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Poetry

Visual Media

Prose

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“Split Screen”
Kayla Voss



Anthony Robledo

“Sokayama Hike”

Anthony Robledo

In Light of Death

Jack Luis McClintock

The Road

A single red pickup truck sat parked at the end of a gravel road in the northwestern forehead of Montana an hour before the sun rose, and several hours more before it would clear the mountain range to the East whose shadow draped the ground cold through the morning. In an intensely thick forest, the truck was alone in a small man-made clearing where the shadows of a thousand once-parked cars killed the grass beneath them in the daylight. The car simmered and rattled subtly; its old engine had just been running.

Half a mile to the south, Joel Jonas Phillips was putting some good distance between himself and the truck, backtracking on the gravel road. Black though the night was, he knew the road well enough. The moon was nearly full and gave him just enough light to make out his route. A shotgun was slung over his shoulder, and a pistol holster at his hip. It was cold. He wore a hardy jacket, but his face was going stiff in his cheeks and lips. It would warm soon, he knew.

A few yards ahead of Phillips on the side of the road were his only company: two short-haired pointers. He could barely see them as they scurried noses-down in between trees in a deep prey drive. They never strayed too far from him, nor vanished into the black for too long, slipping in and out of the forest like a pair of dolphins surfacing rhythmically.

Phillips yawned, feeling his ice-cold face stretch and inhaling a knife of icy air. How he itched for the sun to pass the mountain. He knew it would be long. He looked at his watch, but he didn't know what time he started walking. The dogs kept his pace up anyway.

From the silence ahead of him came a low crumpling and grumbling, and from the night came a dull yellow that illuminated pine trees ahead of him. He froze. Something in him became uneasy, and his face sure felt a tad colder.

The headlights of another truck rounded a turn in the gravel road and nearly blinded him. He stepped off the road to his left. He could see

nothing but the headlights, not even the rest of the car they belonged to. He started walking again, head down as if the truck wasn't even there. It passed him.

The forest and the road were suddenly engulfed in red as the truck stopped. A cloud of dust picked up by its tires spiraled upward and thickened the red hue in the night. Phillips heard one of the truck's windows open, and a young male voice suddenly yelled, "Hey, Phillips!"

He stood and turned. The brake lights blinded him now, but he could see a head just in the corner of the opened passenger window. He made for the truck, some strange caution in every step he took.

In the car were two young burly men with bushy beards dressed in camouflage jackets and orange hoods, smiling goofily in contrast to Phillips' wind-burned, miserable face. They looked nearly identical.

"Oh," was Phillips' greeting. A relief as peculiar as the caution it eased came over him.

"Shit, man, we ain't seen you in a while," said Daniel in the passenger seat. "We passed right by you, I was like, 'shit, that's J. J. Phillips!'"

"Yeah. How you guys doin'?" He must have seen Daniel and Cooper Gittleson out here a hundred times, but at this moment could not remember which was which.

One of the pointers emerged from the brush and leaped past her owner onto the truck's door, her head and front paws greeting Daniel.

"Oh, hello, precious," Daniel said warmly and rubbed her head.

"What you after? Birds?" Cooper asked.

"Yeah," Phillips answered.

"Shit, man, why you out here so early?" said Daniel.

"Ah..." Phillips stammered. He nudged the dog licking Daniel's

face. "Hey. Down."

The dog obeyed. By the time she was on the ground her nose was back to the gravel and she began following it into the trees again.

"Alright, guys, lemme..." Phillips started.

"Yeah, yeah," Daniel said. "We're checkin' out up north there. We'll see you."

Phillips nodded and quickly was walking again. The truck just as soon continued.

The Track

Phillips and the dogs walked another quarter mile. It was still too dark to see what he was looking for. Had he passed it? He was sure he was close. He ventured off the gravel and hugged the tree line alongside it, checking the trunk of every pine in what little light he had.

He at last felt the can bump his head and heard it clink. He looked up: an empty — yet just recently emptied — beer can adorned a short dead branch above him, slipped on through the hole in its top. This was it. He pulled the can off and crushed it, then barely took two seconds to look and listen behind him. No cars coming from either direction. He disappeared into the forest with the dogs. Eastward.

The forest was utter night. It didn't matter how well he knew the terrain. He was blind. The moonlight helped, but far less than on the road. He walked slowly.

He gave up. It was too dark. Too dark even to read his watch. He sat and waited. It was worth this, he was sure.

Twenty minutes went by and the sky began to blend blue. The monstrous silhouette of the mountain range revealed itself between the pines, and the stars faded. Phillips was up again. They continued ever east.

He made his way to a clearing, and within it the next checkpoint in his hunt: a section of grass near a large boulder, heavily matted down

by some foreign, now-absent object. The space was perhaps four feet long and a foot and a half wide, almost perfectly rectangular. He whistled and snapped his fingers. The dogs emerged from the brush behind him and approached his side.

“Here, here,” he said, crouching down and tapping the matted grass with one hand. The pointers ran their noses over the imprint a few times, and soon were visibly closing on a scent, slowly moving past the spot. They both headed north. Phillips followed.

The morning had barely begun to warm and the sky blue'd further. Birds began to sing. Another two miles were covered. It was only then that Phillips wondered how far he may follow the trail.

In the midst of his discernment to abandon the chase, the black and green consistency of the forest was suddenly split by an alien white directly ahead of him, perhaps four hundred yards off. Phillips' eyes snapped to it upon noticing it, and he tripped on a root and stumbled momentarily, then fixated again on it.

He walked to it. It was a clean, almost reflective white. Something unnatural and unmistakably man-made. He clutched the grip of the shotgun, still over his shoulder, if not to use it then just to keep it steady as he navigated the brush. He got closer; less trees blocked his view of the thing. It was metal, a thick, tubular shape sticking awkwardly up and stretching ten feet from the ground, motionless.

He snapped his fingers. “Heel,” he said in a low voice. The dogs both arrived at him and sat beside his right leg.

“Down,” the master ordered. The dogs lay, statue-still.

Phillips walked just another few yards when he could finally make out the thing, which he now saw was in the middle of another small clearing: it was an airplane, nose-down in a violent, dirt-churned crater.

He arrived at the clearing. He could see there was a man in the plane. Phillips drew his pistol and stood at the tree line. He looked around: there was nothing but the plane. The man in it was slumped forward in the left seat. He looked asleep. Phillips approached slowly, pistol

only half-raised.

The plane was a small, four-seat high wing prop; the cockpit was beneath the wings, deep in a blender of dirt thrown up in the crash, but reachable. The man inside, head resting against the instrument panel, still did not move as Phillips neared.

“Hey,” he whispered, his voice raspy after such a long silence in the cold. He cleared his throat and repeated, “Hey.”

He crouched under the right wing, across the cockpit from the pilot. The man was dead. His safety belt buckle broke clean off his seat, and his forehead was caved in against the edge of the firewall, dried blood lining his face.

Phillips didn't dare touch him. He lowered his pistol and backed away; something smelled awful. “Jesus,” he murmured, reaching for the wing above him to pull himself onto his feet. “Jesus...”

He cleared the crash, and suddenly vomited a little. He spit, breathed and calmed. He whistled for the dogs, and heard the rustling of their approach in the brush behind him moments later.

He examined the plane from where he stood. The flaps were not extended. The nose landing gear was ripped off, laying some yards behind the wreckage. Even the skid in the dirt behind it was hardly twenty feet long. The clearing itself was no bigger than a football field, not long enough for any plane to clear the trees and land. The machine must have slammed into the ground at near 90 miles per hour.

But could it have been where his man came from? Could anyone have survived that crash?

He returned to the side of the cockpit, squeezing his nostrils shut. He only just noticed that the right seat had been folded into its foremost position—to grab something from the backseat, he figured. The backseat—and cargo hold, for that matter—were empty.

The dogs arrived. One quickly examined the plane all over. The other ignored it altogether, her nose still fixated on a scent that took her

around the plane and straight to the north of it. She stood and pointed to the trees ahead.

The Quarry

Phillips' feet hurt. He swapped the shotgun between sore shoulders frequently. His hands were so cold he couldn't rub his face to warm it. Some aching tick had begun to stir his brain, a withdrawal of sorts he had never felt, pushing him further and further. He dared not look at his watch nor gauge how far he had walked for fear of making a rational decision. But it was early yet, it was early yet... the sun still hadn't cleared that damned mountain.

Even the dogs had slowed their pace. The gap between them and their owner shortened. Yet track they did. They made their way to a small hill, then vanished over the top of it. Phillips began clambering up when he heard a subtle clamor just ahead of him: the dogs panting excitedly, and their paws pacing over one spot.

The crunching footsteps of a man suddenly approached from over the hill. Phillips had only time to clasp the pistol when the stranger emerged. Phillips froze and looked up.

"Phillips? Shit, man, where did you come from?" Daniel Gittleston said. Phillips stood mouth ajar.

"Hey, man, we got some serious shit here," Daniel continued. The dimwitted joviality from earlier was absent in him. "There was a bear."

Phillips reached the top of the hill and saw Cooper ahead, greeting one of the dogs, and a few yards beyond him, a strange shape in the dirt, an amalgam of dark red and brown. It looked like a man.

"Bear attack," said Cooper. "It ain't pretty."

