

ISSUE 9

FALL 2021

The Agathist



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FALL 2021

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Advisor's Note

MR. DICKSON

I'm typing this as I'm getting the oil changed in my car. Nothing about this setting—the tired vinyl seats, the stained tile—makes one think art. There's not much poetry in a high-mileage Honda engine, is there?

Well, is there?

This waiting room has hosted all manner of people driving all manner of automobiles. Oil changes, like grocery stores and pharmacies, are ubiquitous in their need. Sure, you can fancy up any retail experience, but regardless of whether they're from Whole Foods or Kroger, milk is milk. And even if a oil change place fancies up its building with free coffee and comfy couches, the engines they service are all gross, belching things that need the same care. It's universal.

As is art. Poetry. This edition of *The Agathist* shows that universality keenly. There's something in this semester's magazine for everyone. If you've struggled with relationships, if you've felt lonely, if you've ever felt joy, if you've ever felt blank and listless, there's something within these (digital) pages. And to our non-student readers: you're included as well. I'm a 42-year-old Gen X white dude with a mortgage and a bald spot, and I've seen myself reflected here, too.

To the staff: thank you. Y'all have produced an absolute banger of an issue and made tough but necessary decisions about what went in. Creativity and chaos.

Enjoy this issue. Find yourself. See you next semester.

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A Mother

BELLA BRIDGES

A mother with hair like snow
The type of snow that falls once in a lifetime.
Snow that reflects the warm glow of the sun.
Hair that falls like a river.
A river that stops abruptly before reaching its desired destination.
A mother with a smile as pretty as the heavens.

A smile that would make mountains move.

Her smile makes you cherish every moment spent together.
Every moment spent together is short
But they all hold a special place in your heart.
She has the eyes of the sea.
Eyes that show the waves of tranquility.
Blue as the morning sky
But eyes that also show the signs of a hurricane.
A hurricane that will destroy everything in its path.
Destruction is near when the waves begin to crash in her eyes.
The sea of tranquility becomes a storm of rage and distress.
But all storms calm in the end
And at the end of the storm
There is always a rainbow.

A rainbow that shines through even the darkest moments

A rainbow filled with laughter and hope.
Hope for a brighter day to come.
A mother is everywhere
but there is no one like my mother.
My mother is the goddess of beauty.
A woman who puts her kids before her.
A woman who is the definition of hope and brightness.
A mother who cares too much and sleeps too little.



Marigold

CHLOE VIZIER, DIGITAL

And So It Goes

WILLIAM GARDNER

The boy awoke on the edge of a pond. It stood silent, still, placid, and vast. He looked both left and right; only a grey mist stretched across the horizon for as far as he could see. He looked down at his hands, they were just as he had remembered. Behind him was an endless forest of towering pines, spread amongst a seemingly infinite grassy plane. The world was desaturated; not a single bird chirped, not a single breeze blew. It was uncanny.

"Hello?" the boy called. No one answered. "Hello? Where am I? Who's there?" Not a voice, nor the wind answered. The forest stood deathly silent.

From behind, a hand gently grasped the boy's shoulder. He pushed it away—startled—and fell to the ground. Instead of running, as he was accustomed to, he remained sitting, staring at whatever it was that touched him. Standing above the boy was a man of modest height. His hair was thin and grey; it was apparent he was getting on in age.

"Who are you and where am I? I think I may be lost; I don't remember how I got here," the boy said. He remained on the ground, unable to move.

"Oh me? I'm no one of importance," the old man replied. "And as to where you are, it's of little consequence. May I sit?"

"Oh, well yes, I suppose."

"What is your name young man?"

"I'm not sure, I can't quite remember," the boy replied.

"I don't believe that, we both know that your name is Kai."

"No wait, Kai is my little brother, I'm Cian," he contested. This sudden recollection somewhat startled the boy.

"Ah, so you do remember." The old man smiled as he stood up. "It's unwise to sit in moments like these, a lethargic body is hardly suitable for our purposes, let us take a walk."

The two strolled down the shore, Cian keeping his distance. For a few minutes they did this in silence, the environment around them echoing their hush. The trees were uninterested as well.

After some time had passed, the old man finally spoke. "Tell me Cian, what did you think?"

"Think about what?" The boy lessened his distance from the stranger.

"Oh I don't know. What did you think about life, or whatever it was that you experienced?"

"I'm not really sure," Cian replied. His stride lost its rhythm and certainty. "It was rather painful actually. I didn't really see any point to it. People were not kind; they were only selfish. I felt no love, no happiness, no purpose. And what would you know of life anyway? From the looks of it you just sit here awaiting the dead just to take them on a lakeside stroll. It seems like your existence is just as meaningless as mine was."

"Well, I am sorry you felt that way. I'm assuming that is why you gave up so early, is it not?"

Cian looked up at the old man's face, it was neither sympathetic nor judgmental—placid as the lake. The boy felt rather dejected by this lack of empathy; it was a feeling all too familiar and real. His feet dragged across the rocky shore, creating a rhythmic scraping.

"And as to our existence, my boy, you're right; our 'lives' are very similar. But as to the purpose of them, perhaps your youth deprived you of time to search. It's much more trivial than you think."

This upset the boy greatly. "Oh, don't lecture me about age and wisdom; you don't know the pain others have caused me. I've had enough of those callous lectures from my father; in fact, you sound just like him. And just who are you anyway? Some cruel god here to torment me eternally for the sin of ending my life? If this is Purgatory, I'd rather be in Hell. "

The old man did not respond. He kept walking at a constant, calming gait, his eyes fixed to an undefined point on the bleak horizon. Cian followed with his head lowered, eyes set upon the gravel beach. He retrieved his composure, thinking only about his steps; one foot after another, until the old man stopped.

"We'll rest here," the old man said. And so, the two sat. "While you are young and do not yet understand who I am, I can tell you that your experiences are not foreign to me. I was once in your position, many times in fact."

"What do you mean?" Cian asked. "I thought you were some sort of god. Gods aren't supposed to deal with human emotions. Even if you were all-powerful and forced yourself to feel sadness, it would not be nearly as real as what we feel."

"That would be true, but I am neither a god nor human. And you are neither just the same. Look at the water dear boy; do you see any ripples?"

"No, it looks completely smooth, like glass even. It looks unreal," Cian replied.

"That lake is the reality you come from. All of time, matter, the universe, all of 'human' experience is compressed into that water. It is still because nothing has created a ripple in it yet. This means reality is very young, as you were." The old man paused for a second, staring at the grey horizon. "You see my boy, all of reality and life is within this lake, and there is no rhyme or reason to it, only the interruptions which cause the water to move. I do not control whether it ripples or not, only you do."

"What do you mean?" the boy asked.

"All of this was created for you, and you alone. Your existence extends beyond this very short life which you have lived. Not only are you Cian, you are everyone in this pond. You have lived the lives of everyone whom have come into existence yet. You were both peasants and emperors; you were both the victims and the abusers. By my count, we have had this very same conversation a few billion times."

The boy sat paralyzed, his eyes wide open. Tears began to well and he did nothing to stop them. "So, I am everyone? I was both my father, my mother; even Jesus and Hitler?"

"Yes you were, and after each life of yours we have met on the same shore, walked to this same place, and talked about the same things—with slight differences of course. Then, at the end of our conversation, your memory is wiped, and I send you on your way to be reborn. You will not remember this nor will you remember your past lives, but a small part will still remain deep down inside your conscience. And so it goes."

"But, what's the point? How am I supposed to relive life over and over again if I cannot remember this?" Cian asked. "What's the point of learning a lesson if I'm unable to take it with me? And, is there an end? This just sounds like torture." He slumped down further and pulled his knees to his head.

"The point? There really isn't one. I do this because I was put through the same ordeal, and he who came before me was just the same. The point is to exist, as it has always been; it's up to you to decide what that means. After billions of lives lived, I have found my peace, and at the end of everything you will find yours. Then you will take my place and become the next architect of reality. You will not become a god nor wield divine power, but you'll do your part in continuing the cycle. Simply put, at the end of everything, you will have accomplished everything that is possible from within the reality I have created. Your lives representing all of humanity will create ripples in this pond, and you will eventually mature to the point in which you may father a universe of your own."

"Wait, so where am I now? If the pond is the reality that you yourself made for me, then where is the rest of your world? What's beyond that horizon or on the other side of the forest?"

"That I do not know; I created this as a space to watch my own universe. Outside is the reality which my creator made for me." The old man paused for a moment; Cian lowered his head. "My dear boy, I'm sure you've realized this from our conversation, but there will come a day when we must meet for a final time. As I send you to live the last of your lives, you will finally reach the singularity, where you will have discovered all that there is to discover and built all that there is to build. It will be at that

point, during your last life, where you will become all powerful from within that placid lake of reality, and you will create a universe to your liking. And with that, my job will be complete."

Cian slowly raised his head as he attempted to comprehend the thought. "So, you're telling me I can make the next universe however I like? I could make a perfect world, one without suffering, rudeness or homework? I could make a universe where both sides of double doors are always unlocked? Or even a world with endless drinks and talking animals?" He looked excited at this concept and his mind began churning, thinking of all the possibilities.

"Yes you could," the old man said, "but by then your wisdom, built over the course of billions of lives, will tell you otherwise. Every so often, someone will create what they see as a party universe, one without pain and infinite pleasure; but they then come to realize that their creation is too easy. The inhabitants of their reality get bored; they stop progressing. They become stagnate because life is too easy, because there's no point. A world without suffering cannot have happiness either, it's all relative you see. You'll create a world which you will see fit, based upon your own experiences; and that will be enough."

"Oh, I see." Cian looked saddened but more or less accepted this fact. He slightly rose his head as a spark of curiosity came to him. "So, what kind of world did you create? Why just a lake, why not something more interesting?"

