

# RUNE LITERARY MAGAZINE



ART, PHOTOGRAPHY,  
AND WRITING

2023 EDITION

**Rune Literary**  
**Magazine**  
**2023**

## **ABOUT**

Rune is a literary journal produced annually in the spring by Robert Morris University students. The journal accepts high-quality creative work—poetry, prose, photography, art, etc.—from the Robert Morris University community as well as the greater Pittsburgh area. The journal aims to recognize local writers and artists through its publication.

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# *POETRY*

# Sunday Morning Rescue

By Joan Bauer

I bring Daisy up from an early walk  
& there, trapped on the second floor

crashing into the white walls  
                                & its own image  
on shiny framed glass—flapping & frantic—  
                                a brown wren.

Daisy woofs & growls. I wake up Joseph.

*Can we help this poor creature  
down the elevator  
out the lobby door—*

As Daisy whimpers, pleading,

we grab a grocery bag.  
One lucky scoop—  
quick-elevator down  
& flying free

# Death and You

By Lucas Cain

May Death find you alive my friend.  
May he knock at your door in a while,  
when your years have caught up to you,  
when you're ornery, cranky, and content.  
I hope he mentions your warranty on life,  
and you'll shut the door on his bony nose  
like you would an insurance salesman.

May he come back every single day,  
failing to charm you in every way,  
until one day when you chase him away,  
chucking a sandal out of your doorway,  
flying, hitting him on his dull skull,  
and falling onto his bony behind.

May one day, when Death finds you again,  
on a day your grandkids had just left,  
hands full of sweets and faces of smiles,  
You'll be in a good mood, feel complete,  
so you'll sigh, humor Death's attempts once.

May he tell you that he must come to all,  
and it's his job, his boss isn't the best,  
his lunch breaks short, his wage minimum.  
And maybe you'll see some of yourself in him.

May you find Death a nice guy, just trying to get by.  
May Death remind you of yourself, a persistent guy.  
Finally, I hope you ask what he's selling, hear him again.

May Death be honest with you, no scammer's mischief,  
tell you the price, present the contract in ancient parchment.

May you, of your own will,  
  
sign your name on the line one day.



# Adam Was a Namer

By Jay Carson

we are told, creating  
with his multitude of designations  
the first poetry: *lions, ears, Homer*,  
all our appellations.

But linguists now disagree  
saying word origin was more gradual  
suggesting other reasons than Adam,  
such as my favorite, onomatopoeic or Bow Wow Theory,  
words were made to sound what they were about:  
does “dog” sound like what a dog looks like?  
Appropriateness and pornography  
add additional problems as do  
mere suggestions, like w-t-f.

Language groups argue primacy,  
such as the *frappe* elegant clarity of French  
versus the *tank* bluntness of English.

Talking about art is more complicated still:  
what are the words to argue  
Picasso vs. Michelangelo?

We all have our opinions  
of language, art, and beauty,  
but memorable effect is all,  
like my Spanish whore in Florence  
who unaccountably interrupted  
what was then called “A French”  
to compliment my designer underwear.

# Walk with Me

By Noah Cintron

And you... you see what I see, and what I do not see. And you wonder what it all means. I wonder too; but, for now, we will say nothing about this. Instead, you shall take my hand, and walk with me to the edge of the sea.

For here the waves come up onto the beach and break upon the stones. Here there is no wall, though there might seem such a thing in a place where the land ends, and the world begins. There are none in that space. This place has no end.

You shall walk beside me through the surf until you reach the shore, and then I shall go on alone. I cannot stay by your side for long, but I will stay as long as I can, and I hope you will remain by mine.

We will not talk again until the sun sets and you return to the darkness. When you find yourself alone again, you will think I have vanished, or perhaps you will dream that I did. That would be just as well.

Let you believe me gone. Let you continue with your life, knowing only that it continues without me.

# I Live Alone

By Michael Comiskey

The furnace turns on, the furnace turns off.  
The furnace turns on, the furnace turns off.  
The furnace is my friend.

# Anamnesis

By Shaheen Dil

Memory is made of infinite longing,  
infinite regret.

The world is on an equinoctial axis,  
spinning  
Say: let me off!  
Say: let me on!  
Say: where are we going?  
Say: are we there yet?

The Multiverse is not our future,  
but infinite pasts  
recurring  
again and again until we get it right.

Somewhere in the world you are waking up  
without me  
but still  
we breathe the same air  
walk on ground sodden with dew  
leaving indentations.



# Reflection or Projection

By Desirae Dolce

Not everyone wants to be saved  
And not everyone knows what they want.  
Sometimes no matter how much energy,  
You put into someone,  
nothing will happen.  
Because you can't breathe in a vacuum,  
And broken toys don't work the way  
they're supposed to.

I am so much more,  
Than the pieces of you,  
I yearn for.

I say I miss your charm,  
Or the way you speak.  
The way you see the world,  
And the truths you seek.  
I wanted to know the reasons,  
Your lips smile while your mind sleeps.

Well I have all those things too,  
It was just nice seeing them in someone else,  
Looking through a pool of water,  
With your reflection staring back at you,  
From what seems like another world.

But I won't break my back,  
For a glimpse of a reflection I've seen  
A thousand times.  
Even if it does have,  
A smile to rival the sun.

# Seams

By Ziggy Edwards

We crawled across the river on railroad tracks,  
climbed leaf-hidden steps with aqua rails  
lepered by rust.

On a stone wall crowning Mt. Washington  
we sat facing skyscrapers,  
confronting the beams of U.S. Steel.

You said, *I don't understand*  
*why they put downtown on an island.*

Was it true? At your voice  
the tower receded, became an overburdened  
bath toy bobbing.

I turned to you and found  
a muddy doll I carried there.

Monongahela's corridor of bridges,  
the seam between our neighborhoods,  
snapped like old guitar strings.

# I Saved a Seat

By Amy Ganser

I saved a seat for you  
In case you might stop by  
To sit with me a while  
Just you and I

I saved a seat for you  
I wish I could hear your voice  
You were taken away too soon  
We didn't have a choice

I saved a seat for you  
I wonder how much you can see  
If you cheered for things I've done  
And if you're proud of me

I saved a seat for you  
You've gone so far away  
We should've had more time  
Even just one day

I saved a seat for you  
But you don't need a chair  
I feel you all around me  
You're everywhere

# One, Two, Three

By Byron Hoot

There are three ways to be a hillbilly.

First, you're born one.

Second, you marry one,

Third, you move into the hills.

And you settle in, settle into the landscape

which becomes your soulscape,

settle into the people who deep down

are lovingly rebellious against anyone

who wants to tell them what to do.

In religion and politics obstinate

but deeply suspicious of promises

made and the history of them being

broken more than kept.

And if you like commonsense

philosophy and good cooking,

you've moved to the right spot.

No Rockwell paintings here.

A basic honesty of place and people –

as they are. And a joy, an unexplainable

joy of knowing who and where you are.

The stories families tell like private scripture

being read – the good, the bad, the ugly

and the love. I don't know any other

ways to be a hillbilly. Somewhere

in the heart there's a love for the hills,



woods and streams, fishing and hunting,  
gardening, a dog, bluegrass, country music, gospel.  
Something that longs to touch and be touched  
by Nature sets you apart.

# The Gentle Giant

By Paige Jubeck

You came here yielded by melting snow  
To blossom and flourish, to open and bloom.  
How grateful I was to witness you grow,  
And see you overcome every aspect of doom.

Your leaves never withered or browned.  
Your stem stood tall, proud, unwavering.  
During rain you never faltered or drowned.  
We watched while your roots were tapering.

Your roots were a fortress of fortitude.  
Your stem, the backbone of the new flowerets.  
But the most impressive, the most you exude,  
Is the smile you bring with your simple gaze.

A small blossom entertained with love,  
Showed the world the beauty of life.  
The rays of sun shine down on you from above  
Bringing hope and shielding you from the everlooming knife.

My father, my protector, my ever-present friend,  
I have seen you grow and protect me until the end.

# Shape

By Hannah Kennedy

You gave me the mold  
I should fit my soul into  
like butter  
or jello.  
Hot and cold,  
stirring  
and dissolving  
and conforming.  
I filled it gladly,  
every corner, glorying  
in my shape,  
the shape you told me was mine.  
But then I began to set, and I began to see  
the cracks,  
and I turned to liquid again,  
my soul seeping out,  
weeping out,  
a deep wound  
festering  
until everything was gone  
and I had bled out,  
collected into a puddle  
which soon took shape  
and the shape was me  
and she was beautiful.