Phillips walked past Daniel without a word, then past Cooper. The two followed him. The terrain leveled off and became rockier. The forest was denser and shadier. He arrived. It was a man, alright—utterly mutilated and covered in blood. Dried red saliva lined his face

from a hard-bitten tongue. Enormous claw marks in rows of four riddled his torso and shoulders. His gut was nearly ripped open, and a tooth-marked arm desperately tried to keep his organs in place.

Phillips checked the dead man's face. It was the man he was after.

"You recognize him?" Cooper asked.

"No," was the quick response.

"Yeah, us neither."

Now where in Hell was the duffel bag? Did these morons find it?

"Huge bear, man," Daniel observed. "Think it was Mean Beau."

"Guy had a gun there, see?" Cooper said. He pointed to a small snub nose revolver in the dirt nearby.

Phillips paid no attention to the two as they prattled about their detective work. His mind was on some other grim subject, and his eyes wandered the scene. The Gittleson brothers quickly became flustered at their inability to get him more invested in the more current matter. He couldn't even distinguish their voices:

"See, there's no other car over at the road there."

"Yeah, so, we don't know where he came from, and if you don't recognize him—"

"And we checked the gun. There's two shots missin', but no blood trail from the bear..."

As Phillips looked around, he noticed that the other dog was, as usual, ahead of him. She stood deep in the shade, her head up, smelling the air beyond her.

"Hey, Phillips. We don't know what to do here."

Phillips at last turned to the brothers.

“He, uh...” he started.

“What?”

“He have anything with him?”

The brothers’ faces went expressionless.

“What-what does that have to do with— did he *have* anything?” Daniel said glibly.

“No, forget it,” Phillips said equally glibly. “I don’t know.”

“Alright, well, you think you could head back and report this?” Cooper asked, somewhat pressingly.

“Yeah. It was probably Mean Beau,” Daniel added. “Should let the rangers know he’s around here.”

Phillips turned again to the dog. She faced her owner, awaiting an order. The brothers looked at the dog, then to Phillips, perhaps for the same reason. The tick in his brain worsened. It became an unreachable itch. Every second he spent with these idiots, he was more irritated. They either knew about the duffel or they didn’t, and he was starting not to care which it was.

He stepped right over the corpse and made for the pointer. “Stay,” he said. She obeyed.

He passed her, where, just behind a bush, was a deep hole in the ground where a large tree had fallen over, uprooted. Sloppily and quickly thrown into it— with some dead leaves sprinkled on top— was the duffel. Phillips looked back at the brothers, still standing by the corpse. They knew.

All three of the men had guns.

“Okay,” Phillips said. “Okay.”

The Struggle

Those sons of a bitch. Phillips began his trek back, shotgun on one shoulder and duffel on the other, with only half of the cash inside—a couple million easily, but half nonetheless. Only half of the quarry he chased all morning was his own. Those redneck sons of a bitch.

He was furious. Every step was a step away from the other half. The tick had not ceased; half would not satisfy it. Rather, it grew. It became a needle that shifted like the needle of a compass, but stingingly and almost painfully, scraping the inner walls of his skull, pointing him back to get the rest of his hard-earned prize by any means, by any way he could.

Yet his feet disagreed with him, taking him against his will back to the gravel road. He was exhausted. As far as he had walked, the ground was still cold in the shadow of the mountain range. But the sun was so close; it would pass the behemoth any minute now, and reward him at least with some warmth, and the more he ached, the more that was all he wanted. That was all his face and his hands and his feet wanted: a little warmth.

So the tick would grasp his whole body in short bursts, sending him back. Over the next mile, he would stop and turn and stop and turn again. It seemed that at every step, some new reason in favor of the opposite direction he walked revealed itself, and he would spin on the spot and follow it. He wasn't even sure if he was speaking aloud as he campaigned for both sides of the struggle, rambling and wandering and spinning, his saliva drying and frothing on his lips in the cold.

It was *his* money, sure. He knew about it, he tracked it. He deserved it.

But half was still plenty. More than he had ever imagined he would ever have.

So he imagined that other half, and he felt the scraping in his skull again.

But he was so damn tired. Maybe he just needed to get home and think. Or maybe even the warmth of the sun would ease him, if just a

little.

But the sun would come out no matter what direction he went. He'd been out there this long. He'd gone this far. The Gittleson brothers couldn't track each other's ass up the back of his legs. He could find them easily...follow them...

And then what would he do?

He came out of the craze and froze. As he had drifted with his head to the ground, the thoughts had built into a thunderous static clogging his ears that had now suddenly ceased, and the forest shook violently in a dense gust of wind. He wondered what effect the sight of two dead men, more than he had seen in his life, in one morning might have had. The sight of all that money, too. He inhaled and sighed.

He was back at the clearing and the crashed plane. It was unchanged. He could faintly smell the corpse from where he stood. All he cared of the crash was the thought that he had better make good tracks from it before the rangers arrived, and in that moment he suddenly became aware of his own numbness to the whole ordeal. He frightened himself; he didn't recognize himself.

Now, where were the dogs?

He didn't know at which point they vanished as he drifted in thought moments ago. They were gone. He saw no movement ahead. He heard nothing — and then he did.

A heavy rustling came from the brush to the East, just a few yards into the trees. Phillips whistled. The rustling stopped.

A bellowing, low-pitched groan came from the trees — it was a bear. Phillips reached for his pistol — but the duffel was slumped over the holster. He looked up:

The sun came out. It passed the mountain and blinded him instantly. He saw nothing but orange, and suddenly heard all 800 pounds of Mean Beau charge him, his paws timpani drums against the ground. Phillips, still blinded, braced, screamed and felt the animal crash into him like a bus, pinning him helpless, his head slamming into the bar-

rel of the shotgun now crushed between his back and the ground. He couldn't reach the pistol; the bear's left paw crushed his right arm, tangled in the shoulder strap of the duffel bag. He screamed again as teeth and claws dug deep into his shoulders. His breath was squeezed from his lungs as Beau's other paw crushed his rib cage under its weight. The screaming stopped. Then the paw pulled back, and all 5 claws shredded his chest. He felt his own skin obey the claws and peel. He felt the flesh depart his body. Mean Beau roared, his mouth inches from Phillips' face. Phillips felt his left arm free as Beau lifted his paw to swipe again. He tried to cover his face just as the bear tried to bite it, but his forearm went into the mouth instead. Beau yanked and tugged and thrashed the arm in his jaws. Phillips' shoulder snapped out of place and his forearm was crushed. He managed to breathe and screamed again. The bear dropped the arm and swung at Phillips' now defenseless face, slashing his cheek and his ear and his eye.

A gunshot went off. Blood suddenly spurt from Mean Beau's shoulder. The bear recoiled and lifted his head to the unseen assailant. Another shot hit his neck. Beau collapsed onto Phillips, gargled a few last grumbling breaths, and died on top of him.

Phillips wheezed helplessly for breath, and realized that he was suffocating under the dead bear's weight. Tears flooded his eyes and blurred his vision. At the first shot fired, he knew what the Gittleston brothers had done. Perhaps he was on his way to do the same. Perhaps one of them had some change of heart upon seeing him ripped to pieces, or perhaps they simply waited to shoot the bear until they knew he was finished.

Every breath became harder to draw. He was utterly immobilized. His right hand clutched the strap of his prize feebly and weakly, but he knew they would pry it from him. He heard the two's footsteps emerge from the trees and approach. He tasted blood. Joel Jonas Phillips was finished. His eyes stared, bulged and reddened as he was wrung of breath. The hand loosed the duffel.

To Taste

France T.

Lips like marshmallows in hot cocoa—
soft and warm,
supple yet, sweet—
give way to lips like ice cubes:
firm and cool,
pliable, yet tasteless

Tongues intermingle,
combining flavors of heat and comfort.

Hands grasping faces,
holding what is theirs
and taking what they please —
sampling, searching, inquiring.

Lips break away
while tongues unravel.
Hands, still grasping, widen their reach.
Eyes, conveying words unspoken,
gazes receiving words left unsaid.

Mouths meet once more—
tasting, savoring, devouring.

Bodies collapse onto clouds,
surfaces unrecognizable in
moments like these.

Claiming, eating, consuming—
something ravenous reaches its peak,
tasting until there's nothing left.

To taste is to consume



“Plant Wall”
Kayla Voss

red lentil soup

A. Gusenkov

Kaleidoscope Sphinx Award for Prose



His heels, red and solid, dug sharply into the earth. Fleishy clay clung to the cracks in his calloused skin. It was soft and he sank lightly into it, the pillowy soil beneath the sparse green grass.

He had a blade affixed to his belt in a simple sheath on which his brother had carved the image of a lamb and its mother, crude silhouettes made perhaps more crude by the fact that they were etched onto the leather of a slaughtered ewe. He was quite used to slaughtering ewes; he didn't worry himself about it much. It was only natural. He pulled that blade out of its sheath and it shone under the white sun.

The killing tended to fall to him. He was a natural-born hunter, and he was proud of it. His father was proud of it, too; he would come home, game slung over his browned shoulders, and his father would rub the hair on his back and bless him for it. His brother had a strong mind, and he had strong forearms that kept his family fed.

He wiped sweat from his shaggy brows, his large hand streaking dirt across his forehead. He'd clambered up this hill on all fours like an antelope. He did it quietly, careful not to raucously tear up the ground and scare off his game - a herd of fallow deer, which he had only glimpsed earlier, but now stood in a militant phalanx on the lower ground below him. They pawed at the earth and bent their heads low, pulling up grass with the roots.

