pick up that night, and clouds block the moon, all making it harder to see the edges of the forests and hear what comes.

The pair walk between forest to forest, crossing branches, grass, and concrete.

I keep imagining the two raccoons I saw that night as Roadkill Lovers.

Condemned by cold light on a dark night.

Whatever those two raccoons were to each other, whatever time they spent each Autumn feasting on whatever they could find, avoiding human contact, they lived against what they understood would kill them.

Nature, time, or another car would have killed them, why do pieces of Fall roadkill matter?



Maci Hall

-by Ada H. Ominam



Honorable mention

Part One: Red Wine

Maci Hall never really put much thought into how food got to her table before tonight. She knows it was harder back when her family lived in Boston—she hears it all the time, in fact. "Your father and I would've *killed* to eat this good back when the company was just the two of us," was her mom's nightly mantra, always recited with a smile. Maci's parents, Abby and Francis Hall, founded Hall Brassworks in 2011. It started in their basement with the young couple repairing trumpets and tubas and trombones for local middle school bands, and has been slowly growing over the past fifteen years, culminating in the purchasing and refurbishing of an old metalworking plant in Avernus, New York (with investor assistance, of course). Since moving, her parents have been able to afford, as they call it, 'tippity top shelf' wine to accompany gourmet meat and fresh vegetables for dinner each night, and in preparation for her 21st birthday they've been letting her share a glass of it with them. It's good food and good drink, but there's something about the consistently carby, salty, chemically laced microwave TV dinners that Maci can't stop missing; a certain *je-ne-sais-quois* to the dino nuggets, mashed potatoes, and steamed corn of old. Tonight, two nights before her 21st birthday, Maci once again idly picks at the pork chops and potatoes on her plate. As she's come to expect, her father prepares his mantra once more, until—!

"Abby, she knows." An exasperated interjection from her father snaps both Maci and her mother to attention. Abby immediately sets down her fork and knife. Francis continues, "What's the matter, honey? I know something's up."

"I dunno, Dad," Maci insists.

"I didn't raise a liar. Come on. Spill." Both Francis and Abby lean intently towards her.

"I just think… I think I miss home." Her mother slumps back in her chair a bit, picking her fork and knife back up. Her father cocks his head to the side. "I mean, I'm not trying to say it was a bad idea to come here or anything, I know how much the company means to you and Mom, I just…"

"It's okay to be homesick, kiddo," Abby says between bites, each one washed down with a sip of red wine. "But, it's just for the summer. After this, you're back to school, then out into the world!" Maci sags in her seat.

"Abby," says Francis. *Uh oh,* Maci and Abby think to themselves in unison.

"What?" She replies, mouth half full of pork.

"I don't think that's helping."

"What? Why?"

"I think she was looking forward to spending the summer in Boston."

"Oh." Abby takes a much longer sip of his wine. Francis turns to Maci.

"It'll pass, honey. I know you miss the old house, but I also know that you know this is good for us. But if it makes you feel any better, well…" He turns to his wife. "Should we tell her?"

"That we're…?" Abby trails off, and Francis mouths something to Abby. Maci has never been any good at reading lips, and her parents know this—they've used it to discuss everything from surprise birthday parties to family drama without her knowing—but she can pick up that whatever her dad said is two syllables.

"Oh! Oh, that. Yeah, we can tell her."

"We were going to tell you tomorrow morning, but we're all staying up till midnight, and taking you for your first drink out! So, surprise!"

"I know we've been letting you drink here—"

"—and I'm sure you've been drinking plenty up at school," Francis cuts Abby off before returning the floor to her.

"...but it's still a big deal."

At first, Maci's only response is a short nod and half a smile. She could see in her parents' expressions that she wasn't hiding just how much the homesickness for Boston, upstate New York's perpetually sunless grey skies, and unfamiliarity with the people and places of Avernus had drained all the vitality and excitement out of her 21st birthday. Eventually, automatically, a few words slip out of her. "Thanks, Mom and Dad." The next five minutes or so are wordless: Abby and Francis eat quietly while Maci idly pokes at her food, drinking occasionally, finishing her glass before anything on her plate.

"Not hungry?" Francis breaks the silence, yet again.

She vomits brown and tan chunks wrapped in greens and yellows of leaves and starches but not a drop of red. The wine didn't do this.

"Not really," Maci says. "Dad, can I—"

"Sure, honey. Your Mom and I'll clean up." It's not the first time this has happened. Her mom doesn't even call her out for drinking without eating anymore. There's a *s h h h s h h h h h p l u - plunshhhplunk* as Maci heads upstairs: metal fork on ceramic plate guiding meat and veggies off the edge and into the trash. Then, another, followed by a third. Maci stops. *Did Dad cook too much?* she wonders, as she hears footsteps. Someone's walking, briskly, out of the dining room, into the bathroom. Maci can barely make out the bathroom door opening, followed by soft coughing from… Mom..? A soft *thplunk*, *swoosh… thplunk*, *swoosh*… is she throwing up? Maci starts down the stairs and into the bathroom, where she sees her mother hunched over the toilet, retching. Maci calls out to her, "Mom, are you okay?" She vomits, brown and tan chunks wrapped in greens and yellows of leaves and starches—but not a drop of red. The wine didn't do this. She finishes, then takes a moment to catch her breath.