The old man moved his gaze from the boy, and set it upon the water, still as tranquil and silent as before. "I came from a much more chaotic world. The lives I lived were almost too hard. My creator made the universe too difficult to decipher, they made finding happiness in life a hopeless pursuit, and they made nature too bizarre to understand. Thus, it was nearly impossible for me to enjoy living, every bit of it seemed unknown. When I finally reached the end, I wanted to chew them out; but I didn't. Instead, I made this: a universe created out of beauty. I made the laws of reality complex, but not too complex. I put happiness in a place where it would take some time to grasp, but not so high on the shelf that you could not reach it. I made nature interesting enough to keep you curious, but not so odd that you couldn't figure it out. I learned much from my predecessor, as you will from your lives and from me. I trust that when your time comes

you will create your own beautiful vision of reality. And I trust that you will view an old man's missteps and mistakes with indulgence, I'm sure you will make your world better than I ever could. And, I guess that's the true answer to your question; that is the point of everything."

"Oh, I see. I guess I'll somehow know what to do when the time comes then. How much longer do I have, or how many more lives do I have to live?"

The old man smiled. "So far, we've had this same conversation billions of times before. Your questions varied slightly from life to life, but ultimately, they were the same curiosities. And to answer your question I do not know. Even though I engineered your world, I am not in control of how you progress; that is up to you and you alone. But if I had to guess, you're a little over halfway there."

"Well what happens if I fail to become this great architect of reality like yourself? What if my universe—or myself I suppose—do not make it to the end of time, or to that singularity you spoke of?" Cian looked slightly shaken, but the old man laid a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder.

"My son, do not worry about such a thing. If that were a possibility, do you really think the cycle will have lasted this long? It is infinite; and you are a fundamental piece of that infinity. Take solace in knowing that you will succeed, and that one day, you'll be able to look upon your creation and think, 'all is very good.' It won't be without suffering or hardship, but without such matters there would be no motivation to do great things. I have full trust in you." The old man slowly stood up and—for the first time—looked the boy in the eyes. "Cian, I believe it is time for our talk to conclude. I know this life was difficult for you, and I realize you won't remember this for some time, but deep down know that you are all of humanity. Meaning can only be created by you, and the universe was created for you, so take comfort in that."

Cian unfurled his legs and hesitantly stood up. "I'm scared," he said.

"I know," replied the old man, "but it is time for you to leave once more. Until we meet again, Cian." And with that, the boy closed his eyes and the old man sent him on his way, toward his next life.

The old man stood alone then, on the empty shore. In this moment of silence, and from within the stillness of the water, a ripple appeared. Its small waves traveled evenly in all directions, gently shaping the cosmic fabric. The old man smiled and soon began his walk, back to where he had first found Cian.

Upon returning to that spot on the shore, he came across an old woman. She laid on the beach, in the very same place Cian did, dressed in a flowing white gown, with the waves gently lapping at her feet. She slowly sat up, not questioning her form or her existence at this moment in time, simply admiring the stillness and the beauty of the water. The old man kneeled beside her, laying a careful hand upon her shoulder. The woman turned to meet his gaze, placing her hand on his in reassurance. With not a word spoken, the old man helped her to her feet, and they walked, side by side, down the gravel shore, her gown swaying in the calm breeze.

And so it goes.

Burning

SOPHIA GUERIERI

Burn the inherited shame

Burn the regret created through false expectations of humanity

Burn that which was handed to you as your palms bled

Burn that which was thrown at you as your body languished

Next, Burn that which still tore your callused heart

What preyed upon the innocence and imprisoned the mind's creations

Burn that which threatened the breakage of the spirit

What suppressed its devotion and our love

Then Burn the lies spread amongst generations

Contaminating perceptions

Finish with the collective false history

With darkened life and uprooted culture

With the burial of truth after truth after truth

Blessed be the flames that shall consume the chains forged by hate
and ignorance

Only time will tell who will deal worthy punishment

Justice or the devil

The Violinist

JACOB HOSFORD

It was a warm July day. On this particular day, there were no clouds in the sky. A little ways out of the city limits, a homeless man gets off of a train, moving quickly so as not to be seen train hopping. He carries a violin case with him, and as he walks into the city, he stops to take it all in, the tons of people, the cars, and the gigantic buildings. The man had never been in a big city like this one before. He walks through admiring the beauty. He quite likes the hustle and bustle of the city, not as much as the tranquility he can find in the country, but he still enjoys it all the same, for it doesn't take much to please him.

As he walks further into the city, he sees what he can only assume to be fairgrounds. He sees the Ferris wheel and the tilt-a-whirl, and he smells the various deep-fried foods. He hears fairgoers screaming on the different rides. He sees a man with his wife and children walking to the gates, and he sees the smiles on their faces. For a second he wishes that his life was like that man's, he doesn't dwell on these thoughts too long though, for he knows he already left that kind of life before. He takes a seat just outside the gates and opens his violin case. He places the case next to him, rolls his sleeves up, and puts the bow to the strings of his violin.

He plays sweet songs, he plays sad songs, he plays new songs, and he plays old songs. Some of the fairgoers compliment him saying things like, "That's beautiful," or "You're amazing at this!" Some drop some coins into his case, some give him dirty looks, and some just stand and stare, mesmerized by his masterful playing. He hardly notices them.

He plays for hours and hours, only stopping to wipe the sweat from his brow. He is so lost in his playing that he barely notices the day turn into night, he barely noticed the lights at the fairgrounds being turned off. He almost didn't even notice the fair's security tapping him on the shoulder. He turns to the security guard and is asked to leave, he replies, "C'mon man, let me just play one more song." The security guard starts to lock the gate to the fairgrounds and lets the violinist play his song.

When he's done, he looks into his violin case and sees all the money the fairgoers gave him, and he smiles. He has enough money now to make it another day in this cruel world. He puts his violin into its case and latches the case shut.

The man picks up his violin case and heads to the train station, waving goodbye to the security guard. The security guard, still struggling with the old rusted lock on the gate, doesn't notice him wave. The homeless man continues on his way to the train station, only a little saddened that the security guard didn't notice him wave.

He sneaks onto a departing train not knowing where it will take him next, and he sets his violin down next to him in the car. He pulls his hat down over his eyes, hoping to catch some sleep on the way to his new destination.

Winter

BELLE CLEM

During the California Caldor fires, wildlife officials had to euthanize a bear cub because his paws were so burnt, he couldn't walk. This poem is for that bear.

Tell me again of winter;
Of heavy nights spent knitting warmth,
Spoiling sleep into dreams of fat fish and low hanging stars

Tell me of last year's cubs-
tumble legged and downy

Fearsome vanquishers of blackberry and thorn,
Brave snifflers and snufflers-
Hornet nosed and hungry.

Look how the pines stoop through smoke to cradle you
Kiss you with sticky sweet sap
Look how the little birds flee and the fat fish boil
How the red moon hangs low in the sky to call you home

And tell me again,
Of winter.

Postmodern Slow-Poke

BELLE CLEM

I was on the road for so long by myself,
Thinking some wrongness in myself had made me that alone.

Confused by the signs,
With a shortness of breath,
And that postmodern feeling of falling behind

Desperate to appease
The invisible parents of this world
- Yet never quite catching up.

But that is what was

I do not know when someone appeared on the road beside me,
I do not know when this wrongness within me found a right,
But change was certain-
and I felt strange because suddenly I didn't care.

Assumptions

AUDREY DEAN

They think your mind is of steel
When really it's made of glass
They think you have it all together
When really it's about to crash
Their mind tells them there is no flaw
But if they looked a little closer
They'd see you fooled them all
Assumptions, assumptions
Go and ask them what they're like
You may find out the real thing
And it might give you a fright.



Scribbles

SOPHIA GUERIERI, PEN AND MARKER

Somthing You Should Know

SOPHIA GUERIERI

is that as a kid, I spent every minute I could outside.
I took walks around the neighborhoods
with streets littered with trees and bugs,
rocks and worlds to imagine and explore.
I mostly would ride my bike
up and down the same streets, day in and out,
waiting for when I went down the one with the big hill.
I would push so hard to make it up to the top,
turning around and letting my feet and hands fly,
like I could breathe in all the peace in the world
for those few free seconds. Maybe that is when
my search for escape began. Maybe
that is why, even now, I so often find myself
longing for even a few seconds away from life, afraid
of the pain and hurt you would find behind closed doors.

Spring in December

MARY CRAWFORD CANARD

Things won't be how they always were
And I know I seem to be making assumptions
But aren't we all?
This dirt path along the cedars
Which is a road that we didn't choose
And when there's somewhere else we would rather be than here
I imagine that the cedars are no longer of their unfortunate color
But are white and snowy like springtime dogwoods
And they aren't cascading depressingly over the unknowns of that
lonely dirt path, but they follow the trail of a path that leads toward the
outside bridge rims of a dusty old house in the middle of nowhere
Its where I want to be
And that dusty old house inside is shady with old Fred's dollar by the box
Lightbulbs
And the whole house smells of ladybugs
And it's alive
The TV is buzzing, and it always will buzz, with gray and white cartoons
And the noise isn't hollow
Not like that eerie dirt path
But it's a comfort to listen to, and it almost reminds me
Of a time when the burning cold of December
Couldn't even stop the blossom
Of a springtime dogwood, and its beauty unlike the death of its brethren
Made me realize in that moment
That I was standing in the extraordinary wild
And clever
Of spring in December



Buds

SYDNEY SLAUGHTER, PHOTOGRAPHY

The Forest

RACHEL PARR

When you step out into the forest after it's just rained there's a very particular scent
that just sort of hits you right in the chest.
It's a sort of familiarity that seeps in through your nose,
somehow flooding every single one of your senses without much of an effort.
It's a mixture of wood and indescribable life.

Just when you think you've begun to get used to that;
you begin to recognize the symphony of sounds—
from the mass of undefined noise of nature
emerges the quiet chirp of a lone cricket (or perhaps a thousand).

Woodland creatures scurry across branches,
their tiny little feet carrying them further than many men could imagine.
Water trickles from leaves,
a steady drip that marks their descent towards the ground.