# "The Legacies Of The Culture Kings And Queens"

By Romella Kitchens

They ferry your body to a Viking Heaven, they cremate you  
or they place you in a mausoleum or the ground.  
People have to search for your grave, live on empty  
without your love.  
Tell me...  
What is your hurry to get off of this planet?  
The planet only gets uglier if you leave too soon.  
Another iconic truth saying voice gone.  
They bury you. Not you.  
Dynasties are formed in music and in movies.  
Ancestors before.  
Ancestors after.  
You in between trying to make your mark.  
Say something more than you have money  
and money has you.  
Because those rings, those chains those customary  
outlaw affectations of many generations were silky  
smooth but have faded.  
Dead Kings and Queens come and go.  
Even so, no one makes a monument to what they suffered  
and didn't do.  
The exaltation is to what was made of the damndest "steel."  
Pharaohs? What will you leave?  
On what foundation when the young regard you will  
you have built your generations pyramids?  
Hatred is crumbling rock.  
Going out in a blaze gets extinguishers excited eventually.  
Temples of knowledge need thinkers not cruel naysayers.  
The new generation will just do it without you if you didn't  
say it while you had the microphone, the will, the way.  
Hatred is crumbling rock.  
Even more so if it is a by-product of self-annihilation.  
The words that form popularity sometimes become just  
a pleasant memory, not matter how many tour buses you  
commanded or first class seats on jets.  
The ladies come and go and create new universes themselves.



Maybe there won't be jets anymore.  
Maybe there will be air taxis landing here and landing there.  
When you are on that elevator by yourself, try not to have  
some drug in your system that aims to kill you.  
Try to be that discernment, that new ray of light.  
Because if you leave wounded and angry all the men and  
women around you may wonder at survival themselves.  
It all passes but you may see generation after generation  
rather like stepping into a time machine.  
But, you have to step.  
You have to step wisely and keep stepping no matter  
what the change in equipment, melodic or syncopation.  
Step past the pain into new formative differences in the  
world and in you.

# The Dance

By Jordan Merenick

is always off-kilter  
passed between  
coughed up generations

we each screw off  
the frayed bottle caps  
hanging along our cranium  
and rub them against  
those dusty washboards  
left behind in the corner

hoping the excessive  
marrow of our melody  
sticks to the shoes  
of those ghosts  
who come after  
us

though the choice  
is never  
ours

# Patriarch

By Melayna Pongratz

A girl just needs her father,  
God or another,  
To make it through this rotten world.

Your daughter, your baby,  
Pious,  
Sweet;  
But as long as I can remember  
I've never been clean;

I was dirt fed so that's what I bleed.

Crated like a calf, I couldn't grow tough.  
Now I won't let my body rest—  
Walk until every step hurts,  
So when I fall you won't touch me  
And when I fall my sinews can be strummed.

A girl just needs her father,  
but I'm no man's daughter,  
So maybe the choir was right—

Someone's got to wash me or I die.

# Reflection on Time

By Judith Robinson

Can a thief be forgiven?  
One can try.  
I breathe carefully  
Stay balanced  
Walk the broken streets.  
Cherish drops of moisture  
That come my way in the parched hours.

The thief is rapacious, unstoppable;  
Still I will not succumb to tears.  
No begging of heaven for succor  
No memento viviere by others  
Can stop or even slow his pace  
So I gather up history---

Photographs, posters, love notes and valentines--

These become  
The torn scraps I assemble  
Into a bright, sad collage,  
A mix of pinks, grays, lines,  
The flown-by years as a pastiche  
Of shapes and shadows.

Nothing to alter the absolute,  
Perhaps a piece of art.

# Seasons of Love

By Phillip Shifter

We fell in love in October

That's why I loved fall.

But then fall left and so did you,

Leaving me alone in winter.

Spring came in and so did you,

But it wasn't the same as fall.

You had change just like the seasons,

And I no longer loved you

## Coda: The Crows

By Michael Simms

We barely recognized ourselves  
But the crows knew  
Who we were and where we'd been  
Why we returned  
Without meaning to  
Perhaps they recognized our regret  
As theirs, or perhaps it was just  
We had changed everything  
But our faces  
Which we held in place  
With effort, not wanting  
To admit how wrong we'd been  
How far away

## ADVICE FROM A RABBIT

By Mary Soon Lee

Do not worry about your yard--  
the things you label weeds,  
the scraggly, uncut grass--  
I find it quite congenial.

Do not worry about the bee--  
her hovering close approach,  
her barbed and acid sting--  
she only hunts for flowers.

Do not try to touch me--  
let me choose my distance,  
let me leave when I want--  
enough to be neighbors.

Be cautious but not dismayed--  
the fox, the wolf, the hawk,  
the crooked and the cruel  
will always threaten.

Don't yield what matters--  
trust in your burrow-mates,  
fresh clover dowsed with dew,  
each dawn, each dusk.

# Margot

By Cynthia Stewart

*"In Greek mythology, Hecate was the goddess of the crossroads ...  
When you arrive at a fork in the road, she is there."  
—Goddesses in Older Women — Jean Shinoda Bolen MD*

I am called Evil Margot, but once just  
Margot. Mine is the classic tale,  
cast out of the King's heart.

a maiden

I gave my life over to his rules. No more.  
No less. No longer

good enough.

I did what spurned lovers do—fell to my knees,  
invoked the Furies, seethed, pulled my hair,  
wept and wailed. Then I stood up,

vowing

I would not swallow the bitter root. I set out  
into the wild woods,  
of hemlocks, hickories, and ash.

the pilgrim's path

Three nights I  
my bed made of bloodroot, thistle, blazing star,  
Do you see...

slept on the forest floor

what was unfolding?

I healed my heart by painting it with the forest green—  
scent of pine, hue of lichen, the tint of velvet moss.  
My brush, the foxtail fern.

I picked up my pen and wrote the seer's spells  
to mend broken women. My home—a cave  
at the crossroads. I was  
*the Keeper of the Ointment Box.*

*a Worker of Charms,*

I interpreted dreams, birthed babies, soothed  
dying souls, administered to the down trodden  
who chose the forest's footsteps, the solace...

the deep shade.

All the King's men hunt me.  
They hiss "Evil Margot."



They wish to bind me to the heretic's stake,

burn me.

I am already aflame with my truth and they are afraid.

I banished silence.

I dared to speak.

Greenwood wisdom does not burn.

# *PHOTOGRAPHY & ART*



“Butterfly on Flower” by Antonia Fama



“Pond-ering Life” by Tyler Michael



“Nature’s Window” by Emma Kemp



“You’ve Grown” by Megan Ledgerwood





**“Sunset + Beach = Beautiful”** by Hannah Casto



**“Mighty Ram”** by Renee Augustine



“On Display” by Natalee Calfo-Carroll



“Owl Art” by Hayley Whittaker





“Starry Owl” by Andrew Hudock



“Black Sand Beach” by Laurel Katzenberger



“Daybreak” by Daniel Medved



“Lost Future” by Nadiya Kostiv





**“Untitled”** by Tristan West



**“Artist’s Block”** by Cameron Bakaj



“Into the Sunset” by Kyle Le



“Pensive Beauty” by David Wheeler

*PROSE*

# I Bought

By Stacy Alderman

I bought a tight V-neck shirt, striped in shades of pink, purple, and red. Nothing special about the department store shelf I plucked it from. But it made me feel pretty.

Chose to wear it one day in early September of my junior year, figuring its flattering shape couldn't hurt when I asked my crush to Homecoming. But his rejection was more than eclipsed by the towers falling out of the sky that day, a single plane plummeting into a Pennsylvania field.

I bought a black and white wrap dress to wear to my graduation. Comfortable, light, and flattering. It fit well under my royal blue cap and gown.

A week later I put it on again for my grandfather's funeral, paired with white heels that sunk into the wet grass at the cemetery.

I bought a gray hoodie from a street vendor at Westminster Pier. Roomy, warm, with the Union Jack and the word 'LONDON' stretched across the front. I wore it for the rest of that day, marveling at the endless memorials at the Abbey, strolling through St. James Park. Wore it home, of course, so strangers at Pittsburgh International knew I had crossed the Atlantic.

Three years later, wrapped myself in its worn comfort right before I said my final goodbyes to Comet, the best dog I'd ever had. The stretched-out sleeves and thick fleece caught my tears as the kind woman with the black bag inserted her vial of peace into my boy's paw.

I bought a pair of tickets to a critically acclaimed Broadway show making a stop in downtown Pittsburgh. Made plans with my sister to enjoy it together just before the holidays.

Tried to sell them on Facebook mere hours before curtain call because I couldn't bear the thought of enjoying myself while you were critically ill in the hospital.

I bought blueberry flavored tea from a gift shop in Niagara Falls, picturing you sipping it from your favorite mug during the coming winter months.

It still sits on my dresser, price tag fading as you fade from life.

# Venus

By Mary Bartels

Who knows why I was near the river that day. I'd like to say I was drawn there by her, but I'm afraid to say it was more my boredom.