"Yeah, honey, I'm okay. I just—" she coughs, "—I just ate too much."

"Jesus, Mom." Maci pats her mom on the back as she catches her breath.

"Maci, I…" Abby starts, before trailing off again. "Nevermind."

"Are you sick or something?"

"No, I'm just…"

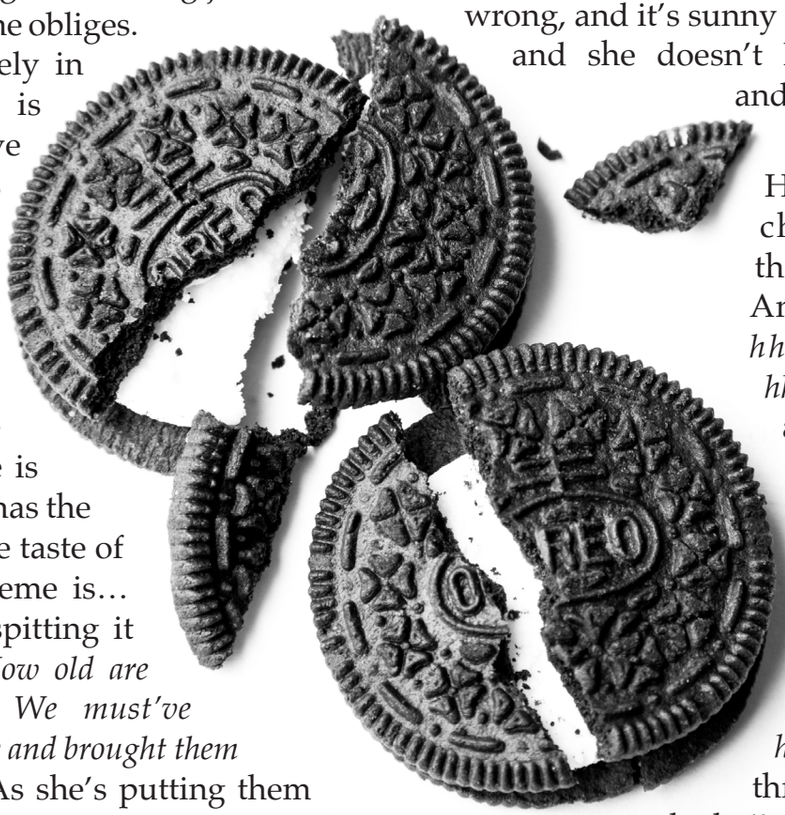
"Stressed about the company?"

"...yeah," she replies, bleakly. "I'm gonna wash up, ok?"

Maci steps out, and waits beside the door for a moment, listening to the sounds of her mother's hands lapping up running water, then returns to her room. She feels like her stomach should be churning. She thinks, *Thank God it's not, I guess*.

. . . .

Maci laid down to go to sleep around 10. Now, it's 12:51, and Maci can't fall asleep. She's not hungry, not tired, not anything. Just bored. She's spent the past two hours trying to either lull herself to sleep or stimulate herself enough to stay awake; reading, doomscrolling, texting friends, braiding her hair, writing notes app poetry, eating some junk food just to taste something have all crossed her mind—some of which she's obliged, but all for naught. If only she was back on campus, then she could smoke something. The thoughts of eating junk food are back. This time, she obliges.



Her parents are surely in bed as the house is completely silent, save for her footsteps as she approaches the kitchen, and the crinkling of the packaging on the sleeve of oreos she takes from the pantry. The first bite is horrible. The cookie has the texture of ash and the taste of charcoal, and the creme is… crusty? Maci gags, spitting it out into the sink. *How old are these?* She thinks. *We must've bought them back home and brought them up during the move*. As she's putting them back in the pantry, a car rolls by outside. *What's someone doing out this late in Avernus?* As she's closing the door, it pulls into the driveway. *Mom and Dad?* Instinctively, Maci runs to the top of the stairs and hides. *What am I doing? I'm not 12*, she thinks, *I'm 20. Almost 21. A midnight snack is normal. They're not gonna get mad at me for having a cookie without asking.* The side door opens, followed by the *thud, thud, thud* of footsteps—! and a *hhwwwrrrssshhhh* of something being... dragged? She listens closely.

"You almost told her?" a low hiss from her father.

"She's gotta find out at some point." Her mother was never good at whispering.

"Quiet down! She could be awake."

"Sorry," Abby whispers at the same volume, to a quiet sigh from Francis.