He crouched and thought, blade in hand. He hadn't anticipated this. He thought he knew all of the game herds around here, the lumpy wild boars and gazelles curving their spines beneath the hot sun, the fallow deer that would drop their velvety antlers

for him to pick up and bring to his brother who could fashion them into knife handles or little statuettes. He kept track, and this group was unfamiliar. One of them was swollen around the middle - grotesquely pregnant. None of his herds had a pregnant doe.

Because he hadn't expected them, he wasn't prepared for them. He furrowed those shaggy brows. He had set no traps, left no loose stones or thorns in their path; he could pursue them, but they would outrun him. He had two thick-set legs and hairy arms fixed uselessly to his shoulders - the deer were reedlike, lithe, and they would twist their tense bodies, throwing their hooves in the air, kicking up pillars of dust. He envied them. He'd envied them more when he was younger, wondering how much more he could catch if he could move the way they moved.

He crouched and he thought.

His brother would know what to do - he watched the pregnant doe bow her head and pick at the grass. His brother would know what to do, and not because he had any experience doing it. His knives were used to fashion new tents out of thick undyed parchment, or help their mother prepare dinner. The closest he had ever come to killing a thing was stripping the scales off of fish so that their mother, sighing contentedly over his shoulder, could add the soft white flesh into a stew. But he was gifted in other ways.

He watched as the doe brought her head up again, into the sun.

The herd had made itself vulnerable, nestled between two silty hills, the sort through which water might run during the wetter months of the year. They bristled with downy grass that would soon coarsen yellow and bend to the earth as the sun grew hotter and hotter. The deer must have known that their supply was limited; food would soon begin to run out. It seemed that death

by predation, quick, violent death, was preferable to the long dilatory drag of starvation.

He wiped sweat off his brow again, ran his fingers through his thick dark beard. Poor gentle woman, he thought, watching the pregnant doe.

If he found a way to startle the herd while it was packed so tightly between the grassy mounds, there was a considerable chance one would trip over another and stumble long enough to be left behind. Then, he could get at it. He looked left and right, blinking against the sun; to his left, a cubit away, was a ragged stone half-buried in the soil. Slowly, steadily, he reached towards it, digging it out with his yellow fingernails.

Maybe he shouldn't.

His hand hovered in the air, knuckles pale, skin red. Maybe he shouldn't. This was a different sort of hunt; a dishonest one. He would throw the stone across the clearing, over their mousy heads, and it would fall just out of his line of sight where he could see the crowning bough of a short gaunt tree rooted somewhere at the base of the hill. If he had any sort of aim at all, it would hit the tree, and the branches would shudder dangerously, and the herd would hear it and scatter. Fallow deer were simple creatures that did not pause to consider where the noises they heard came from. They took cues without question.

It was the sort of plot his brother would come up with. His mouth twitched, almost grinning - if his brother were anything but human, he always said, he'd be a serpent twisting beneath the sun, pretending to be something else. A branch, perhaps, or a coil of twine.

He was not his brother. He brought the stone up to his chest, to his heart. This was not an honest hunt. An honest hunt would be one where both the hunter and the prey understood what was happening; he had no desire to make a thing think it had es-

caped when it hadn't. Unlike his brother, he was not an ambush predator - he was not a liar.

Sweat ran down from his forehead, past his brows, into his eyelashes. He blinked it away. What was he on about? His family, his mother and father and brother, needed to eat. He was the one that brought home their meals.

Besides, it was terribly hot. If he killed now, he could soon walk proudly back into the tents that were his home, and he would receive a generous portion of whatever his mother had prepared for him that day. Perhaps it was red lentil soup. He, despite being a dutiful carnivore, had a special tender love for red lentil soup.

He let himself fall silently on his side, lithe for his frame, and hastened like a hairy sun-tanned wildcat down the side of the hill. His blade was still unsheathed in his hand; he held it low and ready. In his other hand he clutched the stone tight, tensing his arms, preparing for the rush of hair and hooves that would come his way.

With the sun in his eyes, he threw the stone. As soon as it left his hand, it disappeared into the haze of bleached sunlight. He heard an impact, and the shuddering of leaves, and a low crackling sound like a great elm uprooted and beginning its calamitous descent to the ground.

The sun really did have a way of bleaching things white. He blamed it for his condition. His brother could be spiritual, could spend his days on his knees with his mother or studying Yah-weh's Word with his father, because he stayed in the shade of their tents. He, the ruddy hairy-armed hunter, himself something more like a bear or an ape than a person, had to waste away beneath the sun. It had made his skin brown and it had made his soul pale and brittle and white. Often, wandering the endless rippled Negev beneath that terrific sun, he would find

himself wondering if there was any Yah-weh at all, and why it did not elect to show itself to him in all his lonely years.

Now, he realized that he had been a fool. There was a bridge between him and heaven right here, crackling behind the curve of the hill.

He began to run before he knew why he was running. The herd went with him, past him, baying and crooning and kicking up dust. His eyes burned. He heard it behind him - a plume of sound, a low growl that billowed into a roar. He held his knife tight in his hand, though he had been startled so badly there was no doubt he wouldn't be able to use it if he got the chance. Again, he cursed his body for having two thick legs and two useless arms, for its inability to bend down and run on all fours and blend into the hooved crowd.

There would be no outrunning a leopard. He would just have to hope that it would kill something else and not him.

He could glimpse it if he craned his neck back, narrowed his eyes so his long lashes would shut out the dust. It was the color of the sand, encrusted with the clay he himself had been nestled in a moment ago. It could be mistaken for a swarm of locusts, perhaps, sooty black spots against the hillside.

He realized in his fugue that it must have been there the whole time, hidden by the tree, ambushing the herd of fallow deer the exact same way he was. He had thrown the rock and startled it into action. It had tricked him - his brother would call it a demon in the body of a leopard, a deceiver, a spirit of evil here to teach him a lesson about honorability and the fragility of his own life.

He would say that, and then he would laugh. He heard it in his own head as if his brother was there next to him - his brother, the hypocrite.

It screamed again in that peculiar way leopards do: guttural, loud, pharyngeal. He blanched. The knolls were rising on either side of the spasming cluster of living, moving things - a bottleneck, he realized, a bottleneck! One deer broke away in front of him, round and unbalanced, scrabbling for the swelling incline. His knife was still in his hand; he dropped it and it disappeared beneath the throng of hooves.

He wondered if his body would taste different to the great snarling thing; his meat, hairy and tough, born red and scorched golden. Would it even be able to tell his gore apart from that of anything else - any other animal, soulless and wild-eyed, out on the grassy plain?

He imagined teeth around his ankle. He reached forward for the doe on the incline, grabbed her heel, and followed her up into the sun.

The doe keened. Just behind them he felt heat and muscle, felt it the way one feels the presence of something in a dream. With a cogent heave, he pulled the doe down by her heel and sent her stumbling down the hill behind him. Blinded by dust and the thick smell of fur, clay crumbling beneath him, he clambered up and over. At the peak, he bent himself low to the earth, flinging himself forward with his legs and landing on his hands like a hare. The ground fell away again; he lost his footing and rolled down, sky twisting, frenzied braying growing distant.

He saw the sun and it looked dazzling to him. His brother would laugh - he knew that right away, before he could possibly know anything else. He would return home, and he would tell this story to his family over dinner, and his brother would call him a fool. He laid there, body heaving, sweat soaking into the earth. His brother, who spent his days helping their mother weave and playing with his father's camels! His

face cracked open, flaxen teeth glimmering in the sunlight; he laughed.

He couldn't wait to tell him. His brother must have been the funniest person he knew.

Eventually, the plain fell quiet again. Whatever had happened - with the leopard, with the doe and her fawn, with the herd that had come out of nowhere and had gone off to nowhere - it had moved far away from him. A flock of small black birds landed on one of the low scraggly shrubs near him, chatting discordantly among themselves. He watched them flit around and then watched them move on. Eventually, he got back on his feet, cleaned some of the gummy clay off of his shoulders, and moved on.

The leopard never left him for a second.

It was behind every tree and every hill. He found himself keeping to open ground, brows furrowed, warily craning his neck over his shoulders. His knife was gone; he could not hunt. He picked up a rock and dropped it again. Once, he found a hare, staring back at him with eyes like little glowing beads. He considered strangling it with his bare hands, knuckles pale around its throat, but he couldn't. Surely the leopard would find it soon, and then it would kill it. Then, it would come for him. They were both doomed.

When he finally made his way back to his family's tents, he was empty-handed and rehearsing apologies. They still had food; it had been a good hunting week, and his father had traded for some extra vegetables with a group of traveling merchants on their proud camels. His legs, nonetheless, were leaden. He hung his head low, ducking beneath a woven curtain into his family home.

Only his brother was there.

“About time. Mother and Father were just about to send me out to look for your body.” The hunter scoffed - not annoyed, not particularly amused, only exhausted. He took his belt, on which hung the empty sheath, off of his hip and tossed it unceremoniously into the corner.

“Empty-handed?” His brother grinned at him, face pale, cheeks rosy. They had the same face, but they rarely wore the same expression anymore. Perhaps they did when they were young: dark-haired, big-eyed, grinning twin boys giving their mother trouble while their father was out mending their tent.

“You won’t believe what happened to me.” The hunter sighed, hollow-faced. “What are you doing?”