Regardless, I was sitting on a bench nearby when I saw her in the river. The river is disgusting, and toxic, probably; but she made it look like the most appetizing body of water in the world. I was so enthralled watching her that I don't quite remember how she got from the water to sitting on the bench next to me.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi."

I sat and watched her face. I studied it more intricately than I've studied anything else, ever. Don't ask me what she looked like, though, it's impossible to expect me to remember.

"I'm Venus," she said.

"Oh." I can tell you, she did not look like Boticelli's. It did not cross my mind that she was just a stunning woman *named* Venus, no. It wouldn't cross yours if you ever meet her.

I know, I know; how strangely commonplace the interaction was. We sat in silence for a long time. I watched her; she watched the river. If I'd dropped dead right then, I would have died happy.

"Can you tell me about myself?" she asked. "What am I like here?"

It shocked me to hear her voice. It took me a while to understand what she said, and when I did, the sense of power I felt was immense. It did not escape me that I was the Zeus in this story. "Well." I wanted to give her agency, purpose. I felt like everything I said right then would change her life forever. "You're the most dangerous of the gods. Everyone envies you because

you'll survive the ages. You've started wars and ended them. No one can escape you." Some well of mythological knowledge I had never known I had poured from me. "People are scared to compliment you, because people have died for it before. People are scared to be beautiful, in case it incurs your wrath. You're pretty much the most powerful thing that's ever walked this earth."

We sat for another interminable moment. My high drained slowly. I'd misstepped somewhere.

"I think it's time for me to go," she said finally.

"Please don't."

"I'm sorry. I think I'm rather too soft for this world."

"No, I'm wrong. You're perfect here."

"Goodbye dear." She walked away, and I did not move to stop her. I know, I know; what commonplace strangeness.

I've never quite forgiven myself.

# The Window Full of Secrets

By Julie Ceoffe

She was at it again. Jennifer Malway, the so-called perfect wife, mother, and daughter. If they only saw what I have, maybe then they would change their minds. She brings home a guy once a month, takes them up to her bedroom, has sex with them, and kills them. They never see it coming either. The poor man today, like all the others, thinks it is just some kink of hers when she ties his ankles and wrists to the bedposts. He lays there in a euphoric haze, thinking Jennifer is the best woman he has ever met while she begins her ritual. She licks every part of his body like he's a lollipop or something, yet she never goes near his genitals which arouses him further. This is where her fun really begins.

After his entire body is covered with her saliva, she grabs a dagger from her bedside table. She holds up the dagger to the moon before every ritual, and watches as its silver blade glistens against the moon's cool glow. Once she kisses the blade, she sways her hips over to him and straddles his torso. The poor soul doesn't see the dagger until it's too late and she digs the tip of the blade along his inner arm and stops when she reaches his elbow. She repeats this on his other arm before doing the same to his thighs. He tries to push her off, just like all the men before him, all that lust gone in a second, but she ties a good knot. They never scream at this part, they more so yell at her, probably calling her a crazy bitch or a fucking psycho and other terrible curses. No, it's the next part when they start screaming.

She holds tight to his genitals and doesn't hesitate to cut them off in one quick swipe. He never gets a chance to plead with her. She wouldn't listen to him if he had anyway. He starts screaming as she leaves nothing behind. Once she does her work and he's left dripping with sweat, she begins digging her dagger into other parts of him. Slicing, ripping, and tearing him



apart all while his heart is still beating. When his skin turns white, and his eyes can barely stay open she starts extracting his organs until she finally comes to his heart. What she does with their bodies afterwards I don't know. I never see her basement light turn on, nor does she walk to her garbage can. She remains inside. I want to say that Mr. Malway doesn't deserve to live with a psychopath, but he also has a secret life that no one knows about.

I see him sneak in a young woman on the weekends Jennifer takes their children to camp. He has sex with her on the same bed that Jennifer conducts her rituals. Just like Jennifer, Mr. Malway leaves the curtains open. Maybe they assume since their windows face the backyard no one would be able to see. But I see. My window is the only one that faces their house, and even though there are trees in my yard, they don't distort my view. I watch everything that goes on in that bedroom. They can't hide anything from me. But why would they suspect anyone was watching? It's not like they'd suspect a teenage girl spying in on them. I was in the clear, especially because I made sure to keep my lights off at all times, just in case they spot my window through the foliage.

They needn't worry about their affairs spreading through town, or Jennifer's obsession with taking men apart piece by piece. No, their secrets are safe with me.

# Stop Staring

By Mackenzie Hill

“Stop staring at me.”

Nico pretended he didn't hear Melody and continued to stare at her. They had 5th grade science together every day, and their interactions were usually the same. Nico would sit at the desk behind Melody and study her pretty blonde hair every day. Her mom always did it in a different style. Today, it was pigtails.

Melody turned around abruptly and glared at Nico. Usually, she didn't confront him. She would whisper pitifully for him to stop staring, but then she would give up and let him look as much as he pleased. Why was today different?

“I said stop staring,” Melody seethed. Nico didn't think the girl's face was as pretty as her hair. Her features were cold and sharp like a reptile. He sighed in relief when she turned around, and he could see her delicate golden hair again.

Nico continued to stare and once again Melody said, “Stop staring,” but Nico couldn't help himself. He was so entranced by Melody's hair. The way it swayed back and forth in its two pigtails like a pendulum. In an almost hypnotic state, Nico reached forward and tugged one of Melody's pigtails. He had never touched her hair before. He marveled at how soft it was like silk pajamas.

Before he could touch the other pigtail, Melody turned around again, and her hair was ripped from Nico's grip. Nico gasped and tried to grab her hair again, but something pinned his eager hand to his desk. His face wrinkled in confusion as he looked down to see what was stopping him. A pencil had been lodged clean through the back of his hand.

Nico blubbered as his gaze met Melody's. She smiled and pushed the pencil into his hand further, so he couldn't move. For a change, Nico couldn't stop staring at Melody's face instead of her hair.

"I said stop staring."

# Red's Antiques

By Peyton Jackson

David loved anything covered with a thick layer of dust that smelled like it spent much of its life in an attic. The obsession came from his mother, who had a large collection of antique items that covered the walls and shelves of his childhood home. He hadn't done much antique shopping through his young adult years, but when his mother passed last year, he picked up the hobby once again.

A bell rang as he opened the door to Red's Antiques, an old favorite of his mother's. Not only was he looking for something to take home, but he had also brought some old things from his mother's boxes that he was looking to sell. Red himself sat at the counter, glasses on the bridge of nose and his eyebrows scrunched in concentration. David walked closer, clearing his throat to get Red's attention. When that didn't work, he rang the bell on the counter. Red looked up slowly, his piercing blue eyes intimidating.

"Yes?" said Red.

"Hello... I am looking to sell a few items. They were my mother's. You may remember her. She-" David began.

"Mary Bradley. Yes, I remember."

"Oh! Yes. Sadly, she passed about a year ago. I don't have room in my apartment for all of her things." He took the items out of his bag one by one and placed them on the counter. Red looked with no expression.

"Why don't you go take a look around while I assess these," he said, placing his long, boney fingers around the items.

“Yeah, sure,” David said.

He walked along the musty scented aisles, each one holding new treasures. He picked up vases and knick knacks, finding nothing he was willing to take home. He felt his mother beside him there, whispering her thoughts about each item in his ear. “Never buy something that you couldn’t look at once a day for the rest of your life,” she would say as they roamed the stores.

He reached the back of the store, one aisle left to find something worthy of his mother. There were paintings leaned up against the wall, and he began to search through them. His disappointment grew until something very unusual caught his eye.

It was a portrait. It looked like it was from the eighteen hundreds. He pulled it off of the floor, and looked the woman in the painting directly in the face. He could not wrap his mind around what he was seeing. The woman was his mother.

“Excuse me,” Red said. David jumped in surprise, the creepy man was standing directly behind him. “I have finished looking at your items. Have you found anything...worth your while?”

“This painting. The woman in it is the spitting image of my mother. I swear it’s her...” said David.

“You are confused, boy. That painting is from 1867. I don’t assume your mother was alive then, was she?” said Red.

“Of course not. But...” David started.

“Perhaps she is your ancestor. Whatever she is, she has called to you. I think you must buy. She belongs with you.” Red said. David nodded, following him to the register. After exchanging items, David owed three hundred dollars on the painting. This was certainly out of his budget, but he had to have this portrait.

“I will see you again soon, my boy.” Red said as David exited the store.

When he got to his apartment, he immediately hung the painting up on the wall. He sat at his kitchen table, staring at it. He didn’t realize it had gotten dark until a knock at the door broke him from the trance. His girlfriend, Ella, stepped inside.

“Ready for dinner, honey?” she asked.

“Dinner? Oh, no, time got away from me today. Ella, come look at this painting I found at the antique shop on Jefferson street today. It looks just like my mother, don’t you think? It’s uncanny!” David exclaimed, grabbing Ella by the shoulders and pushing her toward the painting.