"She's not ready yet. She won't understand. She'll want to go back on it." Francis has gotten even quieter. He's compensating for Abby's poor whispering skills.

"Is that even possible?" Abby whispers.

"I don't think so. But she'll lose her mind trying to cure it." Maci can hardly hear what he's saying, but the emptiness in his voice where guilt should be for whatever he's done echoes throughout the whole house.

"What happens if the weather report is wrong, and it's sunny outside tomorrow, and she doesn't know any better, and—"

"Sunny? Here?" They both chuckle to themselves quietly. Another set of *hhwwwrrrssshhhh*, *hhwwwrrrssshhhh*'s, and the door is closed. Another set of *hhwwwrrr-sssshhhh*, *hhwwwrrr-sssshhhh*, *hhwwwrrr-sssshhhh*, *hhwwwrrrssshhhh*'s, through the kitchen, the hall, coming closer.

Maci slips further up the stairs into shadow as her parents pass the bottom of the stairwell, dragging—Maci feels like she should throw up but she can't. Her parents are dragging a man—40 something, maybe? She's lightheaded. She can't feel her legs as they saunter her down the stairs, she can barely make out the coolness of the railing under her fingers. She stalks her parents into the dining room, a few paces behind, footsteps light as the fog in her brain. No words are exchanged by the Hall family as Maci slinks into the dining room, not that Maci would hear them anyway. By the time they see her enter, Maci can only feel two things: a tugging from her teeth, and a pit in her stomach.

Part Two: Bethany White

Bethany White doesn't like to think about how she'll get food to her table. It takes up too much of her time. She wants to think about poetry, about Mary Oliver and Seamus Heaney, of places to write that aren't the break room of Ol' Abe's Diner. She wants to think in verses and meter, not spreadsheets of mortgages and insurance bills. She's past being tired—she's tired of being tired—so tonight, she's carved out time to walk, to sit, and to let poetry come to her. Notebook in hand, Beth's first stop is the woods a half mile from her parent's house. There's a dirt pullout on the side of the road, with a trailhead for a 4 mile loop of the woods, around the little pond in the center. In high school, she spent the sunniest days of summer vacation under cover of the trees, writing sonnets sitting on a rock about three quarters of a mile in. She hasn't been since graduating. Tonight, that changes.

About a quarter mile in, Beth realized two things:

She is walking into a trail around a pond in the middle of summer at night.

She forgot to put on bug spray.

She managed to turn around before getting in too deep, escaping with only a couple mosquito bites. Despite the danger of cars, Beth decides to take the next leg of her walk along the roads, heading south towards the old factory. Avernus, like any town in this part of the country, is littered with the rotting bodies of old brick buildings; mills, factories, power plants, slaughterhouses, lay as naught but husks, like scars over places where the industrial lifeblood once flowed—of course, it's all drained now. Having drained everything Avernus was worth, Calvin Steel closed its doors in '74 for greener pastures overseas and more green in the pockets of the board back in Chicago, while the community dependent on Calvin for wages collapsed, and the river was designated a superfund site as a result of how Calvin Steel ran its facilities. The factory's been re-opened for a year, and it's no secret the town is on the up-and-up for it, but as she passes the old Calvin Steel plant, now with its Hall Brassworks sign, Beth wonders how long till the Hall Family has extracted everything they want from Avernus, too.

To their credit, at least the Halls have the respect to move to Avernus. It took them a year of operation to do so, but at least they made the effort. Before his death in 1968, Mark Calvin owned 20 plants in 13 different states, and rumor has it he never left Chicago. In some ways, this gave Beth a great deal of respect for the family. She'd heard from their employees at Ol' Abe's that they got their start working out of their home. They sounded like honest, hardworking American folk, living the American Dream. At the same time, having faces to put to names made Beth hate the Halls. The worst part was they had a daughter, about Beth's age, staying in town with them for the summer before leaving for her last year of college. No one has really seen her, and though she's never met the girl, Beth knows why: She doesn't want to be here. *Well neither do I, Miss Hall*, Beth thinks to herself, in imaginary argument with the ennui-filled heiress, *but some of us don't get to just pack up and leave like you do. I'd kill to. But I can't. And so I learned to find little things to love, even though most of it's shit, which is what you have to do when you're not born rich enough to fix the cards you're dealt!* Beth catches herself speeding up and clenching her fists, slows down, and takes a deep breath. "Poetry," she says to herself, "I'm here for poetry."

There's a streetlamp and a bench outside the gates to the formerly-Calvin-Steel-now-Hall-Brassworks-building. Beth takes a seat, facing the building. She thinks of Mark Calvin in Chicago. She thinks of the Hall girl, probably texting all her college friends about how sucky Avernus is. She thinks of her Grampy, who worked in that building for 30 years and died in debt because there was so little work after the closure. Letting her rage bubble, Beth clicks her pen and opens her notebook. She's written enough sonnets. Meter and verse can't contain this feeling. Her hand is in a frenzy and her mind is on a warpath—she's almost lightheaded as carving words and phrases into images on the page becomes, for a brief and beautiful moment, second nature. Her body and instincts and mind are one, rending words from rage onto notebook page.