His brother stepped back. He was standing over a fire, he realized, and on the fire was a shiny black pot and in the pot was something wonderful.

The hunter salivated.

“Red lentil soup. It’s the only thing Mama trusts me to make on my own.” His brother smiled at him. “Those merchants, the ones with their big ridiculous camels, apparently threw some extra lentils in for Father because he’s traded with them before. God bless them - they know loyalty when they see it!”

“Give me some.”

The hunter salivated.

“You’re filthy, you know that?” His brother tittered. “Go wash off in the river - and then wait for dinner. Then you can have some.”

“No, Jacob - I want it now. Just give me a spoonful.”

His brother stepped between the hunter and the fire, and he was still smiling, and several furlongs away the leopard dragged a broken body into the shade beneath an olive tree and gorged itself.

“Alright, Esau, but you have to give me something in return.”



“The Field That Watched Me Heal”

Kiersten Gantek



“Absolam”
A. Gusenko V

Ode to Atlas

Jacob Cline

Raise an ode to Atlas, he who holds up the sky
Did he know his curse? Did he choose his fate?
Why did you do it? Again, I ask why?

He who fought the gods, only to be left high and dry
I wonder, did you fight alone? Armed with just your hate?
Raise an ode to Atlas, he who holds up the sky

Below you lives pass on, yours comes by and by
Do you let your mind drift back to there? That cursed date?
Why did you do it? Again, I ask why?

He who holds up my world, to this life you are my tie
Was the effort worth it? Until then you sit and wait
Raise an ode to Atlas, he who holds up the sky

Did you ever dream of something else? Did you wish to fly?
Or do you smile now, your pride all you can sate
Why did you do it? Again, I ask why?

I would free you if I could, I would wipe every tear you cry
But you say you are happy, that it is a joyful weight
Raise an ode to Atlas, he who holds up the sky
Why did you do it? Again, I ask why?

Smoke

France T.

Inhale...
Black, star-filled nights, wrapped in warmth.
Exhale...
Smoke from two cigarettes fills the air.
Inhale...
Mouths exchange words with no meaning.
Exhale...
Eyes relay desires left unspoken.
Inhale...
Music fills the quiet lull in words.
Exhale...
Whispered tones that aren't really heard.
Inhale...
Spots of ash resemble the pain of what is unrequited.
Exhale...
Eyes forget to meet once more.
Inhale...
One cigarette burns out before the other.
Exhale...
The other remains burning, missing what is gone.
...
Never to inhale again.

Cinnamon

Ocean Swift



Kaleidoscope Unicorn Award for Poetry

&



Kaleidoscope Jackelope Award for Best
Overall Submission

We sit down for dinner every evening,
the world half shadowed in candlelight.

You set out my meal
and pour a glass of wine
with just a hint of the poison
that's eating me alive.

Gone are the days
when you disguised the taste in my tea
or held a knife blade to my throat.

My dear, now you know
that if you pressed it to my lips
I'd drink it straight from the vial.

And I don't even mind
when blood rises from my throat
and spills over my lips
down to the collar of my ivory dress.

It just serves as an excuse
to feel your hands on my face as you wipe it away.

And each night we lay down in your bed, our bed.

The poison lingers on my lips
so you never kiss them
but you hold me as I sleep
with my head on your chest
and I can hardly feel the acid-burn in my throat.

And when we wake, you brush my hair
as I look at myself in the mirror.
My eyes are ringed with black
and my skin is pale as death.
But you tell me I'm pretty like autumn leaves,
vibrant, brilliant, dying things.

So I drink this poison willingly
though it keeps getting harder to hold up my head
and I can hardly speak with my ravaged tongue.
But you let me lean my head on your shoulder.
As the tears slide down my cheeks,
you don't wipe them away.

You lay me down in our bed, your bed.
My burning skin is numb now to your touch.
I don't mean to say I have any regrets
but part of me has to wonder
if there is a world
where you might have loved me gently instead.

A Silent Dread

Monty M.

I straighten the utensils until they line up evenly along the edges, listening to the TV humming low in the living room.

Mom brings the plates of pasta to the table with steam rising and disappearing.

Dad sits across from me. He doesn't look up. We start eating.

"How was your day, Tristan?" Mom asks.

"Fine."

She nods. "Anything interesting?"

I shake my head and keep my eyes on the plate. The noodles fold over themselves in the red sauce.

Dad's fork scrapes the ceramic. "Keep your head up."

My eyes find my reflection looking back at me in the window.

Mom touches my wrist lightly. "You've been seeing Colton and Mason, right?"

Without thinking, I pull my hand back. I nod.

Dad chews and swallows. "Great talk."

Mom clears her throat. "You have therapy tomorrow after school."

Dad pushes his plate forward. "Still?"

"Yes," she says quietly.

"For how long?" Dad's look turns stern.

Mom doesn't answer.

I cut into the meatball to reveal a darker inside. The food slides past my taste buds.

Dad stands, and his chair legs drag across the floor. “Same as always,” he mutters.

Mom gathers the plates, then pauses at mine. “You’re not going to finish?”

I shake my head. She takes it.

Water runs in the sink as voices rise in the kitchen. The TV keeps humming.

I sit there for a moment longer, staring at the space where my plate was.

“I don’t belong,” I say, but I’m not sure if I say it out loud.

No one answers.

Before I even realize, I’m on my feet watching as my legs bend with each step up the stairs. My eyes narrow on the floor as I absently walk down the dimly lit hallway to my bedroom. At the door, my arm lifts to grasp the doorknob. It’s a chill that mingles across my entire body—the muscles in my wrist twist as the door creaks open. The door closes behind me, snuffing out the hallway light.

Darkness wraps around my vision.

The air feels thick, unmoving.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

My arm moves before I’m awake. The alarm cuts off mid-ring.

I lie still. Light presses against my eyelids like something waiting to be let in.

6:30 a.m.

The numbers look right.

Sweat clings to my skin. I don't remember turning the fan off. I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and cross the room. The fan clicks on, and cool air brushes my face, but the heat under my skin stays.

I always sleep with the fan on. I guess I forgot.

Forgot.

The word doesn't sit right.

Downstairs, the smell of eggs drifts toward me. The scent feels distant, like it belongs to another house.

"Good morning, son." Mom's voice lands softly, but I flinch anyway. She kisses my forehead.

"Morning." My voice sounds thinner than usual. "Do you remember what I did last night?"

She pauses for a second. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just—" I search for words. "I don't remember falling asleep."

Her expression smooths. "You must've been tired." She turns back to the stove. "Breakfast is on the table. I have to leave for work."

I nod.

The kitchen shrinks when she walks away.

A plate of sunny-side-up eggs waits on the table. I cut into the yolk. It spills dull yet warm. I lift the fork to my mouth. Halfway through swallowing, my throat closes.

Not sharp. Not suddenly. Tight. I cough.

Egg and spit scatter across the table.

The chair falls back as I grip the sink. Another cough tears through me, hollow and dry.

Water runs. I swallow until the spasm loosens.

When I shut off the faucet, the house is silent. I stand there longer than I need to.

Tires screech outside.

Shit. I grab my backpack and bolt out the door.

Noise floods my eardrums as I step up onto the bus. Every seat is taken. I slide into the front seat beside the driver and stare ahead.

I don't like it here. I'd rather be home, where it's quiet. I just want—

“‘Silence’ is so much better.” A voice breaks my thoughts. I peer down the aisle to see a conversation between two girls.

“No, are you serious? Sarah McLachlan has so many better songs than that. ‘I Will Remember You’ is one of my favorites—” The other girl refutes.

Oh. Music.

My body shifts forward as the bus stops. Footsteps and voices flow around me as I enter the school.

Pre-Calculus.

Entering the class, I find my seat in the back. A familiar hand slaps the edge of my desk.

“Good luck. Imma need my lunch after this hell.” Colton rolls his eyes and walks up to take the seat in front of me.

“You too.” My leg bounces rhythmically under the desk.

“Alright, class. This is your second-to-last test of the year. As you all know, no notes, no phones.” Ms. Dunbrink preaches as she hands out

the tests.

The pencil in my hand scribbles out math, right or wrong. My eyes land on the last question.

A substance has an initial mass of 160 lbs and decays at a rate of 8% per year. How many years will it take for the mass to disappear?

I blink and reread the question. I skim the line too fast.

A human has an initial mass—

I rub my eyes.

A substance has an initial mass—

My pencil hovers over the paper.

“Ten more minutes, class,” Ms. Dunbrink shouts.

I write down an answer, not processing what I wrote. I hand over my test and slump my head back onto the desk and wrap my arms around my head. A bubble of darkness.

BRRRING BRRRING

The school bell brings me back to reality. I grab my backpack and walk out of the classroom.

“Hey man, where the hell are you going?” Colton jogs up to my right. “That test was bullshit. I got nothing right.”

“Yeah, same.” The last question, still clouding my mind.

We walk to the cafeteria, where a short lunch line awaits us. We shortly find a table to sit at.

“Hey, guys.” Mason sits next to me. “How were your guy’s mornings?”

“We just bombed a test.” Colton nods towards me. “How about

you?"

"It's been great! Lemme tell ya." Mason adjusts his glasses and begins to tell his story. I fork up the mashed potatoes and watch them slowly fall. I poke at the string beans, watching the putrid water ooze out of them.