“Hmm. I don’t really see it, honey,” Ella said.

“What? That is my mother Ella,” said David.

“Are you okay, David? I thought you were finally coming to terms with your mother’s passing,” said Ella. David shook his head in frustration.

“Are you blind, Ella? That is my mother!” David was beginning to shout, and Ella backed away from him.

“I think you need some time to yourself. We’ll talk again tomorrow. Have a good night, David,” she walked quickly to the door and slammed it shut. David couldn’t be bothered. He sat back down and looked at the painting.

He hadn’t realized he had fallen asleep until a faint sound awoke him. He opened his eyes, rubbing the grogginess from them. His mother stood before him, looking down on him with a sadness in her expression.

“Hello, my dear David,” she whispered. David looked up in awe, tears leaking from his face to the floor.

“Mom, I’ve missed you so much. I knew it was you in the painting. But how? How are you here?” he asked. He looked toward the painting, now empty of the person inside.

“I will tell you everything, child, if you come with me,” she said. He stood, regressing to a childlike state where he would do what his mother asked, no questions, just to have her presence once more.

She led him toward the painting on the wall. She set it neatly on the floor, and then she put one foot in. The painting did not tear or break, it simply opened for her, like a stairway. She stepped in completely, grabbing David by the hand.

“Where are we going?” David asked.

“Don’t worry, dear, just come along. Hurry.”

David put a foot in, and hesitated before taking the second step. A sense of reality hit him as he looked back at his apartment. This made no sense, but how could he not take this opportunity. He loved his mother, and he knew she would never lead him astray.

When he finally took the second step, he looked at his mother. But his mother was not there. Instead, it was the man from the antique shop. Those piercing blue eyes and boney fingers gripped David’s wrist. David screamed but it was too late, Red was dragging him through the painting, away from his apartment and the real world.

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Ella hated anything covered with a thick layer of dust that smelled like it spent much of its life in an attic. However, she missed her boyfriend, so here she was at the last antique shop he mentioned before his death. She just wanted to feel closer to him.

She walked through the aisles, gazing at things David would have loved. She didn’t have any expectation of bringing something home, until her eye caught something unusual. It was a

painting; it looked very old but well preserved. That wasn't the unusual part, though. The unusual part is that the man in the painting looked exactly like David.



# Man's Worst Friend

By Clayton Pfeifer

The last sweeping frost of winter had just broken in Pepper Patch, Alabama. That meant Mose Grady and Guthrie Grady, Mose's firstborn, had a lot to do. They began by driving through the fields, tilling soil with a tractor. They did this all day and once the sun started to set, they called it quits and began driving back to the barn. On their way back, the tractor slammed to a stop. Near the front left tire, it began to sink into the ground. The boys could feel its weight shifting as it began to tip. Mose jumped out the passenger side, just in time, taking Guthrie with him. They landed in the dirt, the engine backfired and started smoking.

"Gad dammit, Guthrie!" Mose cried out in a booming voice. He slammed his fist against the metal frame of the machine.

"What happened pa?" Guthrie said.

"Damn groundhogs got me again Guth. I tell you what, I'll kill every last one of those varmints before they get me again. Damn things."

"Why are they doin' us like that?"

"Because they're a bunch a' dumb rodents who dig holes in everyone's field. Then innocent people like you an' me run into them, popping a tire at the very least. I swear they're out to get me."

"Guess we got to fix the tractor now. At least she didn't tip over."

“Sppose so,” Mose sighed. Using tools from the toolbox attached to the back of the tractor, they set to work repairing the tractor. Guthrie cranked the key in the ignition and the tractor roared back to life. Mose pushed the machine from behind and Guthrie reared it into drive. It rocked back and forth until finally breaking free of the hole it was stuck in. Mose hopped on and the two farmers made their way back to the barn. The sun started to set just as they got back, so they parked the tractor and went home for the night.

Once the two boys finished eating supper, Mose reached for his rifle hanging above the mantle, grabbed a spotlight and a six pack and made his way to the back porch. He sat in his rocker watching the backyard like a hawk, swaying the spotlight across the dew-covered fields. He sat there until finally a groundhog popped out of the ground. Its beady eyes, shining in the reflection of his spotlight, glared back at him. He raised the rifle in his right hand, while holding the spotlight carefully in his left, and angled his eyes in front of the scope to get everything in view.

“Shit.” The animal vanished as soon as his scope connected. He sat on the porch, slumped in his chair, watching the yard and drinking beer until he drifted off to sleep.

The next day, Mose woke up early, right as the sun rose. He got up and set his gun inside, before making his way to the barn to get a head start on the fields. He got on his tractor and rode it through the field tilling the soil, prepping it just as he did before. Mose’s grip on the steering wheel loosened as the warm sun shone down on his face. He had been farming for so long, he could drive around blindfolded with nothing but his muscle memory to guide him.

Mose went on plowing the soil deep into the afternoon. The roar of the tractor started to fade as his ears acclimated to the noise. His eyelids edged closer and closer together. Soon enough he was asleep.

Mose jolted awake to the sound of metal crushing metal. “What in the hell? Where am I?” he shouted, but nothing came out. Suddenly he was aware of the rope tied between his lips, muffling his cries for help. Someone turned him over so he was facing upwards, blinded by the sun. To his right, the tractor was flipped over, smashed to bits, and spraying smoke out of the engine.

“Get him up and hogtie the rest of him!” a voice shouted out of nowhere. Suddenly, four groundhogs standing on their hind legs slid into Mose’s eye-line.

“It’s time we teach this varmint a lesson”

# Good Friends

By Leah Stauber

Lainey and I had been best friends since the first day of preschool, when Bobby Price spit on me and she punched him right in the front teeth. She got a time out in the corner of the classroom, where I snuck her my bag of graham crackers at snack time. Our friendship continued much in this same way; Lainey steamrolling her way through elementary and middle school, and me trailing behind her just a bit to pick up the pieces.

That summer, Lainey was working at the Tackle Shop down by the marina. Far from selling just earthworms and bobbers, the Tackle Shop boasted a veritable mishmash of nautical odds and ends, all thinly covered with a layer of salty grime. I rode my bike down to the shop every afternoon around 4 o'clock, when her shift ended. I waited for her outside the back door, where she always appeared with some treat she'd swiped for us. If it had been a good day, she brought peach rings or cherry sodas. On bad days, it was unsalted peanuts or raisins. I pretended not to notice when she brought the shittier snacks, seeing as she had recently lost her dad and all. That day it was cherry sodas—my favorite.

We sat beneath a twisty live oak tree, using one of its lowest branches as a bench, and sipped the icy sodas. The hot air buzzed and mingled with the smell of southern cedar and cold carbonation, making me a bit woozy.

“Did you hear about the party at Diana’s?” I asked. Diana was a year ahead of us in school, but dated my brother, Cal, so I was invited by association. “It’s at her uncle’s cottage on the beach. He’s out of town on a fishing trip.”

Lainey smiled thinly. “Anything to get out of another night of my mom crying on the couch while watching Jeopardy.”

“Your answer has to be in the form of a question,” I responded, teasing her.

“Oh okay. What is ‘let’s go to Diana’s party’?” She gave me a playful shove.

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When the sun began to set I rode us over to Diana’s uncle’s cottage on my bike, with Lainey standing on the pegs. My curfew was midnight, and Lainey didn’t have one, so we rode with the wind, lapping up the cool sea air, savoring the freedom.

The cottage was packed, its driveway littered with empty cars, golf carts, and bicycles. I knew from how Cal talked about her that Diana was popular and that her party would be equally cool. Rainbow lights were strung up in the trees, and Queen blasted from a stereo system inside.

I hesitated at the front door but Lainey thrust it open without even pausing to knock. Plenty of upperclassmen were dancing in the front room, but none of them gave us a second glance.

Lainey beelined for the kitchen, where she grabbed two beers from a cooler and handed me one.

I’d have preferred cherry soda, but I popped the cap off and took a long sip anyway. Lainey drained hers in several gulps before grabbing another.

“Wanna go outside?” I asked, hoping to get her as far away from the beer supply as possible.

We wove through groups of people before emerging on the back porch. There were more lights and a small campfire, and I could make out a handful of people perched on benches around it.

“Is that Bobby Price?” Lainey frowned. I followed her gaze and saw my brother, Diana, and Bobby Price all seated around the fire. Bobby and Diana were cousins, so he usually weaseled himself an invite to her parties—or so Cal had told me while complaining about how Bobby never shuts up about his wrestling matches. I could see him animatedly reenacting putting some guy in a headlock, so I rolled my eyes and pulled Lainey along.

“Let’s walk down by the water,” I suggested. We climbed over the dunes and crossed the sand, soft and cool underfoot since the sun had set. The beach was mostly empty, save a few couples making out up and down the shoreline. We approached the water and I let the waves lick over my toes. Now was as good a time as ever.