Eventually, Beth comes down. The page has been massacred by the steel tip of her pen and now the word-shaped scars bleed black still fresh enough to smudge. Beth's heart is

racing and her breath is heavy, so she takes a moment to set the book down and just breathe in the calmness of the night. After taking in the sky for what was only minutes but felt much more, Beth is ready to leave. As she gets up, she sees a girl headed towards her, a few hundred yards away. Her hair is kind of short, and she's wearing PJ pants and a baggy shirt. Beth waves. She can see in real time as the girl stops zoning out, registers she's being waved at, and waves back. As she approaches, Beth asks, "Great night, isn't it?"

"Maci looks confused. Beth mouths, "assault." Maci cocks her head. "I can t read lips."

"Yeah. Yeah, actually. I'm glad the clouds are gone." The girl responds. Her voice is soft, and a little cold.

"They'll be back before dawn," Beth says, "they always are."

"It's a shame." She pauses, and sighs. "I think the town looks really pretty in the sun."

"Me too. There's a lot of little things here, I think, that get kinda… I dunno. Lost in the overcast? If that makes any sense?"

"Totally."

"Oh, by the way, my name's Beth, short for Bethany."

"Maci. Short for Maci." Maci smirks. Beth snorts a little.

"What brings you out here so late, Maci?"

"You first."

"Writing poetry."

"About?"

"The factory. I'm kind of a local history nerd so I have a *lot* of opinions about it."

"Like what?"

"I hate how our whole town is dependent on it, while it's dependent on the whims of like, one or two people max at any time. I hate how Mark Calvin used it to fuel his steel empire and left us in the dust with all his pollution at the drop of a hat. I hate how the Halls think they can just walk in here and bring it back to life and just… expect us to believe they're different."

There's a brief moment of silence as Maci takes in what Beth said. "Wow. That's really cool, I think."

"Yeah?"

"It's nice," she says, her voice heating up a little, "that I'm not the only one who thinks the Halls are parasites in hiding."

"Right? Okay, now your turn."

"Right, yeah. Fair's fair. I had a fight with my family. Needed to get out and get some air."

"Can I ask what the fight was about?"

"They've… made some decisions. About me. That I kinda have to live with, now. Forever."

"What kinda decisions?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It's…" Her hands tense up. "...personal."

"Oh my god, did they—?"

"Hm?" Maci looks confused. Beth mouths, "assault." Maci cocks her head. "I can't read lips."

"Like… touch—"

"Oh, no, no…" she pauses, ponders. "No."

"Okay. So a career path kinda thing?"

"Yeah. In a way."

"I won't pry if you don't want me to."

"I mean, you kind of already have," Maci's delivery has a hint of irony to it, "but it's ok." After a brief pause, she asks, "Can I ask you a weird question?"

"Shoot."

"Do you ever think about how your food ends up on your table?"

"All the time," Beth says, "basically my whole life is either working or planning for work."

"No, no, I mean more like. The journey the food takes. How much god knows how many people have given for you to have it."

"Oh, like that. Sometimes."

"I've been thinking about that a lot tonight."

"I guess, whenever it comes up, my first thought is always to feel like shit because I know it's not fair that someone in a country I've never been is working their ass off for pennies on the dollar so I can have a mediocre banana any time of year. And I do always feel like shit. But my second thought is always, what choice do I have? I can't afford to buy groceries from anywhere other than Walmart. My hands are tied, and that sucks, but it's the fault of the people making pennies on the dollar for year-round mediocre bananas. Those are the guys tying my hands, and it makes it easier to sleep at night if I put at least some of the responsibilities on them, you know?" Maci pauses, silently absorbing what Beth has said. Beth follows up, "Is that any help?"

"I dunno. Tied hands or not, the way it gets there is still dubious at best."

"What's the alternative? Starve?"

"Tonight I'm thinking I might have to."

"Please don't. I don't know what your life is like, but I'm certain you shouldn't starve yourself."

"No, I really should." Maci said with a grimace.

"Look, I'm not a professional, so I don't know if I'm the best person to talk to about this, but—" Beth stops dead as Maci pulls back her lips with her finger, putting her bloodied, pointed teeth on full display.

"What? No, this… This is a prank. That's… I've seen that at spirit halloween! You've got a camera somewhere," Beth stammers, backing away from Maci.

"This is what my parents did to me. This is what Francis and Abby Hall are. Parasites. And now, I am too."