Occasionally you'll hear a branch snap,
or you'll feel a drop of water against your skin.

It's all so perfectly overwhelming,
even without sight
you can't help but marvel at its beauty.

Butterflies

J.T. PARR

The creek is the perfect place, in Oakly's opinion, to explore. The creek's entrance was a slide formed out of the ground, with a perfect angle to glide down, and little bumps, creating a wavy ride. Her first adventure to the creek had been at the ripe old age of seven. Little Oak and her dad slid down the ledge, dropping down into the water, soaking each other with handfuls of water. But at fourteen, she had decided to adventure the creek alone, having an extra bit of freedom she couldn't have with her dad.

"Dad, I know I can explore on my own, I'm not that stupid." Oak said, before leaving for camp.

"Are you sure? You know there's snakes, and Brennen saw a bear last year."

Oakly had gone silent. "What if I bring my knife with me? For protection?"

James pondered for a moment, then looked down at their daughter, seeing their wife in her eyes. Oak reminded James a lot of their wife, the two are twins next to each other. Oakly had ocean eyes, which turned teal in a certain lighting, with freckles of brown dotted throughout the bright color. Sometimes it felt like her eyes were glowing. Her hair was just over shoulder length, with a bright brown color. Her skin tone was of one that spent time in the sun. In fact, her skin had spent lots of time in the environment. Ever since she could walk, she has been outside. Many of Oaks physical features came from her mother, this was as true as the sun being a star.

With a sigh, James gave the response: "Fine. But your knife will be sharpened, sheathed unless needed, and make sure you know the paths and exits. Oak, I really don't want you to get injured, or worse." Just to be safe (Oak had told her father) she brought an extra knife. In reality, she had brought the extra to climb. The ground surrounding the creek was steep, from centuries of untouched erosion, making cliff-like structures to climb. Whenever Oak had gone to the creek

before, climbing was not an option, her father deeming it too difficult. This, paired with Oaks inability to stay uninjured. The knives she had were given to her by her father.

They were butterfly knives, black on the handles and blades, with designs of sliver dragons and fierce mythical creatures on them. James was a master at doing tricks with knives. They would often spin the knives around on their fingers, flip them in all sorts of ways, and even toss them into the air, barely catching it by the handle. They had promised to teach Oak once she got to a reasonable age but was yet to teach her. The knives had been kept in beautiful shape, sharpened often, washed, and polished. Yet the signs of wear and tear throughout the years were there. One blade had marks from knicks on bones, with the handle of one had an edge chipped off, this from being dropped on concrete. Some of one knife was lighter than the other, slightly sun-bleached. Yet the knives were still beautiful to Oakly, knowing the amount of craftsmanship put into them.

Due to the lack of rain for a week, combined with the constant flow of the creek, the level of the shimmery water was barely a half-foot in most of the creek. Just enough to cool one off, without being drenched. Oak knew the creek would be this was on the day she went, analyzing the rain patterns for weeks, figuring out the perfect time to enjoy the coolness of the creek.

The glossy green trees above gave a canopy of green light that blocked out harsh rays of sun. The tiny blue flowers covered all sides of the entrance. Little specks of golden yellow, hues of cherry-pink, red and violet, all split apart the various shades of green all around. The colors filled Oak's shimmery teal eyes with pure joy. The only exception to excitement tingling in the air was the butterflies, displaying their bright, beautiful colors. The water reflected a bit of sunlight onto the edges of the cliffs with designs of water scales.

Moving down the creek, Oakly began to skip. She often skipped, despite people finding her insane for doing so. A smile plastered on her face, Oakly felt like heaven was on Earth. Freedom at last! She splashed all around, cutting open rocks she found (often collecting them and putting them into her pockets), picking flowers, and trying to stand still enough that the butterflies would land on her. She only got one butterfly

to land. It was little and the color similar to a blue bird, yet light and rich. The beauty of the creature was copious to Oakly. It landed on her right ankle for a moment, before flying off into the vast forest. Oakly realized that she was about to arrive at the Clay Factory.

The Clay Factory is what her grandfather and his brother had named this area. The cliffs around here rose almost directly up thirty feet, composed of pure clay. The water was much deeper than most of the creek. Oak almost immediately noticed the small flag atop the front cliff with the faint symbol of a white cartoon dinosaur. Years ago, her father had climbed to the top and placed it there. Down below her mom was jumping and shouting, cheering them on. That's what James said happened, but Oak knew that her mom had actually climbed it, with dad cheering at the bottom.

Oak decided it was her turn to climb up to the ledge. She knew she had to prove she had made it. Oakly noticed earlier a metal rod sticking out of the ground, most likely left there by one of her cousins. She grabbed the rod and tugged it a bit. With a jerk, it came out of the ground, and Oak had to prevent herself from getting hit in the face. She unsheathed her knife, opened it with a click, and then sliced off a part of her sleeve. She tied one end around the rod, leaving the other side to flap in the wind. Oakly shouted a small fanfare.

She then looked up at her challenge. Suddenly, thirty feet felt like a lot more than thirty feet. Oakly took a breath, then picked her nails, and thought for a moment. A challenge is a challenge though. A little voice in her head told her she shouldn't, but she ignored it. Oakly looked up, sighed, then unsheathed her other knife, clicking it open. She tucked her flag in her pants loop, screamed a battle-cry-like yell, and stabbed into the cliff in front of her. She used her other knife to stab a place to put her foot. Oak pulled herself up and put her foot in the hole, then slipped and slid down the cliff. Clay, gray and brown in color, wasn't known to stay put, so Oak knew this would happen.

On the second try, Oak decided to stab a bigger hole. From the bottom she cut out two rectangular holes, just big enough to put half her foot into, evenly spaced out from one another. Pushing back her glassy brown hair, she put her right foot in the hole. After making sure her foot was steady, she pulled up into place. The second foot. This one was in-

credibly easy, with her other foot and both hands to keep her steady. Once Oakly got to the position she wanted to be in, she used her knives simultaneously, knowing it would be faster. She stabbed where she had put her hands, making the new holes the same size as the previous. This worked incredibly well, so Oak made progress easily. She went through the same process three more times, before the clay gave way, releasing her from the cliff, sliding down several feet with a cheerful scream and a giggle.

On the third attempt, Oakly worked with a sort of perfectionism and delicacy, with sheer determination flowing through her head and body. On the last two climbs, she would look down occasionally, which she found was a mistake, causing her body to tremble. Yet, she made it to the top. As she pulled herself up to the very tip of the cliff, she cheered loudly, knowing only nature could hear her. Oak dug a small hole, then jabbed the flag into it, which was just a foot away from her parents'. She removed one of her colorful bracelets from her right wrist, the one of the faint colors: reddish-pink, pastel yellow, and a dark blue. The bracelet revealed light skin tone, showing the wide contrast in her skin. Oak put the bracelet around the flag, declaring exactly who had put it there. She sang her fanfare once more.

Then, she noticed to view. She could now see the entirety of the creek she had explored before, with the butterflies and colors. From above she noticed that the area where she had found the light butterfly was covered in flowers of every color on the wall above, attracting many delightful insects other than butterflies. She could see the various types of trees: dogwood (what was left of it), pine, cedar, and her personal favorite, oak. These trees had strong, deep roots, that prevented them from falling during storms. Oak trees have very distinct bark, with various shapes of leaves. This is how Oakly identified them. She could hear the birds singing, frogs chirping, squirrels barking, beautiful sounds of nature.

Then, a snake rattle.

The power of nature was stronger than Oak had ever realized. The sting shot through her entire body, paralyzing her for an exasperated moment. Dropping her knives, then her body; races of thoughts filled her head. The ground was softer than she expected, her knees landing first, then her head landing on her arms. Suddenly, the beautiful world blurred,

forming illusions from darkness.

Oak's snap into reality came moments later, the pain was unbearable. Desperately, Oak looks around, then spots the snake. Dark with golden diamonds evenly spaced down its skin; Eastern Diamondback. If the rattler hadn't just attacked, it would have been gorgeous to Oakly. Yet, at this moment, Oak only thought of the position she was put into by the back-stab of nature. As a desperate cry for help, Oak screamed. Again. And again. Her voice was nothing compared to the thickness of the forest. She knew that she would have to get back to her ATV injured. If she waited for help to come, well Oak didn't want to think about that. "It may be best if you leave your phone somewhere safe when you go down to the creek. You do not want to damage it, that's what your aunt did one time. Don't be like your aunt Oak." Her mother told her. "If there is an emergency, there is a button set up on your phone that contacts nine-one-one, both of us, and Aunt Katie. Only use it for emergencies." Oakly knew she had to get back to her phone.

Oak crawled a few steps, trying to reach her knives. She knew she had two choices. Walk through the dense forest until she reaches lower ground or find a way down the cliff. The cliff it was, due to the shaking of Oak's breathing and body, at the sheer thought of walking through the dense forest. There were many ways to do this, Oakly knew. Her ankle had two small marks, which were beginning to swell. Blood oozed from the spot. Oakly turned to the tree she had fallen beside. The oak tree was massive, rising high into the sky, kissing the clouds. Oakly knew this tree would have large and strong limbs, so after a moment of searching, she found a stick with just enough length to hold onto and that had no lack of stability.

Now for the hard part. Oakly thought, knowing exactly what she would have to do. Her hands became unsteady.

She crawled over to the edge of the cliff, looking down into fate itself. Unsheathing her knives once again, Oak made one more attempt to cry for help. Nothing but the cries of nature and her own voice came back. She threw the limb down and with a huge splash, the stick began to float. She clicked open the knives. Oakly leaned over the side, then stabbed suddenly into the cliff. She used her knives and upper body strength to launch herself over the edge. The unbearable pain became

worse. The pain entered her head, along with the sudden thoughts of the fatality.

The power of sliding down the clay was immense. The speed Oakly gained in that moment was that of a sports car, or more like that of a tree falling. The knives slowed the fall some, yet the sheer force and givenness of the clay did not help. If she wasn't in pain, Oak thought, the slide would have been of some enjoyment. The sound of this action was interesting. Like stirring a pot of pasta, or of metal scraping concrete. Oakly had decided was the answer was both.