"-dude. Hey. Hello." Colton waves a hand in my face. "Where'd you go?"

"S-Sorry. I didn't sleep well." I see them glance at each other. "It's nothing."

"Okay, weirdo." Mason finishes his lunch. "You're still coming tomorrow, right?"

My fork taps against the plastic tray. "Ummm."

"Come on, man." Colton's tone lightens. "We were planning on playing the new racing game at my house. Remember?"

My gaze lowers. "I-I don't know." I pick at the skin on my left thumb under the table.

"Okay. I'll decide for you." Mason shoves me a little. "I'll pick you up at 3."

I look up to see Mason's eager smile. I give in. "Yeah, sure."

BRRRING BRRRING

"Great! See you guys!" Colton salutes us as he leaves.

"See ya tomorrow, Tristan." Mason slaps my back and walks away.

I look back down at the table. Then a desk. Another desk. Another. Then the final bell rings.

The school empties into the street, and I drift downtown toward my therapist's office. The building waits where it always does. I climb the steps and push through the glass door. After signing in, I follow the familiar hallway to Dr. Everburn's office. She's already seated,

facing the door.

“Hello, Tristan.” Her smile fails to brighten the room. “How are you doing today?”

I shift in the chair across from her. “Fine.”

She sifts through her notes. “Last time we talked, you told me you still feel out of place. Do you still feel this way?”

I nod.

I shrug, give one-word replies, and shake my head at the rest of her familiar inquiries.

She closes her notepad. “Let’s do the same exercise as last time. Lay back further, close your eyes, and recount a time in your life where you’ve felt content.”

The room fades as my eyes close. I wander around in complete darkness, searching for another random memory to please her.

Nothing.

Not even a single recollection shows itself against the black. I scrunch my eyes tighter.

“Your time’s up.” Dr. Everburn’s voice cuts through the dark.

My eyes snap open. “What?” I promptly sit up.

“Did you find anything?” She stares down at her notepad.

“N-No, I couldn’t. I-I—”

“It’s okay. That usually happens.” She looks down at her notepad, her hand unmoving.

“D-Does it?” I try to meet her downward gaze.

Dr. Everburn finally looks up at me. “Yes.”

My mouth opens, but it makes no noise.

“I’ll see you next week.” Her hand motions for me to leave. “Take good care of yourself.”

“W–Wait. Already?” The floor tilts. “How long did I have my eyes closed for?”

“Nineteen minutes.” Her gaze shifts to the door. “I’ll see you next week.”

I look at her for a while longer. The room closes in, and I find myself outside where my mom waits in the car. I toss my backpack into the backseat and hop in.

She asks a few questions about my day. I answer in single words. After a while, she turns the radio up.

Dad’s car is waiting in the driveway when we pull in. She walks ahead of me into the house.

“Dinner will be ready in thirty. Get comfortable.” Mom walks away towards the kitchen.

My feet drag me to my bedroom. I change, and I fall into my bed. The sheets’ roughness pushes against my back. The ceiling rises.

“Dinner’s ready.” Mom calls out.

I head downstairs. Plates of smoked halibut and collard greens sit on the table. Mom and Dad have already started eating. The TV hums somewhere in the house.

I take my seat.

“How was your guy’s day?” My dad’s tone is unchanging.

“Mine was good. I talked to my boss like you insisted I do, and he said he’d give me a raise.” Mom flashes a smile at us.

“That’s great, sweetie.” Dad places a hand on her wrist.

“Fine.” I fork a bit of fish into my mouth. Tasteless.

My dad nods.

Forks scrape. Knives drag across porcelain.

My parents finish and leave the table while I stare at my plate, still half-full. I scrape what’s left into the trash.

“Goodnight.” I set my plate in the sink. Mom nods without looking up.

I head to bed. My mattress doesn’t sink. My eyes close.

I open them again to a blinding light. My head swivels to notice it coming from my window. I get a closer look.

Daytime.

I grab my phone.

1:00 p.m.

A stiffness gathers in my throat. Something swells there — tight, unmovable.

My mouth falls open, but air won’t come cleanly. A cough rips out of me.

I lunge into the bathroom, gripping the sink as another one hits. Spit streaks the porcelain. My throat burns, as if something has pressed there too long.

The edges of the room blur. For a second, I can’t pull in enough air. Then it loosens. My eyes scatter as the room starts to piece itself together. My ears sharpen to hear pots and pans clatter faintly. I wipe my mouth and stumble down the stairs.

“Morning.” Mom grabs something from the fridge. “Your dad just left to grab something from the store.”

“Something’s wrong with me.” My voice is hoarse.

Her eyes flicker up to look at me for a second. “Oh, what’s going on?”

“Well, first, I don’t remember sleeping at all last night and—”

Mom interrupts me. “I don’t think anyone ever remembers sleeping.” She giggles under her breath.

“N-No, I mean, I literally just took one blink and BAM, it’s the next day.” My arm is restless against my side.

“Oh, well, I’ve had that happen to me a few times. It’s normal to have bad nights like that sometimes.” Mom walks past me.

“Fine. Sure. Whatever.” I rub my forehead. “E–Explain this. I woke up today, and I started coughing my freakin lungs out. It felt like I was gonna die!” My arms flail up. “The same thing happened yesterday when I tried to eat my breakfast!”

“Okay, okay, calm down. If it’s really as bad as you say it is, I can set up a doctor’s appointment on Monday.” My mom’s hand hovers over my arm, as if to make it rest. It doesn’t. “It sounds like you’re really stressed. How about you just go walk it off a bit, okay?”

My eyes dart towards the window. The sun shines brightly on the front yard. Grass like emeralds. My arms lay at my sides. “Yeah, I guess so.” I see my mom’s wry smile. I step into my shoes and head outside.

My clothes ruffle in the breeze. The air is empty of scent. I round the right side of the house where the forest waits. Trees stretch towards the clouds as light threads through the canopy, stitching gold into bark and moss.

My shoes kick up dirt as I start on the path.

The path bends right, but I don’t follow. I pass the boulder. I turn left and see the fallen tree ahead, its ribs of wood exposed, asleep in moss. I hear it before I see it. Water moving over stone. The clearing

opens, and the brook travels through it. The grass dips where I've lain before. I lower myself into it. The earth fits me. Water whispers. My eyes grow heavy.

My body sinks.

Bzzz bzzz bzzz

A vibration starts in my left pants' pocket. I answer.

"Hello?" My eyes half-closed.

"Hey, dude. Mason and I are waiting in your driveway. Come on." Colton speaks over Mason.

My phone reads 3:00 p.m. "Oh, sorry, I must've lost track of time. I'll be there in a sec."

"You don't have to come if you don't want to." Colton's flat voice lingers in my ear.

"N-No. I do. I'll be right there." I hang up the phone and start to get up. The sound of running water dissipates. Rocks and branches are exposed as the water recedes. My eyes linger on it for a while before looking away as I start to head back. The green on the leaves drains as clouds replace the sun. The trees, frozen in time by the stagnant air. My footsteps, loud against the mute backdrop.

Making it to the front of my house, I head over to get inside the backseat of the car.

"-game is gonna be so cool." Mason converses with Colton. He looks past me as he reverses the car into the road.

"Still in your pjs, I see." Mason looks me up and down with a smirk forming on his face.

"Oh, yeah. I woke up late." My seatbelt clicks as Colton starts driving.

Mason and Colton go back to talking about the game. Streaks of

muted color pass by outside. Before I know it, the car turns off, and Colton's house is in view.

"-and the teacher just gave me an F." Mason continues as we get out of the car. "Whatever, after a year, I won't have to see that loser ever again."

Colton laughs. "Yeah, can't wait to leave this place." Colton leads as he grabs his key to open the front door.

Following close behind the two of them, I see stairs emerge from the foyer on the left and ascend to the mezzanine balcony. We head up and enter Colton's bedroom.

"I only got two controllers, so we're gonna have to swap each game." Colton hands the controllers to Mason and me. "I played a bit this morning."

Mason laughs. "Damn, couldn't wait for us, huh?" He snatches the controller and crashes onto the beanbag closest to him, facing the TV on the left wall.

"Thanks." I grab the controller and sit in the other beanbag to the right of Mason.

Colton jumps up on his bed behind us. "The game is set up. Just select your car and get first place. Easy."

The TV comes to life as the announcer starts the countdown, and we take off. Out of all the races, Mason beats me at all of them, but never quite gets first place. I hand over the controller to Colton as my eyes start to strain. We trade spots, and I lie down on the bed staring at the ceiling.

The room begins to feel small. Cars screech in the background. The room disappears, and I sink into the bed.

The announcer's voice from the video game crackles through the speakers. "-waste of space."

My stomach drops. My eyes snap open. I begin to sit up.

“I got first place!” Mason throws his arms in the air.

Colton groans. “Whatever.”

I sit still, trying to remember what I heard.

A buzzing starts in my pocket.

“Hello, when are you coming home? It’s already five,” Mom says.

“Hey, I guess I could come back now, actually.” I sit up.

“Do you need to be picked up?”

I move my phone away from my ear. “Hey Colton, you think you could drive me back?” Colton remains silent, his attention entirely on the game. “Yeah, actually.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in twenty.” Mom hangs up.

I sit there, mindlessly watching the cars on the screen crash, pass, and speed down highways.

I walk to the bedroom door and turn to see Colton and Mason slamming the buttons on the controllers. “Okay, I gotta go. I’ll see you guys.” I wave goodbye.