As Beth hastens her backing away, she trips, scraping her hands. She takes her eyes off Maci for only a second as she scampers back to her feet. Her hand is bleeding. When she looks back up, she scans in front of her for Maci. The street in front of her is empty, and silent. Before she can turn to look behind her, she feels cold breath wisping past her ear, as Maci whispers, "Please. Keep your fist clenched. Turn around, and don't look at me as you walk past." Beth turns, and starts walking as briskly as she can. "Run, and don't look back." Maci calls to her, from what must be 50 feet behind. Beth makes it about a quarter mile before she looks behind her. She doesn't see Maci. *She's gone*, Beth thinks, as she unclenches her hand. There's a rustle in the trees that sounds like someone said "I'm so sorry," as Beth turns back forwards, and—

Maci came to in a ditch near her family's factory around 4 AM, Beth's broken and drained body in her arms. Maci wished so desperately to cry for her, but her hands were tied.



HAVE A YURIFUL HALLOWEEN!!

Stomach Bug

-by Graham Clark

Allison woke up with a with *a centipede on her forehead*. As she was sleeping she felt almost a pitter patter feeling. She she could feel small tingles of the many legs on her forehead. As she was drifting in and out until—

She snapped awake.

Screamed.

Jumped out of the bed.

The cockroach leaped off her forehead onto the sheets of the bed.

She ran to the bathroom.

She took a deep breath in and out as she sat there. As she looked around the bathroom she could start to feel herself getting sick. As she started looking at the toilet, she started to gag and gag and sat there with her head over the toilet expecting that hot feeling to crawl up all the way up to the top of your throat before you start throwing up. She at there for another moment longer and expected to feel it, but it never came. She looked at herself in the mirror. She saw brown hair cut below the ears, skinny frame, eyes with dark circles below them, and noticeably—

Pale, thought Allison she looked into her face still bright red. *Paler than usual or is it just because of cold weather?*

She looked at herself one more time and looked at the door. She shuttered again at the thought of *it. T*ook a few deep breaths and then decided to then take a step outside of her room. Step by step she took as she went there to fight her enemy. She then heads outside of her room and takes a look around. She can already start to feel heart rate rise as she tip-toes closer and closer to bed. She then takes a look down onto the bed there she find nothing.

She starts to breathe faster and faster again, she starts to feel another scream about to leap out of her throat but before she does, allison moves around her apartment in equal parts fear and frustration as she looks for the bug.

Allison takes a bagel from the bag in the cabinet and then loads it into her toaster. And then sits down for a moment in her small dining kitchenette

As she does, she starts to feel a dizzy, she can feel her stomach lurch again. She got up and ran to the bathroom and sat down on the toilet. As she's sitting there She sat there for a few minutes, nothing.

Am I already on my period again? Didn't it just end?

She pulls out her phone and checks her flow tracker. The flow tracker reads that she has another 20 days.

She gets up again and walks back from her bathroom from her kitchen. She then picks up a half of the bagel almost burned and puts some creme cheese on it and takes a bite.

Mmm… pure heaven.

She goes in to take another bite and her stomach starts to squirm a bit.

I might be coming down with a stomach bug, she thought, *it is the season and a few people are out for it already.*

She looks at her clock on her microwave and then looks at her calender. The microwave reading, "8:00 A.M." She looks at her calendar with 3 block marked:

Chemistry: 8:30-9:30

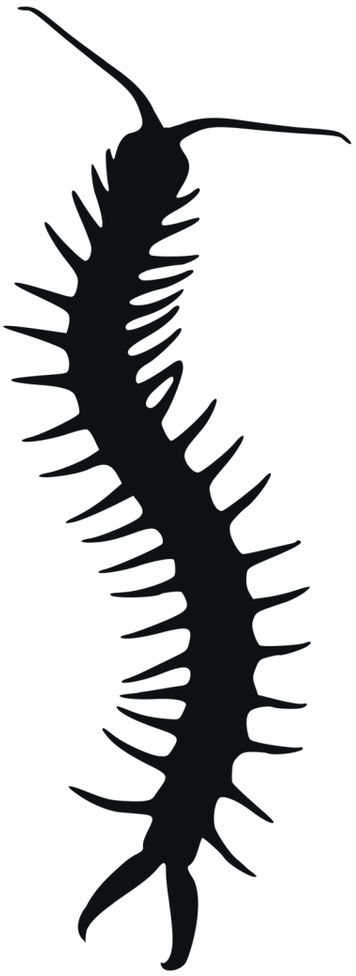
Nutrition: 11:00-12:00

Anatomy and Physiology: 1:30-2:30

I'm going to be late. She grabs the rest of her bagel and then heads out the door.

As she heads from her apartment, she gets into her car and gets caught up in morning traffic, she ends up walking to her class about 5 minutes late. As she opens the door, the class has already started, a large lecture hall with a class of about 80 students in it. She walks up the stairs that lead to each row and then sits at her spot in the back of class.

The professor starts to lecture and the class starts to wash over her. He is drawing on about chemical changes in the cells of the body and the feed of energy and the chemical conversion within.