“Can I ask you something?”

Lainey flashed her eyes toward me. “Yeah, shoot.”

I tapped my fingers together nervously, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“We’ve been friends for a long time, right?”

She grinned. “Ever since I knocked that douchebag Bobby Price’s teeth in.” She mimed punching his face in the moonlight.

My fingers reached out and brushed against hers in the dark. “Have you ever thought about—”

“Are you gonna finish that?” she interrupted, gesturing toward my beer. I shook my head no, slightly annoyed. She handed me her empty bottle and took my half-full one.

“Anyway, I wanted to talk about—”

“Do you wanna know something funny?” she interrupted, her eyes gleaming.

My heartbeat picked up and I nodded. Lainey leaned in really close, and I could smell the beer on her warm breath.

“I don’t actually work at the Tackle Shop,” she whispered, and then snorted with laughter.

“What are you talking about?” This was not where I thought the conversation was going.

“I got fired my first day for arguing with a customer. In my defense, she was being a real bitch.”

I spent a moment processing this.

“Hold on. Am I supposed to believe you just go there every day and buy us snacks at 4:00pm then leave out the back door?”

She laughed again. “Well, not exactly buy.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“So what do you do all day?”

She shrugged. “Not much. Hang out by the docks mostly.”

“With the stoners? Lainey, you’re better than that.”

“Am I?”

Anger burned up my cheeks. “Lainey, you can’t just go around stealing stuff and avoid talking about your dad forever.”

She frowned. “Wow, way to be a good friend, Clem. I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

Hot tears tickled the corners of my eyes. “You want to talk to me about being a good friend? Do you know how much time I’ve spent trying to help you? I ride my bike to see you every day because I want you to feel better and all you’ve done is lie to me. I understand not wanting to face hard feelings more than anyone. Why do you think I spend so much time with you?”

“Honestly, you’re killing my buzz right now. Come find me when you want to be less annoying.” She stumbled up the sand and over the dunes, while I stood there, dumbfounded. Tears trickled down my cheeks. This wasn’t how tonight was supposed to go.

I had to convince myself not to run after her, hurling apologies in her wake. I curled up in a ball on the sand, listening to the lull of the waves and wishing away the last five minutes.

After some time I heard yelling and then a piercing scream coming from the cottage. The other couples on the beach turned and we made concerned eye contact. I hoped Cal and Bobby weren’t wrestling or something—our mom would be pissed. I trudged back over the dunes to put an end to whatever it was, but when I got back to the campfire, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Bobby Price was sitting on the ground, eyes wide with fear, blood dripping down his face. And standing over him, holding a half-broken beer bottle, was Lainey.

She strode over to me and lifted my chin gently with the neck of the beer bottle.

“Now that’s how you be a good friend.” She let the bottle fall to the floor and walked off into the night.

I stood there, frozen, for what felt like an hour but couldn’t have been more than a few minutes. Cal was yelling in my face and asking me a bunch of questions but I couldn’t formulate answers



to any of them. All I could do was wonder how I got here from giving a scrappy preschooler one bag of graham crackers.

# That Day

By Johnny Vasquez

There wasn't a cloud in sight. The desert ground was a dull brown, with pockets of a lighter brown here and there. Even the blue sky seemed a little dull. I wanted to feel alive. I wanted to feel a breeze. All I could feel was heat. So, I looked up into the sky, hoping to feel something along the lines of the sun smiling down on me. My eyes were closed. I couldn't hear them talking around me. Some of us were still excited to be here, most of us were just tired. I started to smell the smoke. My face started to feel uncomfortable so I dropped my face back down, eyes to the ground. I didn't want to turn around.

I was alive. However somewhere, possibly while exiting what was left of the burning vehicle, I dropped my gratitude. I thought I was supposed to feel "oh so glad" that I was alive. But then I started to sense that even my joy, my sadness, my rage..... it was as dull as my surroundings were starting to look. As if my emotions were playing to the same tune or musical note, but not too loud. No, it was about as faint as that dying ringing sound that was still in my ears.

I finally decided to turn around. Twenty minutes ago, I was in that burning monster of a vehicle. There were three of us. I didn't hear anything. I just remember being behind the gun, looking at the sky, the sand, the colors seemed a bit brighter. I remember I felt a small breeze, almost as if the desert air were stroking the side of my face.

And just like that, all sound left me. I was deaf. All the colors went black. I was blind. If there was an on/off button on my head I think someone pushed it. Maybe it was the desert breeze.

But it all came back. First I heard. Then I saw. Then I felt. I was surrounded by a cloud of smoke; everything was on fire. Slouched down inside the cabin I pulled myself out of the gunner hole, out of the turret, on to the ground.

I left my rifle. I was walking. I heard shots. I wasn't sure if it was us or them.

For those following minutes, I kind of wasn't sure how I was supposed to live. It was as if life left me, came back, and while I was putting it on again it was a size too tight. It didn't feel right, something was off.

At least I was alive. But I had a feeling I was going to start to get used to playing a role that wasn't really me. The one where I act like life fits me perfectly and I say brave and courageous things so that other people can feel comfortable around me and not worry about me doing something scary or stupid.

Somewhere back there, in that lonely desert, I'm sure there's still a few pieces of my gratitude. I think there might also be a few pages from my handbook on how to live life; pages scattered and lost, buried in the sand. Hell, I'm sure if you looked close enough, when the sun is shining really bright, you'll find the part of me that got left behind, the part that's made me feel incomplete ever since. I sometimes find myself going back there when I sleep, but instead of searching for what I lost, I'm losing it all over again, stuck on replay, over and over and over.

There wasn't a cloud in sight...

# Mother's Garden

By Mackenzie Wilhelm

Growing up, I had an estranged relationship with my mother. Contempt was the only emotion she had expressed since I was born. This disdain she harbored wholly enveloped her when she looked at me. She hated me because I was the spitting image of my father. He was a workaholic - staying late at the office, always in meetings, and sleeping with the secretary. He never came home one day nor the days after. It was like the earth swallowed him alive and every last trace of his existence. I asked my mother, "When's daddy coming home?" and she'd tell me to "Shut the fuck up and go to your room."

She began to garden after her husband's disappearance. For once, she seemed happy. She tended her bed full of snapdragons and showed them nurture I didn't think she possessed. From dawn to dusk, she looked at her garden with adoration. After nightfall, her maternal duties resumed, and all that love shriveled and died. I left as soon as possible - bitter and without either parent.

Recently — years after no contact — an executor informed me of her death. She left only her estate and special instructions for her beloved garden. I didn't want to return home, but my lease was up, and renewing it would be impossible with my income. Our differences lay buried in the coffin she rests in. I had to move on. Begrudgingly I took the keys to my home and her written instructions.

My childhood room looked untouched after years. Angsty punk rock posters and used vinyl litter the walls. I crouch low and search for a small box under my bed. It's covered in a thick layer of dust with a few dust bunnies inhabiting the box. Inside is my childhood blanket, a

small stuffed bear, and a photograph of my father. His golden tooth was the most remarkable aspect of his smile. I caress the photo before placing it back into the box and shoving it under my bed. I read my mother's list at the foot of my bed, a cloud of dust erupting into the air as I sit. Dusting should be the next thing I do, methinks.

*For Cynthia,*

*Step One: Pour one cup of Fertilizer A into a bucket. Mix it with one liter of water and stir. Add one tablespoon of crushed lime to the mixture.*

*Step Two: Pour the mixture into the central reservoir by the garden. It will flow into the soil.*

*Don't fret if it bubbles or shifts during the process.*

*Step Three: Pluck weeds every 3-5 days. Repeat steps one and two daily.*

**Whatever you do, don't touch the flowers.**

Her instructions were more straightforward than I anticipated. For years I watched her ministrations when gardening. It was typical for her to stroke the plants and whisper to the blooming flowers. My mother drowned herself in the knowledge of flora and chemistry. At night, I'd find her mixing chemicals or installing complex tubes in the garden's dirt. I grimace at the disturbed earth from my bedroom's window - years of work for this three-by-seven plot of land. I'll humor the dead woman's wishes.

The shed is full of burlap sacks — all painted with the giant letter "A." It seemed she intended for me to carry on her legacy. I drag a half-empty bag to the workbench and fill a cup of white powder and a tablespoon of lime into a bucket. A rusted faucet sits in the corner, and I test if the water supply is operational. A dreadful clanging sound and chorus of groans rattle the pipes as water gushes out. The first pumps of water are sickly, black, and orange. I watch the grotesque liquid wash down the drain, seeing clear water replacing it.

I struggle to lug the bucket outside and slam it next to the cultivated soil—the snapdragons dance in the wind. Orange hues accent curled pink flowers. The peak of the flora ombrés from green to purple, further cascading to a rich pink. Some flowers have decayed and revealed their form — a brown, shriveled-up-like skull.