The splash into the water below made Oakly almost forget the pain. The coolness of the water calmed down the intensity of her thoughts, along with the outside temperature of her body. She waded for a moment, wishing she could just swim there, until someone came in search. Of course, her pain and ever shortening lifespan said otherwise. Oak swam to the part of the creek where she could stand and took a moment to ease her breath. Shaking, Oakly grabbed the oak limb and positioned it in her right hand to relieve as much pressure as possible off the wound.

"If you ever see a snake, the first thing to do is recognize it, Oak," her mother had told her at some point. "Once you've identified it, stay away from it if possible. If you're bitten, stay off the wound, find help, and keep calm."

Oakly didn't know how to stay calm. Calm was not her thing. The rest of the advice was useful to her though. She had never been in a situation like this before, not during any of her adventures in the wilderness. This came as a surprise to Oak herself, along with anyone who knows her well. She had gotten caught in a standoff with a water moccasin once. The snake had appeared from behind a limb on the edge of the creek. At first the two had not noticed each other. The snake had left its home, with desires unknown. Oakly had come to the creek with her father, yet her father had split up for a moment. Once the two spotted each other, they both went into a position of defense. They stood there for a moment, looking into each other's eyes, frozen solid. With a gap of about ten feet, Oakly expected the snake to attack. Her suspicions were met, the snake coming straight for her, meeting its vicious attack with a knife to the throat. Her parents knew nothing of this event to this day.

As hastily as she could, Oak moved down the creek toward the spot she knew was best to exit. Nature was still pretty, yet this time Oakly hadn't been able to take in the view. Maybe it was venom, or something in her head. Nonetheless, Oak had to keep moving. That, she was completely sure of.

The canopy of trees had become a source of a gloomy hum of green. The flowers of color had become dull to poisoned eyes. Moths speckled the musty air with desperate attempts of color, yet the browns were that of feces. The yellows were mustard. The reflections on the cliffs revealed demons, spiders, and snakes. The colors of nature had become ugly.

Oakly proceeded on, now reaching an area she hadn't been to earlier. She passed by the slide that started the adventure, seeing all the types of trees, and now was in what felt like new territory, despite the many times she had been here. As she rounded a corner, a beaver scampered off into the woods. She knew she was getting close to the exit, yet it still felt like a great distance.

The trees became a blur of brown and green, the forest becoming a single object. The flowers around her were no longer flowers, but a jumble of blank hues, unable to be split apart into separate objects. The movement in the water disappeared, becoming a feeling, and part of the ground. After Oakly stopped dragging along the creek to puke, she could not tell any of her surroundings apart.

She knew that the area to exit was marked though. This was with another flag, this one of stripes and colors, that of a community of love. This would be easy to spot out, even though Oak's view of the world was not that of a normal day.

James and Lena had planned to mark the exit in some way. They did just that on the very first day they went down there, at the age of fifteen. Their symbol of exit was easy to decide, both being of the community. They bought the flag from a small market, while their parents shopped. They both got together, and both put forth money to buy it. They snuck the flag around their parents, knowing that if caught with it, terrible consequences may follow. James and Lena's parents did not agree with the genders they found attractive, that is if Oak's grandparents ever found out.

James had to sneak the flag around until he could go down into the creek with just Lena. This they were successful of, by some miracle. The flag was put at the exit, both James and Lena pushing the pole into the ground. On the day, James had given Lena one of the butterflies, both digging the hole for the flag. This "ceremony" was important to both, feeling as if they had separated from their parents' views. Oakly's father was very adamant in making sure Oak knew she was accepted how she is. Her mother the same way. When Oakly told them she loves everyone, just like them, they accepted it with open arms. In fact, they were happy for her. Oakly knew from that point on, her parents were perfect for her.

Oakly troubled on, staggering left and right, trying her best to stay off her right leg. She was successful in this, creating a slightly better situation for herself. She could feel the exit nearing closer and closer, but every time she looked ahead, she could not see the flag. Just the jumble of dull and desperate colors. Unrest was beginning to hit Oak, with thoughts of what afterlife would be like, that is if that existed.

Oakly's joy when she saw the flag was that of one winning the lottery. In fact, Oakly did win a lottery. When she neared the flag, she took the moment to savor. The moment of success. Finally, she had made it. Not completely though. She still had to get up to her ATV.

The area back out of the creek had a ladder. The ladder was sturdy, placed into the ground, but Oak knew it would still be a challenge. This was due to the ladder being a blur of silver, along with the inability to use her right leg. Yet her upper body strength helped out lots.

She got up to the place where she had left her ATV, then pulled out her cell phone. The actual phone was pastel purple, with a thick, clear case. The same exact as her mother. She clicked the emergency button, and then in a last act of excitement, removed her hand from the stick to gesture to the wilderness just how she felt about what it had done. Oak's ignorance. All the power drained from her body, first from her arms, then her knees. She collapsed onto the ground, beside an tree of distinct bark. Pain overthrew her whole body and darkness came into view. Swirls of color began to disappear.

Before her eyes closed, she made out the faint tree beside her, a light-blue spot landing near the bottom of the trunk.

If You Wish to Know Me

LANGSTON DILLON

You should know

that about a year ago, my grandfather died.

And I watched it unfold

with coughs like death, hard wheezing,

gasps grasping for pieces of life that could not be given.

I watched as his condition transpired and continued

to diminish the man he was, from a man to a shell.

As it happened before my eyes, I became worried

for the life he had left, and when he entered the hospital,

I knew it was soon to be over. For his life to be reduced

to having to survive from a machine, to have his life so

brutally and efficiently stolen from him before our eyes.

And maybe this is when I became afraid of death.

Not the sweet song of peaceful harmony afterwards,

but the long nights of pain and wishing for it to all be

over. Maybe that is why I cannot seem to want to spend

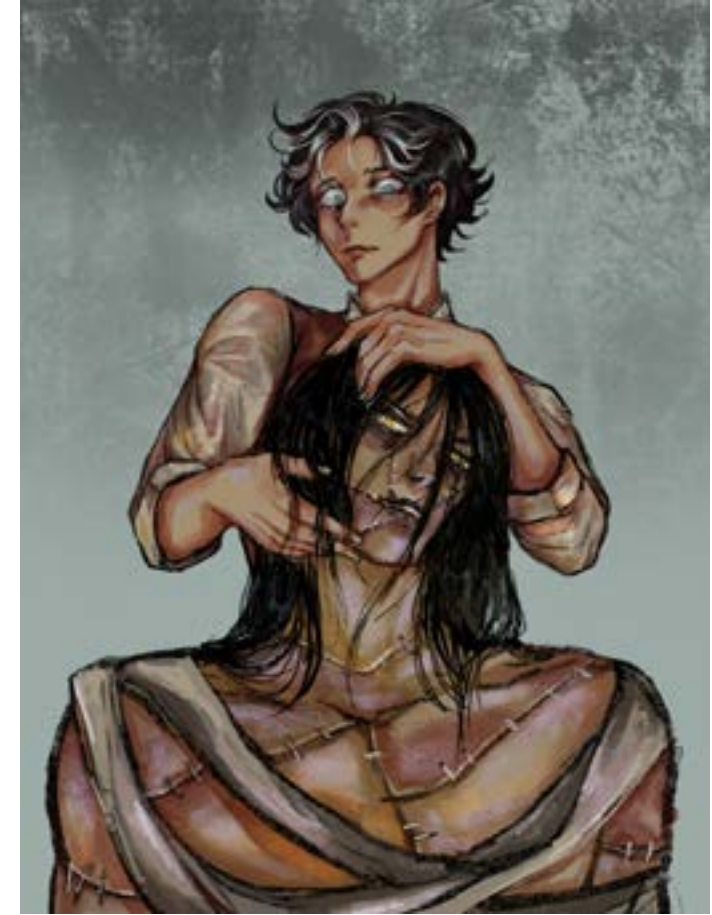
my life with you, because I know I would have to die with

you. Maybe that is why I cannot bear to see you in pain.

For when the sweet song comes, it will bring its pain,

and I could not stand to see you diminished too.

Rest in peace, my father's father, 03/14/2020.



The Maker and his Creation

AMY NGUYEN, DIGITAL ARTWORK

Maverick Zone Pilot Episode

MAVERICK THEATRE

The Maverick Zone is an audio drama written, performed, and produced by Maverick Theatre students. It takes the form of a fictional news show that tells the everyday stories of students at Germantown High. But, when a sinister mystery begins to unfold in Germantown's halls, the show is turned upside down. Our intrepid teen journalists will work to solve the mystery – if they can survive it...

For the best listening experience, be sure to wear headphones



Actors

TAYLOR: Bryn Chappell

HEATHER: Kris Arrington

APRIL: Emma Ellard

RANDOM CREW MEMBER: Erleisha Green

ADVERTISER: Gracia Oden

SECOND VOICE: Perry Herrington

BRAYDEN: Christian Gibson

TRENT: Keaton Rogers

GRACELYN: Chloe Vizier

BRAIDEN: Caden Miller

BELLA: Alesia Williams

ANDY: Carter Hill

CODY: Levi Sullivan

LANGSTON DILLON: Langston Dillon

CREW

Sound: Drew Damon

Editing: Ethan Lambert

Music: Perry Herrington

Lunch Food

KINSLEY GREEN

A small styrofoam plate that's filled with brown
sits in front of me, smelling like a sock.

The gravy jiggles, and it makes me frown.

Who would create such a meal? Only a clown.
I'm starved, but I refuse to get sick from
a small styrofoam plate that's filled with brown

mystery meat from some horse farm in town
or some rancid "fish" from an unknown dock.
The gravy jiggles, and it makes me frown

because honestly, I'd much rather drown
than eat gravy in the shape of a block.
A small styrofoam plate that's filled with brown

is the last thing I'll see as I fall down
because the time has run out on life's clock.
The gravy jiggles and it makes me frown

for all I can smell is the color brown.
Maybe the meat is a wing from a hawk.
A small styrofoam plate that's filled with brown.
The gravy jiggles and it makes me frown.