Why won't he just shut up and let me sit here in my misery in peace? she thought to herself.

As the class went on she sank lower and lower into the chair where her head was almost even with the middle of the lowbacked classroom seats. Until she starts to feel something sharp on her arm. She pricks up, fast enough for the people sitting next to her go glance at her before going back to getting lost in sea of chain reactions and long strings of chemical names and conversion tables.

She starts to feel a sharp itching sensation on her left wrist. She goes to scratch it. It goes away from that spot, and then goes up to her forearm. She scratches it and then it creeps up even higher, but then it starts to return to the other spots, and then she continues to scratch and then it travels up her entire arm and to her shoulder. As she keeps trying to scratch it, it moves and the feels spreads all over her back and to her other arm.

What is happening?

She eventually itches so much that she gets up and grabs her backpack and moves from her seat and walks outside, down the steps of each, and heads outside the classroom. She walks from her class itching, she eventually runs in the bathroom. She looked around it to see if it is occupied and then pulls off her shirt and stares into the mirror.

A lot of her skin is read around the arms, shoulders, and back. She looks in the lower left side of her abdomen has been a yellow and purple bruise on it. Her eyes go wide and she starts to shake a bit.

What is that? What's wrong with me? Am I going to die?

She grabbed her computer and then went to the student health website, she pressed and book appointment button and then scrolled down to find the next appointment at 3:30.

Well at least I can book an appointment by the end of the day.

She presses schedule button and then gets up and walks outside of the science building and takes a stroll to the student center. She then heads outside and she starts to feel a little chill but continues to the student center.

She walks into the student center and heads into into a small convenience store in that area. Within there are food, drinks, supplies, and most importantly *medicine*. She grabs a pink bottle of pepto bismol off of and pays for it.

She walks out of the convenience store, she opens up the bottle and starts to take a swig. Her stomach rumbles again and she starts to feel a little weak again, but this time the rumbling starts to move and shake a shift within her stomach and that uneasiness starts to turn into a sharp pain in her belly and and equally sharp pain around her abdomen. It starts to seize up inider her where it makes her want to curl up into a ball and wrench in pain. So that is exactly what she does.

She walked over to a corner of one the large four storied building and finds a small and quiet corner and then begins to curl up into a ball. As she curls up and sit there, she can still fell the sliding and shifting of her stomach but as she starts to sit there longer the sliding and shifting within begin to cease

reach a point where she doesn't feel as bad. She lies there for what she perceives is only just a minute or two but then her alarm goes off.

She gets up and heads to her next class.

The class was a bit of a drag and the hour seemed to drag on forever. As she was sitting there, she got a text from her friend Caroline.

Hey, wanna meet Alex and I for lunch?

Allison texts back:

Sure, where at?

Caroline sends back:

The chinese restaurant on campus.

Allison responded with a heart, and then put her phone away.

After class got out she proceeded to head to the Chinese place on campus. Looked around the area which seemed to be an almost cafe styled Chinese place built for more of a grab and go syle of Chinese.

There at a table were Allison's friends Alex and Caroline. Allison went up to sit with them. They looked at her both a little bit shocked as the looked at Allison.

"Allison are you doing okay," said Alex, "you look a little pale."

"Are you coming down with something," asked Caroline.

"I think I have some sort of stomach bug," said Allison.

"Well it is going around," said Caroline, "anyways what might make you feel better is to go get some food."

They each ordered some food with Caroline and Allison both getting a small bowl of food while Alex got a large potion. Caroline and Alex began to dig in.

Allison looked down at her food. She took her fork and took a bite of it her stomach started to move but she didn't feel any pain. Sure her stomach still felt full and moving but she felt a lot better and assumed the pepto bismol did the trick. She then start to take another and then another, realizing that the only thing she had to eat today was a bite of a bagel she started in on the orange chicken and downed it, the then finished off the rice quickly only to realize that both Caroline and Alex were still eating.

Allison then went and got another plate and to dig in.

"How was class," asked Alex.

"Awful," said Allison, "I skipped most of my first class because I felt itchy, I was late because I woke up with a centipede on my face. I have a strange bruise on the left side of my stomach, and I feel like I could throw up at any minute but every time I try, I can't."

Caroline and Alex both looked at each other and then looked at Allison again.

"Are you sure you're okay?" asked Caroline.

"Yeah that is truly terrible," said Alex, "have you thought about going to the health clinic?"

She feels her stomach lurch again and feels a motion forward. A small stream of blood starts to flow from her mouth.

"I have an appointment after my class," Allison said. But then continued on forward to keep on eating.

"Yow know, I was thinking," said Alex, "are you sure you don't have a parasite or something?"

Allison looked up from her food at Alex.

"Yeah, like a tapeworm or something?"

Caroline nudged Alex's side with her elbow.

"Ow, what was that for?"