I'm jealous of the plants that received love I could only see in my dreams. My hands struggle to unscrew the cap to the garden's watering system. It fumbles in my hands before crashing into the soil. I reach for it, pausing when I notice the earth breathing - a steady rise and fall. I haven't added the diluted mixture yet, so this must be a worm or some earthly bubbling.

Curious, I drop to my knees and bury my hands in the dirt. There's resistance underground — my hands prodding the hard surface, cupping soil to remove it. The horrifying sight of a ribcage catches me by surprise. Woven roots dig into the filthy stretched skin and exposed bone. It's human and moving. My hands shoot out of the soil, pulling stray snapdragon roots from the chest cavity. A yowl comes from the bed - the realization that whoever lies in the garden's soil is still alive. My hands travel upward in the dirt, finding the face of the poor soul underground.

Dirty skin clings to a strong bone structure. It was a man — I'm sure of that. Squirming worms and other grubs fill his eye sockets - the graying muscle around the gaping holes eaten away by the insects. The tip of his nose has rotted and slid out of place, and his nasal canal is full of maggots. I can see the glimmering gold of a fake tooth through dehydrated lip muscles. The corpse's jaw slacks open, a rattling sound coming from deep in his throat. An overwhelming smell of death hits me in the face. I struggle back onto my feet and stand above the still-breathing body. I recognize the tattered face and teeth from my years of youth.

“Dad?”

# Prophet

By Christine Aikens Wolfe

I clean up at the little playground down from West Penn Hospital. Walk with me down Liberty Avenue, the hum of buses and cars in your ear. Follow me to the playground. Downhill on this street off Liberty right past the old Moose lodge. Doctors' offices now. The street flattens here, playground on the left.

Creaky swings, plastic tunnel-and-slide combinations, a dinosaur car on springs by the kid fountain. Benches. I reach for the canvas duffle-bag on my back and pull out my litter-gitter. It's exactly right. A park-ranger style wooden pole with a spear at one end.

Moms and kids mostly are who come and go. Moms bring littler ones here while bigger ones go to school. Whatever! I wander around on the grass between concrete walks, a bandana on my head. I spear candy wrappers and those awful red plastic cups that endlessly cover America. I spear leaves. Cigarette butts too; this tool is good. And I'm good. I pick it up.

Even underwear. What's with teenagers today? Showin' off at night when I'm not here to yell. Cause I'm a preacher. I really am. And a mystic. I see into their minds. And I tell 'em what I see. Today, I hit my little playground, start to spear junk and deposit it in the metal garbage can by the swings. Nobody here but me, so far.

But here come two moms, each with a kid by the hand. A sweet little girl with bows and ballies in her hair. The boy's got butter yellow hair. The kids reach the park; the moms release them. Let 'em run. Yeah, that's the good part. Shriek, crow, climb the ladders, slide down.

Talkin' to themselves and their moms. Just like me. For now, I keep my head down, spearing junk. Time to listen. And watch.

"Ten minutes 'til we leave, Trinity," one mom calls. She turns to the other mom. "Her dad says he's takin' Trinity to Chuck-E-Cheeses today. About time." She shrugs. "I need an afternoon off. Get me a manicure at the spa."

"You work at the hospital?" the other mom asks. She's a white mom in a white uniform. "I'm at West Penn. Eighth floor. Steady nights. What about you?"

"Steady nights too, girlfriend." A smile. "I'm Chelle." The black mom sticks her hand out. A strong handshake on both sides, I feel the warmth from where I'm standing. I look at their smiles. This Chelle has a powerful smile. I see yellow & red humming around her head. I chuckle as I spear a gum wrapper at my feet. Gray blob below it ain't so easy. Workin' on it. Watchin' the moms.

"Natalie," the white mom says.

I check out this Natalie, smile wide but wobbly, light blue leaking around her face and head. The blue brightens, fades to cloudy. She needs something, but what? I'm thinking about the challenge while I listen. Better listen.

"Steady nights, yeah, then Trinity during the day. I'm out in Aspinwall. Heatherstone Life Center. Steady nights, but her dad gets her two days a week and my mom helps on weekends. But dag, I'm always tired." She looks at the other mom, "Know what I'm saying?" She turns toward her kid on the slide. "Five minutes, Trinity. And make sure your shoes are all the way on when I say it's time."



The white mom nods at what Chelle is saying, but her little blond kid calls her to watch him, so she excuses herself. Walks around the slide. I shamle up to Chelle.

“Scuse me, lady,” I say, humble-like. Ha! Little do they know that even Oprah ain’t as close to the Almighty as I am! I see straight in. Bring the light out. So I tell her. “Scuse me. Was you sayin’ that this man of your, Ray or something...”

She’s watching me; I’m watching me thinking his name is Ray. The name flashes out of the sunshiny orange pulsing around her head. I’ll let her know. It’s important. “This Ray,” I say. “You think he don’t give you enough of what you need?”

She stares at me then. But she notices I’m there. Maybe she *sees* me, maybe not, can’t tell yet. But she’s relaxed. Friendly. Probably works with lots of alzheimer, dementia or simple souls at uh, what did she call it? *Heatherstone Coddles You ’til You Die Center*? Ha ha. I’m a simple soul, myself. Anyway, she *hears* me. I can tell. The orange pulse steadies to an orange glow.

“Hello,” she says. “I was rambling, but... Yeah, what you said. I mean, Ray works three jobs; I give him credit for that. And he adores Trinity. But I’m tired all the time.” She turns a bit and cuts her eyes at the child. “Two minutes, Trinity.”

I know better than to reach out and pat her hand. Tried that ten years ago, or whenever it was my ministry started. They flinch, jump away. Crazy old street woman, pickin’ up litter. But this Chelle has a well of trust in her. Green lines – kinda avocado green – start runnin’ across her face. She’s zebra-striped now.

“Empty?” I say. She opens her mouth. Closes it. “Not appreciated?” She nods.

Then I take action. I rear back. Point at Natalie. “Heard you say your name is Chelle, and that the little one over there is Natalie. But girlfriend, hear me out. In five minutes, I’m about to tell her to leave that abusive Humphrey that she thinks she’s married to – but it ain’t no marriage. Pure slavery, even if she *is* white.

I pause with my stick up in the air like an exclamation mark. Put it on the ground. Look at her. “But I’m forgettin’. That’s *her* message. You, Chelle girl, with your bright orange courage shinin’, and that green-striped love you got goin’ on for people you work with, for your mom and your pretty little Trinity. You. Hear me now.”

She’s looking blank. But the Almighty says to throw her the bolt of lightning, so I do. “I’m a born prophet, girl. I see the truth. Looked at you, then I called up a picture of Ray. I see him too. Like a rock. And you can trust a rock.” I nod my head at her. Keep nodding. Throw more bolts.

“Talk to the man. Play him his favorite music. Tell him to quit one of those damn jobs and marry you proper. Then spend time together. And you.” I stare at her, so she knows that I’m on *her* now. “You. You gotta trust him.”

I’m done. Just us two standing in the autumn sunshine. I stare at her like Samuel stares at King Saul. She’s turnin’ away and tearin’ up. Then she turns back. Reaches for my hands. Squeezes them. Wow! All these moms I preach to every day, and she’s the first *ever* to grab me.

“I’m not sure,” she whispers. “Still not sure, but thank you.” She straightens those shoulders, turns around toward her daughter on the slide. “Trinity. Ima count to ten. And you better be standing beside me when I get to zero. We gotta go.”

## ***CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES***

## **Stacy Alderman - I Bought (Prose)**

Stacy Alderman won the Children of Steel Fiction Award in 2021 and regularly contributes to her local newspaper. Her writing has been featured by Macro Magazine, Capsule Stories, HerStryblg.com, and several others. She lives near Pittsburgh, PA with her husband and two rescue dogs. If she's not writing or reading, she's probably watching hockey or (dreaming about) traveling.

## **Renee Augustine - Mighty Ram (Photography/Art)**

Renee Augustone practices photography as a hobby in her spare time. She has expanded her love of photography over the past several years and enjoys taking pictures of landscapes, nature scenes, and abandoned structures. Her camera is a staple piece of equipment in her vehicle as one never knows when a photo opportunity may arise. She has photographed all over the country and is excited to continue her journey in photography.

## **Cameron Bakaj - Artist's Block (Photography/Art)**

Cameron Bakaj is a 2020 graduate and came back for her teaching certification and master's degree in instructional leadership. She is in her final semester of her certification to teach secondary biology. She has been doing art her whole life, but fell out of it for a few years, and her spark came back during the pandemic. She posts her art on her Facebook page, Cameron Bakaj Art, her Instagram @cameronbakajart, and her TikTok @cammy\_buckeye.