Dirt Cake

ZOE THORTON

Our parents never put sunscreen on us unless we were swimming
My older brother and I would stumble outside
Onto the rust-stained porch
Down the loose steps
And into the overgrown yard
We'd crouch beneath the slide and get to work
Digging with our hands in the damp dirt
Flinging handfuls of soil behind us
The heat was overbearing
Cicadas sang past the treeline
My brother held a cup of water
The key ingredient in our cake
He tipped it
The newly dug hole filled with wet
Loose dirt mixing into mud
Scooped out by pale hands and molded into a hill with a sliding peak
We were pleased with our creations
And would take turns pretending to be chefs
"Did you make this?" We'd ask
Imitating the French folk from Ratatouille
Our accents slipped through
We were just two redneck kids playing in the dirt
With sunburnt shoulders
Cause my parents never put sunscreen on us
And we rarely went swimming

9/19/21

The Old Swing Set

RACHEL PARR

There was an old swing set that had been rescued from Basil's old house before the whole thing had been torn down. It was where he and Angelina had all their important discussions as a child— where he had learned to cope with his first heartbreak— where he'd sat and let the reality of his mother's death wash over him like an icy rainstorm, prickling at his skin and washing away his tears.

Now, it was where he sat when he needed to be alone— when something new came his way and he needed to learn to cope once again. It was like a little piece of home in a place he was still adjusting to.

Oftentimes, it wasn't long after he walked out there that he found himself in the company of his husband. The only other anchor he'd been able to maintain.

-

Giovanni simply knew where to find him. If they weren't together, it never really took long for that to change. Perhaps that was part of their charm— they were like magnets, circling around each other until their poles lined up and clicked into place. It felt natural, being with him.

This particular afternoon, it was that old swing set where his husband had gone to hide. Not from him, but from the rest of the world.

A soft smile overtook his expression when he found him, sitting there alone on that old swing set built for two.

"There you are," he said with a small laugh, moving to sit on the swing beside him, one hand wrapped around the chain and the other extended in a sort of offering. "You good?" He wasn't going to push too hard, but he didn't know if he'd be able to live with himself if he didn't at least make some sort of attempt.

"Yeah," Basil replied with a sort of sigh, looking up from his lap to take his hand— just the slightest smile edging its way back into his

expression. Sometimes he was just grateful for Giovanni's presence. Grateful that he had someone to fall back on no matter what may come to them.

They had each other regardless of what might be going on with the rest of the world.

It was particularly useful on days like today. Days when it felt like nothing else was truly right.

"Tell me about it, Bas, let me share whatever this burden is with you. You don't need to suffer through this alone. At more than one point in their relationship, he'd spent a good long while just trying to convince Basil that it wasn't his fault, that it wasn't his sole responsibility to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders.

His feet dug against the concrete of the little patio they'd built out in the middle of the garden as he swung back and forth gently, pulling Basil along with him by the hand.

The leather on the tips of his shoes had gone from brown to a sort of white—scratched to hell and back from doing this exact thing. It's not like he cared anymore. What was a pair of shoes in the grand scheme of things?

It wasn't exactly like they were short on money—and in Giovanni's mind, keeping Basil out of that dark place was more important than any material thing could possibly ever be.

Basil took in a small breath, meeting those beautiful green eyes of his. They could handle this together, right? For years now, they'd handled all of it together. "The adoption fell through—" he began, giving Giovanni's hand a small squeeze—"the birth mother decided to keep the baby."

Giovanni's face fell, if only momentarily, and he got up from the swing, stepping out in front of him.

He stood there for half a heartbeat, running his thumb over the back

of Basil's hand before moving to his knees in front of him. With the other man sitting on the swing, he was exactly eye level with him like this. He'd have to have his pants dry cleaned—but that was no big deal.

"There are millions of kids who need a family, my love. We'll find the one who is meant to be a part of ours, I promise you," he whispered, bringing Basil's hand up to his lips to press a small kiss to his knuckles. "We've got this, okay? We'll get through this just like we got through everything else."

The faintest of smiles returned to Basil's lips.

"Okay—yeah—okay," he said quietly, leaning forward to lay his head against Giovanni's shoulder. It was a gesture that was meant to say everything that his words couldn't. The words had always been Giovanni's specialty, not his.

It was safe to say that the message came across loud and clear—a small smile of his own making itself at home across Giovanni's expression.

He pulled him in, letting go of his hand to wrap his arms around him, pressing a kiss to his cheek in the process.

"I love you, Basil," he said quietly. It was said quite frequently, but he didn't ever want him to forget it.

"I love you too," Basil replied, "I love you."

I Have To Go

RACHEL PARR

your voice comes back to me in my dreams.
i can distinguish your footsteps from those of *any* other.
i hear your screams echo behind every tender word,
and i know that if i don't take it, he will.

you were meant to protect *me*—
they made you the guardian of my soul,
and rather than hold me dear, you've shattered me again and again.
i don't trust you, i can't and i won't.

you've taken me for granted.
you will lose me like you've lost before.
i can't bear to look you in the eyes anymore.
i *have* to go.

Turning and Learning

BELLE CLEM

So we were turned into being-

For it was worth death to see Earth through these rods and cones.
To feel the chill of breeze through fur on my arms,
And to be swished and swirled in its moral cocktail.

So let us reminisce,
As the gods in olden stories
turn fools into laurel trees and crown,
to teach them some kind of lesson.

Only to find
Nothing that happened here on earth-
who I thought I was,
and nothing that I did or that was done to me,
was ever real.

So we were turned into Humans-
to learn something about loneliness.

Yellow

GRACIA ODEN

"Your sound, so gold, so bright."

My eyes cannot tear themselves away
as you lay yourself down,
under the spray of ten
bullets painted gold. You stood
and then you sunk,
planted there, in that field
barely a sound
form your lips, holding close
to your gun as I ran.

In the place where your eye
used to be
is a hole; star-shaped,
bubbling with your
blood and oozing
with the reminder-
blown away,
blown away.

And with that, Yellow was gone.

Weeds

LUCY HARPER

Once upon a time

There was a little fairy named Dandelion. She had brown hair and green eyes, and she loved to make flower crowns out of, you guessed it, dandelions. Well you see, she had no parents, she lived alone in the woods for as long as anyone could remember, so when people would ask her name, she didn't know what to say. So, she decided to call herself Dandelion.

And every day

When the other forest dwellers would ask her why she chose the name Dandelion, she would say, "because dandelions are pretty flowers and I'm a pretty flower too!"

"But dandelions are weeds" they would say.

But she would simply respond, "They're pretty weeds. And I think they deserve as much love as lowers do too."

Years went by and Dandelion continued to grow and grow.

Until one day

Dandelion met someone in the woods while out hunting for flowers to weave into her hair. This person called themselves Dahlia. Dandelion thought they were the most beautiful being they had ever seen. They were pale as moonlight with white-blond hair to match. Their blue eyes stood out from their ivory face. Dahlia was different. When Dahlia asked Dandelion why her name was Dandelion, they didn't say that dandelions weren't flowers. Instead, they simply said, "I think dandelions are beautiful. Your name suits you."

And because of this Dandelion felt comfortable around Dahlia, and every day after that they would go together to find dandelions and dahlias to make flower crowns and bracelets. They would spend the day

gathering flowers and wild berries and then at night they would go down to the creek and splash each other until they were soaked, but they had so much fun they didn't mind. This went on every day for three years.

Until finally Dahlia told Dandelion a secret. They were in love with someone. At first, Dandelion was heartbroken. Dahlia was her person, and if they were in love with someone else then they wouldn't be around to protect her from the other forest dwellers and their judging remarks and rude stares. But Dahlia deserved to be happy, so Dandelion told them that they should go be with the person they love. Dahlia smiled, and thanked Dandelion for understanding their feelings. But then something happened that confused Dandelion. Dahlia didn't leave.

"Didn't you hear me?" she asked the blonde. "I told you to go be with your love."

"I am" replied Dahlia, taking the girl's hand in hers and placing a kiss on the back of it.

And ever since that day Dandelion and Dahlia lived peacefully in the woods, picking dandelions and dahlias and making them into flower crowns and bracelets, and leaving them on the low hanging branches of trees for children to find if they wandered into the edge of the woods.

And anytime someone would say something about Dandelion's name or Dahlia's pale complexion, they would simply say, "We may be the weeds of the garden, but we're prettier than any flower you'll ever see."

And the moral of the story is

There is love out there for everyone, even the weeds.

Gaia

ASH LOFTIN, DIGITAL ARTWORK



Size 12

ZOE THORNTON

I remember the sound of cicadas before I saw your face.
The shape of your eyelines and the way your lashed slid like slopes
There was a warm pit in my stomach
It felt like lava flowing over gravel
I suppose a more elegant term would be "butterflies"
Eventually the lava stopped flowing
And the butterflies stopped fluttering
I realized your skin wasn't as soft as before
The dent of a shoe print outlined a flattened insect miles behind you
You stamped those butterflies into the dirt
Yet I still loved you.

In My Palms

ZOE THORNTON

I held it in my palms.
Life dripped from its nostrils and leaked down the dorsal of my hands.
Its warmth was no longer consoling.
Yet I held it.
I held it until its body twitched and sputtered
'til its mouth was agape, attempting to suck in those last seconds of spirit
I held it in my palms
And I felt it die.