Colton and Mason’s eyes never leave the screen.

My feet refuse to leave the floor, waiting for some acknowledgement. The room starts to sink. The floor stabilizes a bit as I walk through the doorway. Cars still race behind me.

I meet my mom outside and get in the car. She’s already on the phone. I stare at the sky. It’s the same gray as earlier. Or maybe darker. Trees pass, and houses blur. The radio stays off, and her voice fills the car, but none of it is meant for me. We pull into the driveway, and Dad’s car is already there. Inside, the house smells like chicken noodle soup. Steam fogs the kitchen window. Mom moves between the stove and the counter without looking at me. I go upstairs. Change
Come back down.

They're already eating.

I take my seat across from Dad, the window at my back. I lift the spoon. The broth burns the back of my throat.

"I went to Home Depot today. Bought supplies to fix the laundry machine tomorrow." Dad slurps his soup.

"That's great," Mom replies. "I took care of the tax returns today. That was a nightmare." Her spoon circles the bowl slowly.

I dip my spoon again. "I hung out with friends." The broth touches my tongue. Nothing

They keep eating. Maybe they didn't hear me.

"I hung o—"

"I'm thinking of going to the city," Dad says, cutting through me without looking up. "You can bring a friend. Lunch. Drinks. Like old times."

Mom smiles at him. "Mmm. That sounds nice." Her spoon drops into the empty bowl with a dull clink.

"Oh, that sounds fun," I try again. "You think I could—" They laugh softly at something between them. Not at me.

My spoon taps against the bowl. The room feels smaller. Mom stands and gathers the bowls without looking at mine.

"M-Mom?"

She disappears into the kitchen.

"D-Dad?"

He vanishes into the living room.

I push back from the table. The chair makes no sound.

I find my mom in the kitchen. Words form in my head, but nothing leaves my mouth. She hums to herself as if she's alone.

I can't be here.

The hallway narrows as I move through it. My hand turns the handle, and stale air spills inside. The yard beyond is darker than it should be.

I step into it.

The trees rise like pillars at the edge of the forest, their trunks swallowed in shadow. The trees swallow sound. Even my breath disappears. Something hits the top of my head. Leaves rain down from the trees, and my pulse quickens. The boulder flashes past. The fallen tree is where it should be.

Good. Good.

I see the clearing up ahead. My place. I run. Roots rise under my steps. Branches rake my arms. I break out into the clearing. My knees drop to the ground. In the distance, something stands where the trees should open.

Windows. Roofline.

My house.

"T—This can't be." I turn and run. Dead branches poke out towards me as if to stop me from entering.

Left. Right. Left

The forest rearranges itself around me. The boulder and fallen tree have disappeared completely.

Straight ahead. The clearing.

I bolt. The trees shift as a path opens where there wasn't one. Roots embed themselves into the ground. Solid under my feet.

I break through the tree line.

The house stands there. Waiting.

“Please,” I whisper. I don’t know to whom.

A tear slips down my wide-open eyes before I can stop it. The ground keeps me in place.

The grass gives way as I cross to the front of the house. The windows stare back — empty, lightless. I watch as the front door creaks open, inviting. The darkness inside matches the outside. Maybe lighter. Light cuts through the black as my finger finds the switch.

“H-Hello?” My voice hits the walls and returns to me. “Mom?” The living room lacks the TV’s hum. “Dad?” The stairs ascend to a lighter dark above. I trek up. I open the door to my parents’ bedroom. I flick on the light. The bed is made. Too made. Untouched. My eyes scan the room for something. A wrinkle, a dent, anything to prove someone was here.

Nothing.

The hallway leans. Or I do. I stumble back into the hall. A light spills onto the floor at the end of the hall. I draw closer to the only light in this world. My hand finds the handle, and the door opens to my bedroom.

A chair waits in the center of the room. A rope hangs from the fan. It moves. Just enough.

My knees hit the floor. My throat tightens. Air won’t come. My fingers claw at my neck.

It returns in fragments—

The rope in my hands.

The scrape of the chair.

My foot slipping.

The drawer sliding shut.

Air rushes into my lungs. My hands shoot down to the floor as I lift myself to my feet. I rush to my desk and yank the drawer open. White paper. Stacks of it. I dig. Throw. Dig. Throw. The wood at the bottom appears. Something white in the corner. Not blank.

I start reading. “I can’t do this anymore. For most of my life, I—” A teardrop splashes onto the note. Words smear into blurs of scribble as tears cloud my vision. My hand grows numb, and the note falls through my fingers. I back up until my foot bumps into something. I turn around. The chair. My eyes travel up to see the rope hanging above.

My foot finds the chair. I step up. The rope hangs inches from my face.

Flashes cross my vision. –

The brook receding.

The house empty.

My therapist’s eyes sliding past me.

My lungs seize.

My friends playing and never looking up.

A heat spreads through my chest.

My parents speaking through me.

A pain.

A pain worse than anything I’ve ever felt before.

My foot lowers to find the floor. Then the other.

The rope keeps swaying. I don’t look at it again.

Paper crumples beneath my heel as I cross the room. I crawl into bed and close my eyes.

Darkness.

Light.

It presses against my eyelids, urging them open.

A white ceiling.

The air smells sterile.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

A monitor to my left.

Shapes blur. Then sharpen.

Mom.

Dad.

“Tristan.” My mother’s voice breaks.

I take a breath.

It burns.

But it fills my lungs.



Kaleidoscope Loch Ness Award for
Visual Media



“Spanish Modernity”
Anthony Robledo

Evening Wind

Ocean Swift

leaves, stirred up by the
wind, dance together as they
find life once again



“Kisa”
A. Gusenko V.

Cestoda

Beetlegoose

Nothing existed in the night sky anymore, except for the most dominant of stars: Vega, Capella, Polaris, just to name a few. The littlest and faintest stellar pinpricks, formerly freckling our celestial ceiling, had been washed away by the inexhaustible, luminous urban landscapes plastered across each continent. Mankind eradicated the dark. Its powers now attenuated so severely that the brightness from the convenience stores and tourist attractions on Eastern Island can be visible from Point Nemo. Wielding the artificial sun had come at the sacrifice of smaller stellar objects and all else deemed obsolete in the name of fervorous industrialization. The insignificant morphed into what is forgotten, and the carcass is left to rot in the void of nothingness. Now, no living creature can distinguish the constellations, let alone see one.

10:32 P.M. on a weekday is a particularly empty time, especially in an ostensibly bustling city. Half-occupied luxury apartment buildings were strung together by lumpy asphalt streets for dozens of blocks. Streetlamps competed for their limelight, their lightbulbs eclectically ranging from sodium to incandescent to LEDs; consequently, light flooded the streets at every angle, raining fluorescent white-yellow-green rays onto the steaming concrete pathways. Any shadowy silhouettes plaguing the ground beneath were eliminated. Darkness, no matter how insidious, was pacified; unable to infiltrate even the most concealed crevice. The hostility of nighttime was rebirthed into a mutated antithesis of its former self.

Similarly did our world's inhabitants.

A man of tall stature staggered into the street. His elongated head, plastered with clumped strands of his greasy hair, barely rose above the dense layer of swirling smog. The sky was hazy tonight, severe enough to erase a full moon. Rooftops of four-storied buildings could be occasionally perceived— depending on the undulating haze. The lanky figure continued to shuffle with urgency. Despite the luminous passage, the semi-opaque gas enveloped his surroundings, and scattered the copious light emitted from the myriads of lampposts. He used his long appendages to guide his scrawny body through the

fog-induced disorientation. Amidst the fumes, the beanstalk-esque man almost resembled a streetlamp himself.

It was eerily silent for an urbanized world. Cluttered man-made structures cultivated little life to be seen. The excessive chattering of a bustling metropolitan died long ago, as it is now considered atypical. Here, the ambient noises were sequestered by the smog — except for the man’s dragging footsteps and a laggy utterance of Shostakovich’s Waltz No. 2 yawning through a tinny speaker.

One century prior marked the catalyst of the biological cacophony to ensue, when the fish of Minamata Bay sprouted a pair of flabby legs akin to that of a human infant and crawled onto the sandy shore. A seraphic child was born from a fisherman residing on one of the Marshall Islands downwind of Bikini, roughly half a decade later. He swiftly gained a cult following of new-age religious zealots claiming he was the harbinger of Armageddon, the rapture, doomsday, and other world-ending analogs. Such macabre idolatry weighed heavily on the unsuspecting child. By the time of his fifteenth birthday, the six-winged Icarus abandoned his humanity and set flight with the seabirds. Bizarre eyewitness accounts emerged in the years trailing after his disappearance, detailing a grown, winged man bobbing for fish amongst a gaggle of pintails.

The man traced, with his blotchy, withered fingers, the graffiti sloppily painted onto the lead shutters of an apartment window. The scrawled out red lettering coalesced to read Amen à la Ploutocratie. “Amen, amen, amen”, muttered the man in a raspy breath, “Where’s our creator now?”.

He stopped. His ears twitched to the sound of faint rustling nearby. Thinner patches of fumes permitted the man’s cloudy eyes to discern the outline of a shorter person scuttling opposite of him. Less than ten feet away, the second man froze.

The stranger announced his presence in a discombobulated voice.

“Hello?”.