## Mary Bartels - Venus (Prose)

Mary Bartels is a freshman in the Writing and Publishing department at Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School. She enjoys writing poetry, all kinds of fiction, and creative nonfiction as well. She has shared her poetry during multiple readings at her school, including *Love Amour* (February 2023) and *Shadowcast* (October 2022). Her poetry was accepted into the award-winning literary journal, *Pulp*. Mary has also written and conducted an interview that will be featured on Saturday Light Brigade Radio Productions airing in the next few months.

## Joan Bauer - Sunday Morning Rescue (Poetry)

Joan E. Bauer is the author of two full-length poetry collections, *The Almost Sound of Drowning* (Main Street Rag, 2008) and *The Camera Artist* (Turning Point, 2021). She divides her time between Venice, CA and Pittsburgh, PA where she co-hosts and curates the Hemingway's Summer Poetry Series with Kristofer Collins. Her new poetry manuscript, *Fig Season*, is forthcoming from Turning Point in May 2023.

## Lucas Cain - Death and You (Prose)

Lucas Cain is a professional writing major at RMU and an emerging writer with several publications under his belt. He has a variety of experience in the literary field, having worked on several literary journals. In addition to writing, Lucas also enjoys long runs and aquatic turtles.

### **Natalee Calfo-Carroll – On Display (Photography/Art)**

Natalee Calfo-Carroll is a junior student at Robert Morris University pursuing a major in Mechanical Engineering, minors in Photography and Graphic Design, and a certificate in Entrepreneurship. Outside of classes, she is involved in the Rockwell Fellowship, Women's Leadership and Mentorship Program, Honors Program, and the Society of Women Engineers. In her free time, she enjoys reading, being outdoors, and spending time with friends and family.

### **Jay Carson - Adam Was A Namer (Poetry)**

Jay Carson taught creative writing, literature, and rhetoric at Robert Morris University. He has published more than 80 poems in national literary journals and anthologies. Jay also published a chapbook, *Irish Coffee*, with Coal Hill Review and a longer book of his poems, *The Cinnamon of Desire*, with Main Street Rag.

### **Hannah Casto - Sunset + Beach = Beautiful (Photography/Art)**

Hannah Casto is a sophomore Psychology major. Hannah is also part of Sigma Kappa. Her favorite hobbies are taking pictures, traveling, spending time with family and friends, also watching sunrises and sunsets.

### **Julie Ceoffe - The Window Full of Secrets (Prose)**

Julie Ceoffe is a senior English Major with a minor in Creative Writing. She aspires to be a published author and hopes to further pursue this career after graduating in May. She hopes to tell the stories that are not often heard--shining light on new ideas and discoveries about

ourselves. When she is not writing, she focuses on snuggling with one of her four cats while watching a cheesy Romantic-Comedy. She is also on the Rune staff and a member of Sigma Tau Delta.

### **Noah Cintron - Walk With Me (Poetry)**

Noah Cintron is a senior criminal justice major at Robert Morris University. Upon graduation in the spring of 2023, he seeks a career in the intelligence community. Alongside his undergraduate career he has published three novels spanning from mystery to magical realism to romance. Noah is currently working on book one of a fantasy trilogy that he hopes to one day gain the attention of traditional publishing after rounds of intense querying. Until then, the names of his published novels as of February 2023 are *The Tale of Mayberry Falls*, *The Gift of Hindsight*, *Before The Summer Ends* (N.J. FOX).

### **Michael Comiskey - I Live Alone (Poetry)**

Michael Comiskey is a retired professor of political science and economics at the Penn State Fayette Campus near Uniontown, PA. Many of his poems and short stories are Appalachian. A native of Fayette County, he lives in his hometown of Connellsville, PA with his wife Mary Ann. His website-in-progress is [michaelswriting.com](http://michaelswriting.com).

### **Shaheen Dil - Anamnesis (Poetry)**

Shaheen Dil was born in Bangladesh but lives in Pittsburgh, Pa. Her poems have been published in over two dozen journals and anthologies, including previously in *Rune*. She has new work

forthcoming in *Calyx Journal*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Uppagus*, and the anthology, *Critique of the Gods*. Her first full-length poetry collection, *Acts of Deference*, was published in 2016 by Fakel Publishing House in Sofia, Bulgaria.

### **Desirae Dolce - Reflection or Projection (Poetry)**

Desirae Dolce is currently in the 2nd degree BSN program here at RMU. She is a recent transplant from Humboldt County in California, now putting down roots in Pittsburgh. While she is currently studying and working towards becoming a nurse anesthetist, she has a passion for literature and hopes to be a published author someday soon.

### **Ziggy Edwards - Seams (Poetry)**

Ziggy Edwards is the proud owner of a loft bed. She lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and edits the online zine *Uppagus*. Ziggy's poems and short stories have appeared in publications including *5 AM*, *Pretty Owl*, *Main Street Rag*, *Illumen*, and *Dreams and Nightmares*.

### **Antonia Fama - Butterfly on a Flower (Photography/Art)**

Antonia Fama is a Junior Public Relations and Advertising student at Robert Morris University also pursuing a certificate in sales. She plans to graduate in December of 2023 and go on to join an external or in-house PR or advertising team at a Pittsburgh firm. She is a member of many organizations at RMU, including the Honors Program, PRSSA, NSLS, Strong Women Strong Girls, WLMP, Colonial Theatre, and Women in Business. She loves to take pictures, play music, read, and spend time with friends and family.



## Amy Ganser - I Saved a Seat (Poetry)

Amy Ganser is a Pittsburgh native and former COVID tester for the student body at RMU. Her work has been previously published in *Rune*, as well as *Celestite Poetry Journal*, and an upcoming anthology from *Move Me Poetry*. Amy has had pieces featured in several publications on Medium, including *Write Under the Moon*, *iPoetry*, *The Lark*, *The Power of Poetry*, *Know Thyself Heal Thyself*, and *Lifeline*. She is currently preparing her very first poetry collection for publication later in 2023.

## Mackenzie Hill - Stop Staring (Prose)

Mackenzie Hill is a junior English Studies major. She is the president of RMU's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta (The International English Honor Society) and is the managing editor of *Rune*. Her career aspirations are to be a copy editor and/ or writer.

## Byron Hoot - One, Two, Three (Poetry)

Byron Hoot was born and raised in Morgantown, West Virginia and lived there until he went to college. He never returned to West Virginia but he never left it. Appalachia, the hills and streams, the people, his memories of those first eighteen years are deeply embedded. Now he lives in northwestern Pennsylvania . . . still in Appalachia.

He is a co-founder of The Tamarack Writers (1974). Winner of the 2022 Rattle Ekphrastic Challenge. Proprietor of Hootnhowlpoetry.com where you can find *Piercing the Veil*, *The Art of Grilling*, *Monster In the Kingdom*, *Such Beautiful Sense*, *Poems From the Woods*, *In Our Time*,

*These Need No Title*, and *Observations*. And his new book, *Poems of a Mad Hunter and other Tales*. All available from Amazon.

### **Andrew Hudock - Starry Owl (Photography/Art)**

Andrew Hudock is a digital art major at Robert Morris University. Andrew has been creating paintings for several years now, mostly for personal hobbies. Most of his work is done in acrylic and a few in watercolor. Andrew loves depicting his imagination with his artwork and enjoys creating one-of-a-kind pieces. Some of his inspirations include the universe, music and fantasy movies.

### **Paige Jubeck - The Gentle Giant (Poetry)**

Paige Jubeck is a junior secondary English education major. In her free time she enjoys writing, reading, and taking naps with her cat, Pip. She is on the RMU women's rugby team and an editor for Rune. Paige hopes you enjoy this year's Rune magazine!

### **Laurel Katzenberger - Black Sand Beach (Photography/Art)**

Laurel Katzenberger is a junior nursing student. She is interested in travel and photography.

### **Emma Kemp - Nature's Window (Photography/Art)**

Emma Kemp is a junior Biology major at Robert Morris University. She is the vice president of the National Society of Leadership and Success chapter at RMU as well as an active member in

Biology Club, Students for Environmental Awareness, and the Red Cross. In her free time, Emma enjoys reading, baking, and spending time outdoors.

### Hannah Kennedy - Shape (Poetry)

Hannah Allman Kennedy is a writer from the oil ghost towns of Venango County, Pennsylvania. Her debut novel, *And It All Came Tumbling Down*, was published in 2021 from the Watershed Journal Literary Group. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Backbone Mountain Review*, *Time of Singing*, *SHIFT*, *In Parentheses*, *Marathon Literary Review*, and *The Watershed Journal*. She writes and hosts the podcast *What Happened Here*, which explores the stories of interesting places. Hannah is a graduate of the Carlow University MFA in Creative Writing program. She lives in Pittsburgh, where she teaches writing.