In This Heart That Burns

LANGSTON DYLAN

Its presence-lingers-
Its touch-beckons-
A song like death,
For I know it must be so,
Calls so sweetly in the night,
Or when inhibitions are low,
When the fire burns bright,
And the buzz starts to grow,
I feel it in the night,
When I miss your presence the most,

Hidden deep inside,
Protected by layers upon layers,
Of teeth and claws,
Of razors and sharper things,
Of a shield stronger than tungsten,
More flexible than graphene,
More durable than chromium,
Lays my heart,
And inside it,
the fire

that burns so bright for your love,
That there are some days I,
Cannot even stand its heat,
But it lies in repression,
And feelings held in glass jars,
For I have denied myself,
Even the hope of having your love thus far,

Because I was told,
From a very young age,
That boys were meant for girls,
That man and man can't create,
And therefore, cannot be,
So the future I envisioned, for myself,

So perfect, so visible to me,
Is not what was designed, nor meant,
And that's the way it would,
always be,
Over the years hearing the same thing,
All those voices of various magnitude,
Has coalesced into one,
Forming a cage around my mental,
Locking me inside this feeling,
Throwing away the key,
Corrupting all that I thought I could have,
So even though you might show your,
affections,
Even though you might give me your love,
I'd rather stay in this feeling,
of repression,
Than ever have those voices be right,
Than ever to be so wrong,
Than ever be rejected,
Than ever be alone,
So when I feel it in the night,
And the buzz starts to grow,
When the fire burns bright,
Or inhibitions are low,
When it sings so sweetly,
A song like death,
When its touch beckons,
Or its presence lingers,
It will all be ignored,
Forever more,
This heart that burns,
Forever more.

Nothing Left To Burn

JINX

The fire starts with Witches
You set ablaze the stakes.
The ashes washed to ditches
Their skin absorbed the flames.

I had a fire in my eyes
But hid a heart turned to embers.
No matter how much i've died
I won't be the one who surrenders.
A Phoenix born from Their ashes
My flame will never go out.

Daughters of Witches you couldn't burn.
We took away your flame
We took away this world you turned
We burn away the hate.

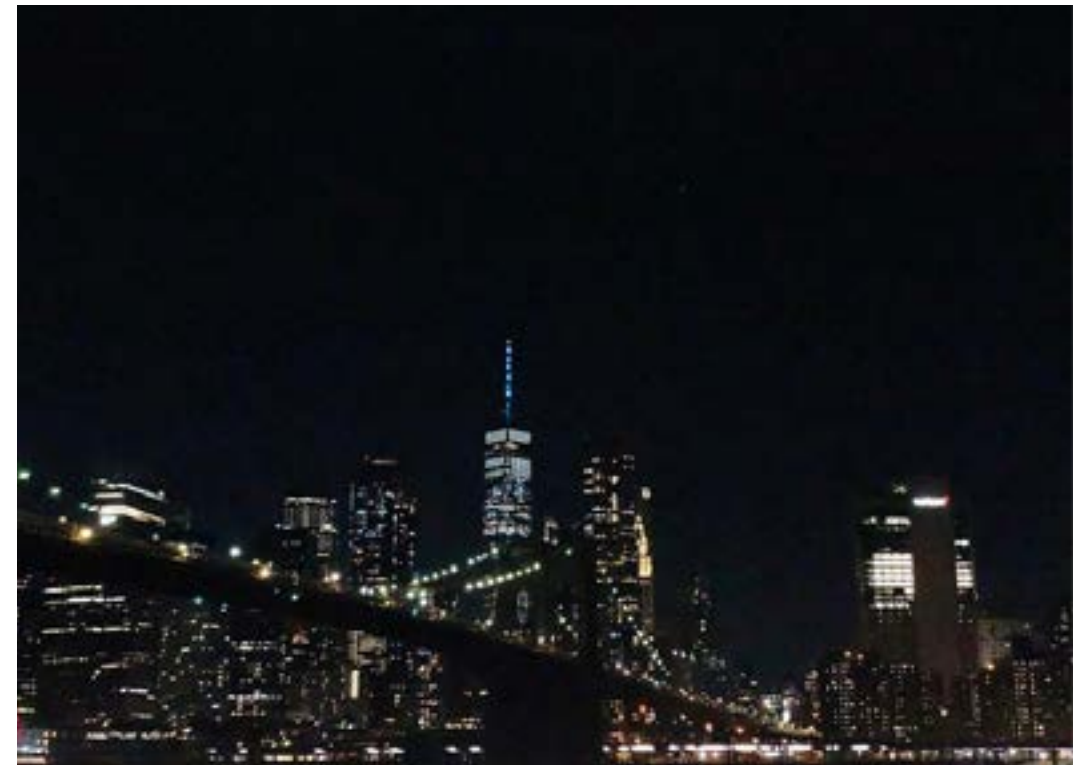
You filled the world with matches
Lighters
Gasoline
Hate.
And You wait
Wait for a spark to burn Us down

After centuries, You returned
Stronger than You were
You may have won the game
And drove us into shame
Though We may have been burned
We never decayed.

Secondhand Smoking

ZOE THORTON

She was never too fond of smoking.
I mean, who would be?
Her car seats were soaked.
But instead of liquid,
The cotton was clogged with tabaco waves and smeared lipstick.
Her passenger seat was stacked with leather books
Flaking at the spine
Strapped in with a seatbelt
That was partially stained with beer.
We just wish she would have strapped herself in, too.
At least she'll never have to smell cigarettes again.



City Lights

SARAH MAGDALENE NIERVA, PHOTOGRAPHY

The Playlist of a Breakup

LEAH BYERS

Psychologists today believe there are 7 stages of grieving a breakup. Each one is crucial to moving on and staying moved on. I believe that with these stages there are musical notes to them. Everyone goes through a breakup at some point in their lives. Musicians just put their pain into music, making a playlist of grieving breakups. With my breakup, these songs represent the stages I was in.

1. Denial – Without me by Halsey

"Found you when your heart was broke / I fill your cup until it overflowed / Took it so far to keep you close / I was afraid to leave you on your own" The first time I saw you it was an instant shock because I could feel the link between us forming. And then you walked me to my class, and the next day I couldn't wait to see you, but you left for Brentwood when the school found the evidence of your pain on your arms. When you came back, I wrote you that letter, remember? You hugged me and told me that I meant so much to you. I filled you up when you were empty, and I gave you happiness, I put you first, I took on your demons and made them mine, I broke myself down to raise you. When you cried, I held you. And it took me a year to get over you. Looking back, I know I didn't just love you; I loved the idea. I loved the escape from reality. But when reality comes back, and it always does, you are suddenly left with a distorted image of what you thought your life was. Only now do you realize you were dreaming. That's what this stage was for me. I couldn't understand why we ended. I mean you said you loved me, you said we would last, you said forever. I was naïve. I was so sure you'd be back because I was the only reason you were happy. I was the one who built you up after devastation. I put you right back on your feet and you couldn't live without me. And I was right, you did come back, but it wasn't the same. I knew then that this was the beginning of the end. "Tell me how's it feel sittin' up there / Feeling so high but too far away to hold me / You know I'm the one who put you up there / Name in the sky, does it ever get lonely? / Thinking you could live without me"

2. Desperate for Answers – I Have Questions by Camila Cabello

I remember being in contemporary health at school when you texted me making small talk. After everything we were, now reduced to small talk. And then we saw each other for the first time in a month at my neighborhood pool. I couldn't look you in the eyes. You knew that because we sat at the tables, you told me that you messed up that I was someone you knew you needed to keep close. God, that pissed me off. I turned away from you crying because I asked you why, if you felt this way, why did you break up with me

in the first place. You answered with "I don't know." I left you crying, and when you tried to come to me, I told you not to, that you didn't run after me when we were together so, don't start now. You came to me anyway and told me to look into your eyes, I did. And you said, "I'm sorry Leah, I messed up, but I want you. So, I forgave you because I thought things could go back to how they were before, but everything was already broken. And I was hoping for a fantasy. I was now in stage 2 – desperate for answers. There were many times I asked you why you broke up with me. I mean it was out of nowhere, then suddenly you asked for me back, is that not confusing? I was being haunted by my thoughts. It was messing with my head, I mean all the tears I cried, all the pain I went through, and for what? For you to realize you made a mistake. Camila said it best, "Number three, why would try and play me for a fool? / I have questions, I got questions haunting me" But it didn't matter because later that year, after the great summer we had. I found out from our friends that you cheated repeatedly. I was a fool.

3. Anger – I Did Something Bad by Taylor Swift

"Oh, you say I did something bad / Then why's it feels so good "I was pissed when I found out. I was out for blood, and I was going to make you bleed. But I think that I was more furious at myself than at you. Because despite all my friends, your friends, and my siblings telling me that you were not good for me, that you didn't change. I believed your lies because I saw your potential. I saw the amazing person you could have been and not the deadbeat you chose to be. So, I believe in this stage we, women, become sociopaths. A few screws become loose. Anger is a secondary emotion, so this stage stems from pain and what happens when humans and animals become hurt. Cue the defense mechanisms. This means listening to the songs that make us feel empowered instead of hurt, angry instead of bitter, lashing out whenever, and being extremely petty. Women have been called bitches all our lives but, unless you have a vagina, you have no idea what a witch we can be. I'm talking curses and all. Taylor Swift is an ultimate breakup queen; it is no surprise that she is on this playlist. It's better to not get mad but to get even. "If a man talks shit, then I owe him nothing / I don't regret it one bit because he had it coming". Taylor knows. Because I knew loving you was wrong, that it was bad. But in those moments, it felt so good. That's why I was ignited with anger, but it makes it a little bit better because I know I scarred you as you scarred me.

4. Bargaining and Relapse – Bruises by Lewis Capaldi

I hate this stage. When I was in it, I was pathetic. Whenever I saw our mutual friends, I always asked about you, how you were doing. I was letting you turn me into a spineless whip. I let you hurt me, come back, and hurt me again. Then I became frantic for you to come back again that I was trying to contact you, make you jealous, do anything that would get your attention. It was sad

really because I talked to so many people that I didn't even like, thinking that it would affect you the way you affected me with your new girl. Later I realized I was just hurting myself and the people I tried to move on with because they weren't you "There must be something in the water / 'Cause every day it's getting colder / And if only I could hold you / You'd keep my head from going under / Maybe I, maybe I'm just being blinded / By the brighter side / Of what we had because it's over" I just wanted you, I was spiraling, and I needed you to be my raft but, you weren't there. But I didn't listen to anyone or take anyone's advice. I was too stubborn and good gracias I needed someone to slap me out of it. At least Lewis Capaldi understands the madness. This song was a cornerstone for me during that time in my life. "I've been told / I've been told to get you off my mind / But I hope I never lose the bruises that you left behind / Oh, my lord, oh my lord, I need you by my side."