Squinting his eyes, the man attempted to deduce the converser’s identity. Crossing paths with a passerby was a rarity, especially

when the mist congealed between chunky-walled residences in the manner it did tonight. He hesitantly gathered that the stranger was a high-ranking official of some sort, as indicated by his clean, tweed suit jacket and well-groomed hair. A gas mask covered his face.

The besuited man loudly babbled on. “A stroll is the most pleasant this time of day, no?” He chuckled as if this was humorous to him. “The lights make it completely safe, yes indeed, no more darkness for criminals and delinquents to spook innocent folks such as yourself! It has solved homelessness so beautifully — I mean, when was the last time you saw someone sleeping on the streets? Terrific! Yes, completely safe now!” A stale pause interrupted the besuited man’s rambling. “May I ask where you are off to now?”, he inquired innocuously.

“Somewhere to rest”, the taller man responded. “It’s hard to see with this smog”. His concentration persisted on the tweed jacket. How could he possibly own that? Nothing of that quality had been produced since a quarter century ago. Sheep were hard to come by; infrequently did a few abattoirs raise them for the slaughter. The average person couldn’t afford wool because of the expenses required for animal maintenance. Even so, the product was imperfect, for many of the sheep developed deformities caused by the questionable quality of available sustenance.

Walking fish and flying men were only the beginning of this era. The preceding decades were dictated by those with the power and means to have a little too much fun in their affluent stratosphere above the rest. Some resumed toying with their nuclear and militaristic playthings; others pushed their exciting and new gadgets forged from plastic and whatnot to the general masses. This was their gift to us. “We are doing this for you!”, they cried while wiping their tears with dollar bills. “This is to protect you. To excite you. To improve your mundane lives! We need you more than you need us.”.

Acres of forested land cut and burned to birth gas stations and car dealerships.

“This is for your own good!”, they pleaded in their private jets.

National Public Health administration releases recalls for lead, asbes-

tos, plastic found in household food brands.

“We deeply care about the health of our consumers!”, they shouted between bites of food chosen by their employed nutritionists, cooked by their personal chefs, and chewed with their veneers.

A cornfield is transformed into a suburban neighborhood, consisting of flimsy houses sold at the affordable price of both kidneys.

“We are your saviors!”, they wailed from their marbled mansions, “We are your *gods*”.

The people were promised a better world. A *different* world. Political tensions reignited nuclear proliferation. Weapons were tested of such large caliber that the irradiated clouds blocked the sun from coastlines, submerging victims into cold darkness for days. It was a necessary evil, stated officials. They reassured citizens that these tests were safely handled at no harm to those living in surrounding regions.

The besuited man waved a hand lightheartedly. “The smog is just a byproduct of the smokestacks”, he said while lifting his finger to the sky. “It’s perfectly safe”.

Faith served as the first offering, siphoned from the people who worried the most. Cried the most. Laughed the most. Loved the most. Those who worked the weekdays and did their laundry on the weekends. Those who planned to spend their afternoon thumbing through bills, but then chose to chit-chat with a friend on a park bench. People who dreamt of quitting their nine-to-fives to open bakeries and art studios. Children who played in the mud instead of tablets. Students who craved to learn without being bogged down by the pressure of their assignments. Everyone yearned for the saccharine freedom to indulge in creation, curiosity, and connection. To be complacently swept away by the monotonous tides of circadian life was equivalent to squandering away your *joie de vivre*. Why were the dopamine-addictions and the merchandise escapism insurmountable? Was the consumerist, militaristic exegesis expounded from figureheads, canonized by banknotes and coins, too compelling? Did the disciples, such as the laymen, shepherds, and the ordinary white collar hiree, conflate their half-baked promises for utopian erudition? The contingencies for peace were destructive measures mass manu-

factured by juvenile hands. None of the means would ever penetrate the perceptions of the laymen who gouge their eyes in favor of what the end contains.

Rejoicing in communion, the time came to eat the body and blood of the crucified. This is the second offering.

More and more were produced. People consumed more and more. Everything was faster. Time moved faster. Waste piled up faster. Resources were depleted faster. No alternatives were considered, for this is the way. This is right. We were promised it was, and all who oppose are naysayers. Pessimists. Fearmongers. Liars.

He pointed to his gas mask. “This is just for optics, you see”.

“I understand”, the lanky man replied.

Faster meant shortcuts in the distant past. The constant exposure to mishandled waste and a general, lazy negligence for safety synergistically formed the misanthropic disregard for the average living creature, resulting in strange ecological changes. Some succumbed to chronic ailments and cancers. Those who lived were forced to shed their humanity: an artificial, abrupt “evolution”. The newfound residents of the world currently exist in an active dissonance. Who knows where the water flows from, how the food is grown, and what shelters are made of. It is unlikely for a concrete skeleton of a planet to sustain a population, no matter the size; therefore, the answers sought out might reveal to be unsavory. As long as these resources are accessible, the layman did not care. Besides, it’s the responsibility of the prosperous bureaucracy to handle those unethicalities anyway.

No one acknowledged the fish rotting from the head. Ignorance or insouciance— either may be the poison. Life is easier for the apathetic; when the situation becomes too sticky, the cog gunks up the machine.

The tall man shifted uncomfortably. The lumpy masses under his skin brushed against his ragged clothes. His grimy shirt displayed a faded logo belonging to a university from an educational epoch long gone.

Jovial laughter erupted from the man: “You need somewhere to rest? Why don’t you live in a house, sir?”.

“I was evicted from my place. I couldn’t pay for it anymore.” He thought about his single room apartment. Several generations ago, people would have considered its size to be closet-like. Smaller rooms were overwhelmingly preferred when constructing apartment buildings. For contemporary landlords, it was pragmatic to invest in colossal buildings with a seemingly infinite amount of rooms. It was more bang for the buck: less amenities to provide and more tenants to house. Like most, the tall man primarily utilized his space to sleep and nothing more, so rent was adequate for the price. His time and labor was owed to a tungsten filament factory, so every crumb of daylight nourished his employment contract. Food and the sporadic pittance served as the exchange for arduous work in a system mimicking accelerationistic serfdom. It was an austere way of life, but the repayment in food scraps left no laborer feeling inclined to complain.

The tall man’s former dimensionally-challenged lodgings had a decent air filter and a weekly rate of five gallons of water. His abode before that could barely fit his 9-foot-tall body. It didn’t have an air filter either. The tall man fleetingly slipped into a drowsy reverie: what was his past apartment like? It was several stories tall, filled to the brim with rooms. He couldn’t recall his neighbors very well. It seemed perpetually quiescent. Several doors down from his apartment may have been a woman. She held a reserved disposition, however he distinctively remembered the women’s chimeric phenotype. Keratinous horns jutted from her forehead: a new one began to sprout the last time he saw her.

“Ah, well. I think I can help you out.” Startled out of his pseudo-hypnagogia, the credulous tall man listened. “We can form a mutual relationship here, if you agree to the conditions”, offered the besuited man.

In a brief break in the fog, the tall man caught a glimpse of his soigné associate. Behind the glass eyepieces were the besuited man’s eyes, encased in welted, protruding flesh.

Easily persuaded was the tall man: after all, he was desperate. It was not feasible for him to serenely sleep in an alleyway anyway— the

blaring lights would illuminate his closed eyelids. Not to mention the agitation prompted by the rattling music. He scratched one of his throbbing bald spots with his gangly index finger. “Sure, I’ll do what you say”.

“Alrighty! I’ll get you in tip-top shape!” He adjusted his tweed jacket. “Just do what I say, but don’t ask too many questions, m’kay?”.

He disappears into the bilious-colored fumes. With his uncoordinated gait, the lanky man follows in pursuit. They walk into the gaseous oblivion for a few blocks, remaining close to the apartment walls to dodge the overwhelming number of lamp posts. Posters precariously strewn across dull cinderblock walls caught the eye of the tall man, limited to missing persons flyers and hiring advertisements. The largest advert faintly illustrated a glowing woman adorned in a glimmering black cocktail dress, tightly hugging her round hips. A speech bubble ejected from her lipstick-painted lips, sweetly cooing a long list of terms and conditions necessary for a construction position opening. A section of her impeccably proportioned leg was covered by a printed photograph of a young boy with bony tusks poking out from his upper lip. In big font, the flyer reads “Have You Seen Me?”. A fragment of the waxing moon peeked through wisps of stifling acrid fumes. Both men trudge on, until finally greeted by a dilapidated building. His gloved hands first fumble a key, and then the shorter companion unlocks the rusted handle. The metal door creaks open.

“I purchased this building to house my employees. You can call me ‘Boss’, now that you live here”. Eagerly, the besuited man stepped into the foyer.

Light proved absent. The tall man’s eyes were not suited for the pitch-black welcoming him, inviting him to blindly waltz in. He crouches upon entering to prevent bumping his misshapen head on the doorframe. Light seeping through the exposed egress highlighted several objects sparsely decorating the large space, including a variety of antique furniture crumbling under the weight of itself, mushroom-ridden tomes, and a mud-crusting rug. The light revealed the foyer to be a massive dance hall. In the far corner of the room sat an antiquated music player, mulling over an instrumental piece: Shostakovich’s Waltz No. 2, mirroring the trembling speaker outside. A pungent scent of formaldehyde offended the tall man’s slitted nos-

trils. The Boss crept behind him and closed the front door to a slight crack, allowing a resplendent sliver to wiggle into the humid room.