### Romella Kitchens - “The Legacies Of The Culture Kings And Queens”

#### (Poetry)

Romella Kitchens is a Pittsburgh-based poet and graduate of the University of Pittsburgh with 3 Masters degrees in Education. She has been published in “Van Gogh’s Ear, Uppagus on line, Hot Metal Bridge from the University Of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh City Paper, Paper Street and many more. She is a member of The Pittsburgh Poetry Exchange and is a past judge for Poetry Out Loud. Her poems have been published in chapbook for by Main street Rag and Pudding House Press. She has presented poetry in various Pittsburgh Schools as part of their enrichment programs.

### **Nadiya Kostiv - Lost Future (Photography/Art)**

Kostiv Nadya is studying in RMU, 13 years ago, she moved from Ukraine to the US. Recently, she decided to continue her study and chose Organization Leadership as her field of study. Nadiya loves to travel as well as take photos during her unpredictable trips. Her works are inspired by new places, cultures, and global issues.

### **Megan Ledgerwood - You've Grown (Photography/Art)**

Megan Ledgerwood is currently studying as a Cybersecurity major at Robert Morris University. Though her choice in major being in STEM, she has always found a love for making and expressing herself through her art, most recently being acrylic paintings that often appear unusual and uncomfortable to viewers.

### **Kyle Le - Into The Sunset (Photography/Art)**

Kyle Le is a freshman nursing major who has been doing photography for nearly six years. He is from Pittsburgh, PA, and is currently trying to build his own photography business.

### **Daniel Medved - Daybreak (Photography/Art)**

Daniel Medved is a junior nursing major and spent the last two summers working as a backpacking guide in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of New Mexico. During this time, he met many people, made many new friends, and took many pictures. These are some of the best pictures from his tenure as a Philmont Ranger.

### **Tyler Michael - Pond-ering Life (Photography/Art)**

Tyler is a sophomore environmental science major from Pittsburgh, PA. He is vice president of the Students for Environmental Awareness club with a lifelong interest in nature. He has been doing photography for 3 years and often incorporates his love for the outdoors in his work.

### **Jordan Merenick - The Dance (Poetry)**

Jordan Merenick is poet/author from Pittsburgh, PA. He has been published in several zines and this will be his first major publication.

### **Peyton Jackson - Red's Antiques (Prose)**

Peyton Jackson is a senior professional writing major with minors in advertising and journalism. She loves to write anything and everything, and hopes that you enjoy her work.

### **Clayton Pfeifer - Man's Worst Friend (Prose)**

Clayton Pfeifer is a third year management major. He began writing fiction in hopes of learning how to tell a story better. Clayton enjoys long distance running, coaching spin classes, and trips to the mountains.

### **Melayna Pongratz - Patriarch (Poetry)**

Melayna Pongratz is a junior majoring in English and minoring in photography at Robert Morris University. They are involved in the Women's Leadership and Mentorship Program, the Student

Alliance for Equality, Sigma Tau Delta, and the Honors Program. In their free time, they can be found trying out a new coffee shop or spending time with their cat Scout.

## Judith Robinson - Reflection on Time (Poetry)

Judith R. Robinson\* is an editor, teacher, fiction writer, poet and visual artist. A summa cum laude graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, she is listed in the Directory of American Poets and Writers. She has published 100+ poems, five poetry collections, one fiction collection; one novel; edited or co-edited eleven poetry collections. Teacher: Osher at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh.

Newest poetry collection is Buy A Ticket, WordTech Editions, due April 1, 2022

Newest edited collection is "Speak, Speak," poetry of Gene Hirsch, Cyberwit.com 2020.

Holocaust Exhibit was "The Numbers Keep Changing," at The Pittsburgh Holocaust Center, April -June, 2019.

Latest Gallery exhibit: New Works at Square Café, September, 2021

Most recent reviews:

<https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/books/2022/05/10/judith-robinson-buy-a-ticket-new-and-select-ed-poems-book-review/stories/202205030005>

## Phillip Shifter - Seasons of Love (Poetry)

Phillip Shifter is a junior English Studies major who plans on going on to law school after he finishes his degree. He enjoys writing fiction works and one day hopes to have an LGBTQIA+ novel published.

## Michael Simms - Coda: The Crows (Poetry)

Michael Simms's recent books include three collections of poems *Strange Meadowlark*, *Nightjar* and *American Ash* (Ragged Sky Press, 2020, 2021, 2023) and two novels *Bicycles of the Gods* and *The Green Mage* (Madville Publications, 2022, 2023). He is the founding editor of Vox Populi (2014-now) and of Autumn House Press (1998-2016). He lives in Pittsburgh.

## Mary Soon Lee - ADVICE FROM A RABBIT (Poetry)

Mary Soon Lee was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for over twenty years. Her latest books are from opposite ends of the poetry spectrum: "Elemental Haiku," containing haiku for the periodic table, and "The Sign of the Dragon," an epic fantasy with Chinese elements, winner of the 2021 Elgin Award. She hides her online presence with a cryptically named website (marysoonlee.com) and an equally cryptic Twitter account (@MarySoonLee).

## Leah Stauber - Good Friends (Prose)

Leah Stauber is a writer from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has a bachelor's degree in English from Davidson College and a master's degree in professional writing from Carnegie Mellon University. She can usually be found befriending stray cats or propagating spider plants. Her writing has been published in fееееels, orangepeel, and Dead Skunk.

## Cynthia Stewart - Margot (Poetry)

CYNTHIA STEWART is from Pittsburgh and is a former public school teacher. She holds a BS in education from the University of Pittsburgh and an MPA from Pitt's Graduate School of

Public and International Affairs. She takes creative writing classes through Pitt's OSHER program, LaRoche University, and Carlow University's Madwomen in the Attic program. She has written several short stories and flash fiction pieces. Now she primarily writes poetry. Her poetry has appeared in *Voices from the Attic* Volume XXVI and Volume XVII.

### Johnny Vasquez - That Day (Prose)

Jonathan Vasquez was born in El Salvador and raised in Spain until the age 16. After living 3 years in Lancaster, Pennsylvania Jonathan enlisted in the United States Marine Corps where he served 1 tour in Iraq doing route clearance (clearing roads of IED's). He currently lives in Beaver County, Pennsylvania with his 4 year old daughter. As a Senior at RMU, he plans to work with veterans in some capacity after graduation. He enjoys writing, playing music, reading and the outdoors.

### Tristan West - Untitled (Photography/Art)

Tristan West is a Junior at Robert Morris University majoring in Biology/Pre-Med. His hobbies include reading/writing, film, fitness, photography, and outdoor recreation. In his free time, Tristan likes to workout, volunteer, travel, and spend time outdoors. Tristan has traveled to 11 countries and 19 states and aspires to travel more to capture moments from all over the world. Tristan wants to get more involved with photography and eventually turn his hobby into a side gig. His favorite things to photograph are animals and nature.



### **David Wheeler - Pensive Beauty (Photography/Art)**

David Wheeler teaches psychology at Robert Morris University. He has been a photographer for over 50 years. Most of his work has been event photography and travel photography. After taking the portrait photography course here at RMU, David started doing portrait photography of people. And of course, he has to take pictures of his cats every time they are being cute.

### **Hayley Whittaker - Owl Art (Photography/Art)**

Hayley Whittaker is a student at Robert Morris University studying psychology. Art has been a hobby for Whittaker since she was able to begin writing at a young age. Through her artistic past, she has won several awards through the Scholastic Art and Writing contests. She has had several other contest winnings where her artwork has been hung in public buildings around the areas of Fayette and Westmoreland counties. Her creativity in art allowed her to become vice president of the National Art Honors Society for two years. Throughout her high school career, she has helped paint several murals in her hometown that have been viewed by many people. Whittaker enjoys expressing her art to others and hopes that they can be inspired by her work.

### **Mackenzie Wilhelm - Mother's Garden (Prose)**

Mackenzie Wilhelm is a Professional Writing major with a minor in Graphic Design. She loves to write and create and isn't afraid to let her inner artist show. She hopes to be a technical writer and maintain her side gig as an Etsy seller.

## Christine Aikens Wolfe - Prophet (Prose)

Christine Aiken Wolfe's full-length book of poetry, Garlanding Green was published by Dos Madres Press in 2018. She had a poem published in *Rune* magazine last year, then (due to simultaneous submissions), the same poem won second place in the Westmoreland Arts & Heritage Festival Contest. Her poetry appears in Gargoyle, Nerve Cowboy, Paterson Literary Review, Sonnetto Poesia, Rune magazine and more. Her short story, *Owl & Stag*, is published in The Wild Hunt (Air & Nothingness Press, 2021), and 2 of her short stories appear in Carlow University's Voices from the Attic: Anhinga, Vol. XXI (2015) and *Invisible*, Vol. XXII (2016). She co-directed the Western PA Writing Project at Pitt, 1999 – 2001, and taught Young Writers there from 2002 - 2013. She is president of Pittsburgh Poetry Society.



"There is no greater agony than bearing  
an untold story inside you"

- Maya Angelou