5. Depression – Dark Paradise by Lana Del Ray

During the depression, I didn't eat, I couldn't and when I did it would always come back up. Every time I ate, a rush of thoughts told me I wasn't enough; the pain and rejection drove all nutrition out of me. Not only this, but I also couldn't sleep. It might be better to say I couldn't function. It was like I was losing my mind. Instead of sleeping as an escape, it was a cage. I saw you everywhere, at the stores, my room, on my computer, in my dreams. I remember one night I sat in my shower sobbing, hoping that the water and soap could wash the stench of you off me. That it could somehow cleanse my broken heart and be drained with the grime from my skin. "There's no relief / I see you in my sleep / And everybody's rushing me / but I can feel you touching me." But no matter how many showers I took and no matter how hard I scrubbed, you invaded my dreams. I dreamt of being with you again, in that car riding around at night listening to music and laughing with you. I dreamt of you holding me. It is like a "Dark Paradise" it is terrible and agonizing, but you can't let go because being with that person was a paradise. So, since you're not ready to move on, you're stuck between the good and the bad. "And there's no remedy for memory / your face is like a melody / It won't leave my head / Your soul is haunting me and telling me that everything is fine, but I wish I was dead / Every time I close my eyes / it's like a dark paradise." Being numb is never uncomfortable because you can't feel anything. You're numb and nothing matters besides the person you want but can't have. I listened to this song in my bed crying until I fell asleep because I knew I'd see you there. Lana del ray put these emotions and feeling into music, and I'm grateful.

6. Acceptance – Past life by Trevor Daniel and Selena Gomez

I remember my acceptance very clearly. Four days before your eighteenth birthday, I wrote you a letter. Not one of those where you receive it but where you write your truest feelings down because you know they won't ever

get it. I had planned out your eighteenth birthday and, I told you that in the letter. I told you the pain you caused me. I told you that even though you hurt me repeatedly, I still tried to be there for you. That I still wanted you. In this song, the chorus is my favorite. It helped me through this stage because, in this stage, we accept the breakup. We know it's final. And we know they are not our "forever" anymore. Living and breathing become easier. But it also leaves a lot of uncertainty. If you are like me, you hate uncertainty. You don't like not knowing. It makes you feel out of control. Which is very ironic because are we ever in control? And was I in control of myself through this whole experience? It's ironic because after and only after I wrote that letter was I truly able to let you go. The chorus of "Past Life" is a note to yourself, a reminder. "Last night was the last night of my past life / Got me like you can never figure me out / Last night was the last time, was the last time / I'll never let you figure me out" And it was, that night was the last time I shed tears for what was, what could have been and what will never be.

7. Hope – Higher by Bishop Briggs

I love Bishop Briggs. She is so empowering, getting into terrible, destructive relationships (like me) but always gets out and builds herself up becoming the badass she always is. I remember the day I let you go because that day I realized I was the one holding on. You had no power over me besides the power that I gave you, and I released myself from your clutches. In my room, I got out of my funk and played this song. I danced and sang it to myself. "Yeah I will go / Screamin' out my pain into the night / Do what I like / I'll lose control / shave my head and dance with girls you like / It gets my higher" Visualizing what Bishop truly meant with her words and her strength inspired and motivated me to be just as savage. Her song "Higher" was, and always will be my anthem. "Higher, your love has set me free. Now nothing's out of reach. Higher, Higher. Higher I'm stronger now I'm free. I'm who I want to be." Her song is about being rejected but bouncing back and then living your best life despite the idiot who hurt you. "This ain't no give or take / I've learned from my mistakes / I'm so much stronger now / I'm so much stronger now" This song, for me, is an FU for the people who chain me with expectations. I don't have to do what they want; this life is mine; I do this for me. Nothing's out of reach, I'm stronger now, I'm free. After the 7 stages, I realized that I don't hate that guy. I'm glad because I got to where I am now due to the mistake I made, which was him. I learned something so valuable, and it trumps the pain I went through. I will never let a guy do something like that to me again. I don't have to; I am worthy and deserving of so much more. And so are you.

She Is

KYNSLIE GREEN

beautiful, but she will never see that because she lives in a world that tells her that her gravity-defying hair is unprofessional and her skin is unfavorable.

She is capable of more emotions than anger, but she will never share that because according to the world, her only personality trait is her short temper and quick wit.

She is wonderful, but she will never realize that because no one has ever taken the time to speak with her long enough to understand that she is not a threat.

She is everything, but she will never know that because she was brought up in a world that saw her only as a concept rather than as a human being.



Flight

ASH LOFTIN, OIL AND ACRYLIC

Trapped

SARAH MAGDALENE NIERVA

I've been staring at the door
For the longest time
I was sitting here
And you were on the other side

Feels like I've been waiting
Just for it to open
Waiting to hear you knock
And asking to come in

But despite my efforts
It never did
Thoughts never mattered
And I was never missed

I knew you could hear me
On the other side
But you chose to ignore it
Leaving me behind

I tried looking away
But I couldn't help myself
I was waiting for you
No matter what I felt

But the door remained closed
You didn't come near it
You left me on this side alone
Waiting for what you never did

But still I'm here
Staring at the door
With you so far away
Leaving me all torn

You turned away
Leaving me closed off
You chose not to stay
Leaving the door locked

Escape

RACHEL PARR

Her whole life had led up to this moment.

Everyone had a curse— but hers had always felt particularly cruel.

In a world where everyone seemed to have an opinion, her life hinged on the opinions of others. Any words spoken about her character, regardless of their nature, became truth if spoken to her face with true intent.

Her entire life had relied on the opinion of others. Her mother's expectations. Her reputation. She couldn't escape.

Until she did.

The plan began the summer before the sixth grade. She was standing there in that god awful dress her mother bought specifically for the piano recital she was currently thirty minutes early for. It was the day that she realized that she didn't want to do this anymore. That she didn't want her curse to define her.

So, when she got home that night, she set about researching.

It turned out that a handful of people before her had a similar curse. There was a loophole. A set of stipulations to what truly had power over her.

The words had to be spoken directly to her face. Virtual communication had no effect.

The opinion holder must be within a 100-mile radius for their previous words to continue to have an effect.

She had to hear it herself, directly from the source. If she didn't hear it, it may as well have never happened.

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It had to be believed whole-heartedly. No half-baked petty remarks could truly ruin her life unless she let them.

That night, sitting on the edge of her bed with her laptop in her lap, mountains of tulle pooled around her because she couldn't be bothered to take off the dress, she formulated a plan. She would run. She would run and she would never look back.

Valedictorian of the School for the Talented & Gifted, the best high school in Dallas, Heather Choi.

Her mother had always told her that she was incredibly smart. And so, it was true.

The popular crowd had always told her that she would never find love if she was her true self. And so, it was true.

Her friends had always told her that she was one of the kindest people they knew. And so, it was true.

Her classmates had always told her that she smiled too much and laughed too loud. And so, it was true.

It was all true.

She was the golden girl, in every sense of the phrase, but she was never happy. She had become the popular crowd that had once tormented her, but her smiles had always been empty. Her laughs had never been as full as they were when she was alone. They thought she had everything— but truthfully, she felt like she had nothing.

The emotions that had led to her plan all those years ago had only amplified under the harsh stage lights and dramatics of being a teenager. She wanted nothing more than to escape.

Her high school graduation marked the day she would become free.

She gave her speech and said her goodbyes, but she couldn't face her mother or her sister. Not when she knew what she was about to do to them. No— she'd call them when she got to her destination, wherever

that may be. She'd call them when their words held no more weight over her, and she'd keep them there. She'd love them from a distance. Her father was the only one she had been able to tell directly. The only heart she had the strength to break.

"I'm proud of you, Heather, I always knew that you'd do great things.

You're stronger than your mother and I have ever been."

Those words became the echo in her mind as she shut the door of her little Honda Civic, strapping herself in and driving until the buzz of other people's expectations faded to a low hum—the weight of all the words she'd ever heard lifted off of her shoulders by the distance.

She was finally free.



Strawberry Skull

EMMA SCHIRMER

Crumbling Names

HAYDEN MCKINLEY

I took a trip to Kansas it was 1933 we just lost crops again this harvest because on the drought. I took some time to think why this all happening I was sat there in a daze. Troubled at the cause of my problems and now distant from the rest of the world but the same, we are all broke and jobless but I'm struggling in a different way.

The way we are getting by is doing work all over just to get some money last week I worked as a construction worker, this week I don't know what I'm goanna do but I do know I'm not going to farm anymore. I went to the city I walked of course; it is about 7 miles from my house to the city I try to find local jobs, but I don't think that's goanna work this time.

When I made it to city I walked around a little looking for a job as usual, I saw this office and I walk over to see if I can find anything useful.

I went in an office space run down of course and I go into a room very dark very bleak, I walked to a filing cabinet and open the drawer, I look, and I only find crumbling names of the previous workers that worked here, poor souls probably liven on the streets now. But not me I'll survive I always do, I kept walking down the street it felt empty nobody around just me.