"You know what that was for," said Caroline, "stop trying to scare Allison."

Tapeworm. The whole thought made her insides squirm a bit.

She reaches for another bite of her second full order of orange chicken. As it reaches her mouth she started to feel her nose run. A steady stream of blood flowing from both nostrils stains the piece of chicken red.

She feels her stomach lurch again and feels a motion forward. A small stream of blood starts to flow from her mouth. That along her nose stains the plate that is in front of her and she starts to feel a bit lightheaded

and dizzy but makes herself study with the spell of dizziness fading, along with the trail of blood dripping from her mouth ceased only leaving her a bloody nose.

Both Alex and Caroline cease their conversation and look up at her.

Out of the corner of her eye Allison looked at her phone on the table and looked at the time.

"Well I have to go to class," said Allison.

"Allison," said Alex, "I really don't think you should go to clas today, I think you might need to go to the emergency roo,."

"Yeah," said Caroline, "I think you need to take the rest of the day off."

Allison thought about that for a moment and then responded. "Well if I have to wait for my appointment anyway, and it isn't for another couple of hours, I might as well just go to class."

Alex and Caroline hesitantly agreed and then Allison got up and then made her way to her next class.

There in Anatomy and Physiology the professor was talking about the digestive system, and all the organs and types of specialized pieces that make up a whole. *I wish that is how my stomach would work,* thought Allison.

Then after saying this she gets a heat flash, her heart starts pumping, and she starts to feel especially sick. This time her stomach does more than just lurch, it rolls and shifts and pains her. Allison gets up mid lecture nearly crouching over in pain and heads to outside of the class.

She heads to the bathroom and goes inside and enters one of the stalls.

She looks at the toilet bowl and sees her reflection. She can feel her face and skin get hot and read, her eyes start to quiver and teardrops land into the water. Her body tenses and she starts to gag.

Each time her gag reflex activates she can feel her entire stomach move and shift in pain. But as she does she can start to feel something move. She gags again until she can feel something at her throat. She feels something bulking, shifting, and scratching. *Something living.*

She let out on more gag and started to throw up.

As she releases into the toilet she can feel a million poking and prodding cramming her through as to where she can't even breathe, and then releases.

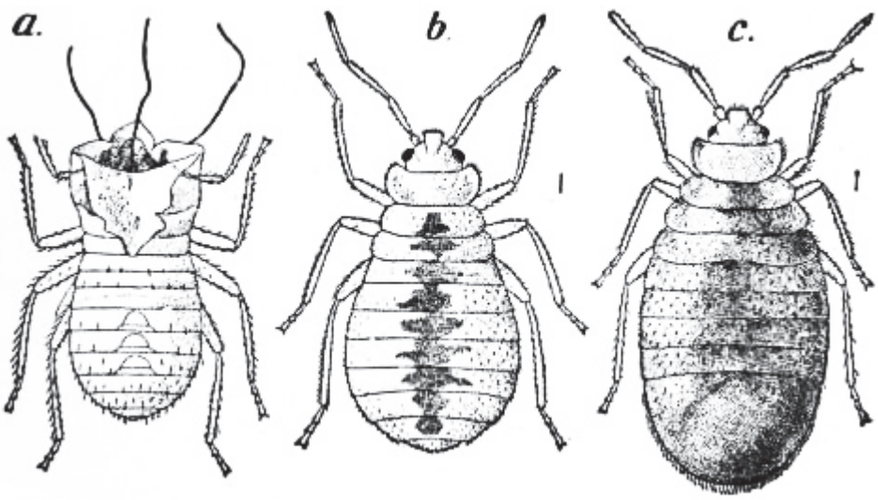
Out of her mouth pours centipedes which all flow flow into the toilet. Some landing in the toilet bowl and twitching around. She felt the gag and gain and threw up, of her throat came another round of insects into the bounds of the toilet.

After that she throws up a round of blood into the toilet on top of all the squirming creatures within.

Allison felt lightheaded and sick and ran outside. As she ran out of the bathroom, she passes out on the floor just outside.

Allison woke up and instantly checked the top of her face. She checked around and realized she was at a hospital in a gown. There sitting there were Amillia's two friends.

Before she could say anything to them, she let out a cough and there a millipede landed on the hospital sheets and Allison proceeded to jump up in fright.



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About the Judging



About the Judges

Brian E. Barrett — Brian was a contributing writer for *GDT* and editor of *Cereal* from 1998 to 2000. He went on to serve as online editor for the *Rochester Business Journal* and *Daily Record* and earlier this year, edited an art book by former RIT professor Jay Lincoln. He also acted in numerous films, mostly horror, and more than thirty RIT student films between 2016 and 2018.

Andrea Chrisman — Andrea is a lover of Pooh Bear, a sillygoatgirl in the wild, and was editor-and-chief of *The Iconoclast* from 1996-1998. In her run as editor she began yearly Halloween Story Contests that directly inspired *GDT* to do the same. She currently lives near the ocean, though it's unclear if she spreads lupin seeds everywhere she goes.