House of Cards

LANGSTON DILLON

In this house of cards,
So fragile and dim,
Thin, battered, and broken,
I wait for my demise
to begin,

Walls built of laminated mysteries,
And happy memories,
Too few, to far between,
Stretching and protecting,
The little light,
That has yet to be fully seen,

In this House of Cards,
That I call my own,
I wait-
For only in the hopes to see,
That just maybe,
I could be dealt a better hand,

A card that could improve
these fragile walls,
A card that could fix the cracks,
The holes, left by the people I loved,
A hand to fix it all,

And the ace,
Being the golden ticket,
Out of this horrid land,
The brutal scene,
Of a heart,
Surrounded by clubs,
Four and five,
Not quite enough,
To make a solid stand,

So I wait for,
A hand to rise,
A hand to fight,
A hand to bring out a voice,
A hand to live,
A hand to survive,
A hand to bring freedom
and choice,

But until the deck is shuffled,
And cards are dealt anew,
I shall wait for that wondrous ace,
Bringing happiness and truth,
In this house of cards,
Broken,
Battered,
Fragile,
Used.

Just Another Face

ANONYMOUS

Over a thousand students attend this school,
I am one of them. But I'm nobody special,
In fact, I'm just another face.

I go to class like everyone else,
I do my work like everyone else,
I have crushes like everyone else,
I have friends like everyone else.
There is nothing special about me.

My friends try telling me otherwise, with things like,
"I wish you saw yourself the way I see you."
But what is there to see? I don't do any activities.
I never go to the games. I just sit at home.
Reading. Writing. Eating. Sleeping.
That's all my life is.

I just sit back and watch as life passes me,
watch as other students live their high school
lives to the fullest. Some of them will grow up
and do wonderful things. Become doctors, celebrities,
Police Officers, Performers. They'll be doing great things.

And what will I be doing?
Nothing. Because at the end of the day,
I am just another face. A face that one day,
everyone will forget.

So what's the point in trying to be
anything else?



Social Anxiety

CEAMBER JEFFERSON, PENCIL

My September

MILLER TURNAGE

My days are a bit colder this September. My September is a wasteland.
My mind is an evergreen, overgrown.
"I don't love you, but I can't leave you forever."
Sitting in school this September, I am alone. Today, I feel like glass. A
frame of glass maybe. A big, clean frame in a store window.
"After the day I took the black fruit, I swallowed it sweetly."
Maybe that's how it used to be. Maybe it's much different this September.
Perhaps I was shattered. Perhaps I didn't realize the store is much emptier
now, Perhaps I hadn't realized.
"My bare days turned grey forever."
Days pass, the moon falls as she always has. Everything continues just fine.
"You don't love me..."
But it is so much harder this September. My days fly away when I reach for
them each morning. Going higher and higher as the moon returns.
"But you still won't leave me."
I have been practicing my French this September. Tout est froide cette
Septembre. I wish I could take French class. That would be easy.
In my September, I feel a little sadder.
My September hurts a little bit more.
Ça fait mal.
I can't survive this September.
"I couldn't even cry..."
It feels like I'm drifting, floating like a ship.
I travel many places, but I am always carried back into the sea. It's hard to
sail with no anchor, always fighting the wake. Always fading in and out.
Déjà vu reminds of my home.
"But I kept living."
Sometimes I wish the days moved faster. Every night I dream of a door. It's
bolted tight and calls for a key. I've seen others enter, but they had keys.
Every night I sit outside the door. I press my ear to the keyhole.
"Carus, come back. You left so long ago... Your hands are so cold."
And another.
"Plum, please I'm trying to help you. Come through the door."
And more and more all night long.
"So that the rest of your life becomes more and more unhappy."
But it's only my dream. Not the kind of dream you'd have. My dreams are

real. There really is someone behind that door. They call to me. I need the
key.
The key: It comes out red and hot. My skin. Stains. Every one.
S'il te plait.
"Holding a knife..."
I am scared though. What if my key breaks? What would I do?
Everything comes down to my courage.
"That hand was not your hand."
It will get better.
When.
Why hasn't it ended.
It's not your fault.
Then why does it keep happening?
"It was mine."
I'll escape at the end of My September.
Then why does it keep happening?
"It was mine."
I'll escape at the end of My September.

Home

RACHEL PARR

The house she grew up in had never felt like home. By the time she was old enough to properly remember the events that transpired in front of her the walls were already more screams than drywall— more pain than paint.

She didn't want to leave— she didn't want to leave her siblings out to dry with the same awful feeling she had fostered for so many years— but as soon as her brother graduated, she was gone.\

It felt like one of the most natural things she'd ever done— leaving behind those bubble gum pink walls that had always felt more like a trap than somewhere to call her own.

June 3, 2025— she'd had it marked on her calendar for several months now. It was the day she officially broke away from her mother and moved in with her best friend.

The sickly-sweet pink of her childhood bedroom was replaced with a deep red glossy paint that coated her apartment walls. The increasingly dark memories associated with that house were replaced slowly by those of Willow laughing on the couch beside her and cheesy teen movies she'd never really cared for before. It was a tiny two-bedroom apartment in Nashville, further away than she had ever anticipated being from her family, but more of a home than anywhere she'd ever been.

The streets of the city came alive at night, the faint sounds of music drifting through the crack between her window and its frame— left open intentionally so that she could feel the breeze against her cheek when the wind blew just right. The slight chill that ran down her spine every time felt like freedom and it tasted of a better life.

There, on her twin-sized mattress six hours from her hometown, she was home.

Just a Girl

PAGE HAYS

Reasons behind every emotion
Will always remain unknown
Don't need another to tell me how I'm feeling

You used to be pivotal to me
You and your "harmless fun times"
But I don't need you to live anymore

So, I'm doing better
I can trust the now
But the thought of having nothing again taunts me

Buzzy

CHLOE VIZIER

It's a cold February night in Antwerp Belgium's Diamond Quarter, a place where over 80% of the world's diamonds are cut and turned into jewels. A man named Leonardo Notarbatolo steps into a room containing one of the most extensive vaults, located near a few safe deposit boxes used to store loose valuables. It's not an unusual trip for him—being a notable Italian diamond merchant in the area—no one blinking an eye when he entered to retrieve something from his box in the room downstairs. Using a hidden camera attached to a pen hanging on his suit pocket, a bottle of women's hairspray, trash bags, a duplicate key, and a three-dimensional model of the vault created by one of his accomplices, Notarbatolo is about to make history by spearheading the biggest diamond heist of all time. By 5:30 AM on February 15th, 2003, over one-hundred million dollars' worth of diamonds and valuables are successfully emptied into duffel bags and hauled out of the quarter, never to be recovered again. The Antwerp Diamond Heist of 2003 is considered by many to be the greatest robbery of all time, the perpetrators only being caught because of a chance lead found by a civilian nearby.

However, a more extraordinary heist has occurred within our borders. A case that's so recent and shocking that investigators had no choice but to stop caring after one rigorous week of active search and two years of vaguely looking for it. A case so severe the Orlando Police Department called in its most prestigious Twitter users to speculate who could be behind it. A case surrounding the kidnapping and disappearance of one of the United States' greatest pilots. A case surrounding Buzzy—the lovable animatronic mascot of Disneyworld Epcot's Cranium Command.

Buzzy belonged to an attraction in the Wonders of Life pavilion, opening in 1989. Guests would enter a small theatre and watch as he piloted them through the human body, showing how important the brain is for everyday functions. However, due to a mixture of guest disinterest and outdated technology, the attraction was eventually shut down permanently in 2007. While the area was closed to the public, all animatronics and theatres within the pavilion stayed intact for nearly ten years. The restrictions placed on the attraction didn't stop some guests, the last documentation of Cranium Command fully intact being by urban explorer Matt Sonswa in 2017. The body-themed ride was a shell of its former glory, Buzzy and his command center covered in thick layers of dust and grime. This inspection notified other urban explorers that the former pavilion was easy to access and was



Cozy

LEAH RAINEY, PENCIL/ COLORED PENCIL/ DIGITAL ENHANCEMENTS

ripe with content to document, causing more people to flock to the abandoned site.

Disneyworld security tried to prevent these break-ins, but people still found ways to sneak themselves past closed doors. This trespassing reached its climax in 2018 when Disneyworld reported troubling news. Buzzy had been stolen. The wire that connected him to the wall of Cranium Command was completely severed, and the loveable animatronic was nowhere to be seen. Theories quickly began springing up around Buzzy's disappearance; park enthusiasts upset that someone had stolen a piece of Epcot's history. Many thought that the animatronic's disappearance was an inside job—a rogue Disney cast member that had snuck in and out with Buzzy undetected—though authorities later debunked this. With no leads to follow and an increasing desire to solve this disappearance, many Disney fans began pointing fingers at one person they believed to be the culprit. A man so gaudy and proud about his trespassing that no one would be shocked if he had taken Buzzy.

Patrick Spikes, who goes by the username @backdoordisney online, is one of the most infamous urban explorers of our time. Notorious for stealing over \$7,000 worth of props and costumes from the haunted mansion and creating a fake employee I.D. to sneak into the underground tunnels at the park, people were almost expecting Spike's next post to be holding Buzzy's severed head or hosting a fashion show with his aviator jacket and goggles on. In 2018, these suspicions finally reached the Orange County Police Department, and Spikes was brought in for questioning. A lead was discovered that Spikes had texted photos of Buzzy's clothing to an employee at Disney, and a warrant was quickly posted for his cellphone. In an almost villainous fashion, Spikes resisted police when they seized his cellphone, trying to simply walk out of the room. He was promptly tackled and taken into custody.

After two years, the mystery of Buzzy seemed to finally resolve itself. Patrick Spikes had been caught, and the pieces of Buzzy's clothing that had been sold were retrieved and sent back to the Disney archives. This, however, is not the end. While Buzzy's clothes have been retrieved, his body has not. His true whereabouts are still a mystery, and people can do no more than speculate on who might be responsible for his disappearance. As of December 10th, 2021, Buzzy's case is still closed, authorities having no leads to where he might be. Unlike Leonardo Notarbatolo, the true criminal behind this kidnapping is still out there, holding Buzzy hostage. This, mixed with the fact that Buzzy has never been recovered, is why Buzzy's case is the greatest, most bizarre heist in modern history.



Ace Chemicals

SOPHIA GUERIERI, PHOTOGRAPHY