Judge Three — Judge Three is a modest soul that requested to remain anonymous. They were a long time writer for *GDT*, and spent some time at the wheel as editor-in-chief.

Shammon H. Hamula — Shammon was our tiebreaker judge. In the event entries received the same score, it was up to them make the hard decision.

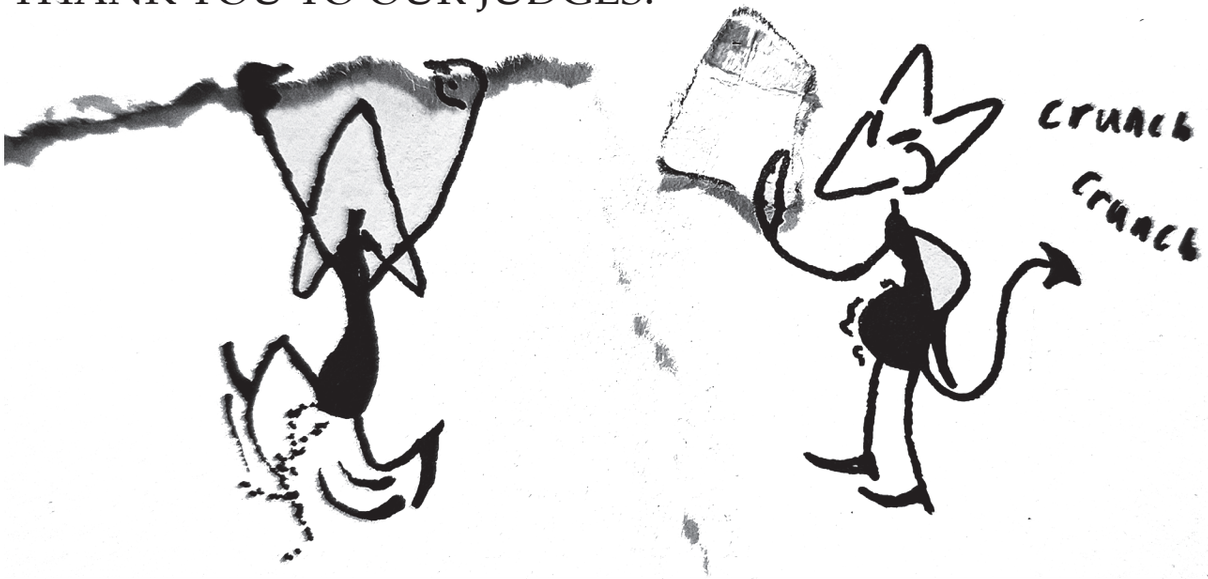
The Process

Prior to the Judges getting access to the submissions, one of *GDT*'s Layout Ghouls stripped the identity of the authors from the materials and ran a quick test to determine how much of each piece, if any, might have been produced by large language models.

Once in the hands of the judges, they were asked to use ranked-choice voting on their top six picks.

While the judges were reading the pieces, the Layout Ghouls feverishly put all 17 submissions into layout more-or-less in the order in which they were received. Once the Judges submitted their scores, the pieces that were ranked First and Second place were indicated as such, followed by Honorable mentions based on total scores.

THANK YOU TO OUR JUDGES!



Dramatis Personæ

Cereal has been brought to you by *Gracies Dinnertime Theatre* (*GDT*).
GDT is a founding member of Hell's Kitchen.

Publisher: Carissimus Diablo

Editors:
Samboozled & Goose Waffles

Layout Ghouls:
Honest Madman & G.S.

Marginalia:
Aidexp, Goat Caroler, Dedusmuln, G.S., & wood man



Photographer:
G.S.

Web crawlers:
Forcefem Foxgirls & Rhythm

Authors:
June Boice, Chloe Brown, Mighty_Chondria, Graham Clark, Alejandro Cruz (LOVI), Harvey A. Dorsey, fishbowl (messenger of THE BOOK), Cooper Haguns, Willa Hamric, Death's-head Hawkmoth, Indi, B.J. Kimpe, Ada H. Ominam, Iris Palmer, Dia-Dora Pinnix, Recipient of Semi-Annual Misfortunes, Samboozled, & Savannah-Lu Torres

Printer Daemons:
turpentine (*dux*), Bullhorn Acacia, Aidexp, Rectum Clown, Dia, Forcefem Foxgirls, Honest Madman, Mighty_Chondria, Moon, Rhythm, S.H., Snow, & wood man

Thank you to all of our newsies!

Judges:
Brian Edward Barrett, Andrea Chrisman, Judge Three, & Shammon H. Hamula

Note: Spelling and grammar was largely untouched by the Layout Ghouls and Editors.



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"Melancholy is the happiness of being sad."