“You’re going to do me a solid. This is your first assignment: help me help you. Trust me, your coworkers have been fantastic so far. No vacation days or call outs. How reliable, dependable, *selfless*.” The tall man inhales deeply as the masked man continues. “Give it your all. It’s a small price to pay”.

Misty light escaping into the entrance hall strewn across the transparent eyepieces of the Boss’s gas mask. More clearly could the tall man observe his superior’s sunken eyes. The skin seemed melted in the shape of two symmetrically thick, circular rings, in which the fleshy circumference took the color of raw meat. Otherwise, his anthropoid features remained intact. The tall man drew his own cataract-afflicted gaze to meet the boss’s olive pit orbs. Down the hallway, several notes of throaty groans were released in a choir of agony. The tall man tensed his emaciated upper body, his arms limply swinging at his sides.

“I’m an altruist of sorts, you see. Or a business-centric socialite? Perhaps both. I enjoy extending a hand to those lesser than me. It’s hard work to regulate my level and wealth, so I heavily rely on my employees to keep me spick-and-span. Like fertilizer to a plant”, chirped the masked man. “It gives people like you a purpose. A sense of fulfillment. Say, consider this your interview. I have a question for you. Just a little one, so don’t be too frightened!”

Reluctantly, the slender, aching man peered towards the direction of the gurgling mewls. His weary eyesight outlines cryptic cylindrical structures lined in a row. Each drum was labeled with a barely-legible makeshift sign. The description for the first large canister succinctly claimed “Brunch”. Next in the sequence was “Afternoon snack”, with smaller, semi-incomprehensible scribbles underneath. Aristocrats to hegemony, the supplementary text listed a checklist of names. The tall man was incapable of deciphering beyond the first letters, as his myopic eyesight posed a physical restriction. Methodically, the besuited man reached his arm behind his head, releasing the clasp to his gas mask. It slipped away softly as if of diminutive weight, like a feather. Lifting his head into the light, he bared the opening of his wrinkly mouth cavity, which was overcrowded with

spindle-like structures curling inward.

“Here’s the test: Let’s say I funded some wish of yours. If you wanted anything in the world, what would you desire?”

The tall man, slack-jawed, said nothing at first. He was not thrilled about his circumstances, yet not afraid either. Apathetically he stands. Groans escape in slow succession from the piles of flaccid, nearly bloodless husks fearfully flopping around in chemical vats enshrouded by the dark. Congealed liquid oozed over the metal rims. A pair of deformed arms waved frantically in an agonized prayer, reaching up to the heavens— begging to be saved.

A few seconds tick by.

“I want to feel human”, the tall man mused.

He itched the peeling skin, as pink as a newborn, irritating the side of his left arm. One of the Boss’s malformed eyelid rings contorted to the shape of an ellipse, as if he was raising an eyebrow. He chuckled at the tall man’s answer.

“I’m afraid I can’t provide what money can’t buy. I’m a philanthropist, not a miracle worker”. The Boss swayed several steps closer. Gargling pursued in the vats. Knocks echoed on the hollowed, steel door. Half a dozen well-dressed, well-groomed, and well-mannered masked guests bounce into the entrance hall. Two of the enigmatic visitors appeared as women decorated in rococo-esque ball gowns, head to toe in gaudy bows and ribbons. Suited men with unique corsages composed the remainder of the flamboyant guests. In her baby blue gown and headdress, one of the women floated past the tall man, her face obscured by a bunny-faced mask. The others, bearing garish animal masks, march behind her. Each disguise was individualized, the tall man noticed. A lion in a white suit. Pinstripes galore on dress-pants for Zebra. Peacock covered her mouth: hysterical giggling muffled by cashmere gloves. A scratchy measure from the waltz repeated over and over and over, rattling away on the malfunctioning music box.

One by one, the costumed strangers dissipated into the darkness of the connected hallway. Peacock straggled behind the esurient parade

until she was the last guest illuminated by the doorway's light. She flung her mask off in a hasty demonstration of elegance—tossing the facade away onto the cracked marble beneath—unveiling her massive, circular jaw of innumerable toothy spirals. Her miniature eyes, like black beads, laid gently on the sides of her slimy face. She grinned at the tall man, although the gesture wasn't instantly obvious from her grotesque exterior. He watched the Peacock shed the coat of light and join her affiliates in the murky shadows. Full of rhapsodic conviction, the congregation chanted with their harmonious voices and empty stomachs before ripping apart the charnel meal. The tall man winced at the cacophonous screams of the anguished banquet as the bourgeois devoured their fleshy entrée. Helplessly, he stood there.

Clarity brought forth an inkling that perhaps, this is not a business transaction. Intuition foretold the tall man of this outcome, but faith and desperation convinced him otherwise. Now, he can't protest his fate. There is nothing he can do.

The Boss interjected the feasting gobbles to share a few more words with his hireling: "I'll do you one better: I'll be your savior".

"We aren't anything without people like you".

It's possible—yes, undoubtedly possible—that this is how it should be. Not everyone is meant to climb the ladder to salvation, but wealth can certainly buy your way out of hell.

Two living things occupied the building at that moment: a parasite and its host.

Bon appétit.

Icarus (O Ruby Daybreak)

Alina Janshon

Singe my wings, o son of light
I will make another for my flight
My bones are a candle wick to ignite
My skin, wax burning to chase away the night

Watch my journey as I fly
My arrival, night upon the sky
This endless darkness cannot stay
For I shall chase the arrival of day

I shall find you, o deity of sun
But my return has only just begun
I long to see your brilliant rays
Shine upon the grassy plains

It matters not, my body engulfed in flame
Only tatters of my soul remain
My eyes stained black in char
For I approach closer to my star

My wings are burning, o light of mine
Lit from my feathers and spread in kind
I will find my everlasting dawn
Until every inch of me is scorched and gone

Scarlet is all I can see now
Your halo over me now
I shall grasp your hand, o ruby daybreak
With nothing left but my heart to take

The Fox and the Scorpion

Ocean Swift

If it brings you any comfort at all,
please know that I never intended to hurt you.

When you offered to carry me across the river,
I marveled that you would show
such compassion to me, of all detestable creatures.
But I suppose you are no stranger
to being made the villain of the story.

Besides, I could never deny myself
the chance to be near to you;
to breathe the scent of your hair
orange as the desert sunsets
I knew so long ago.

I was the greatest of fools.
All I had to do to keep you near me,
was to lay down my war-spear
to, for once, stay my hand.
And couldn't I, for you?

I should have known
that it is too late to learn gentleness
in the middle of deep water.
Too late even to learn
not to harm the one you cling to.

And so when you asked,
with angry tears brimming in your eyes,
why I plunged my stinger into your neck
when it meant I would also sink
and lose the only love I've ever known,

all I could say was that
violence is my nature
and no amount of love
can change the fact
that I was born to drown us both.

But if it brings you any comfort at all,
please know that I'm sorry for what I am.



“Seahorses”
Kayla Voss

The Smokeless Fire

Jacob Cline

Chapter 1

“Farhad Ahmadi, beloved son, uncle, and member of the community, passed away this Sunday in his home. Farhad, 64, had been a resident of our fair town of Mayfield, for the past forty years where he curated a museum dedicated to the fascinating cultures of ancient peoples. His legacy lives on in this museum, which will be hosting a memorial service open to the public.”

Barely a paragraph in a local newspaper. I'm sure that is exactly how my uncle would have liked to be remembered.

When mother called me in the middle of finals, my first instinct was to ignore her, and I did. But after a series of relentless calls my roommate forced me to answer to end the endless ringing to our landline. I was sure that this was her, albeit frantic, way of making sure I was still alive. The reality was far more awful than I could have expected.

That was over a week ago. I was given permission to take my Finals early and sent home on the next train with a suitcase and a letter of condolences from the Dean and the President of the University. *What an honor.*

Flurries of snow flew around the train as it ran through the night. I had never seen this little snow back home in my life. Two hours away, back on campus, there was already a foot or two, blanketing the campus in an eerie quiet.

As the train came closer and closer to home, the people on board dwindled. Now, in the dead of this sad December night, it was just me alone in the cab. I could feel myself being lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking of the train and the slight chill in the air. Slipping my sweater over my head, I leaned back in my seat, propped my feet onto my suitcase and stared out the window.

Out of nowhere, the sharp smell of smoke filled the air. I turned, but just as I thought, there was no one around. Just as I was about to turn back though, I saw him. They were hunched over so I could only see the top of their bald head, but sure enough there was a thin trail of

smoke circling them. *Asshole*. I brought my sweater above my nose and curled as far as I could away from the stench.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed until I noticed that the stench had grown stronger. Peering behind me, the bald asshole was still in the back of the car, but had he moved up? I pulled my sweater up more, just below my eyes, when I noticed a flicker in the window next to me. A soft orange ember had moved to the row just behind me.

I stared at the reflection to ensure I wasn't mistaken. But no matter how many times I opened and shut my eyes, wiped at them, adjusted my posture, the orange glow remained there. By now the stench was undeniable, as if a campfire had been lit just behind me.

Gathering all the courage I could, I turned around to confront the asshole, only to find nothing there. Nobody, no smoke, not even a cigarette butt left behind.

I slipped back in my seat and closed my eyes. The long journey must just be playing tricks on me, that's all. The constant snow made something, anything appear strange. And the smell? It's a train, people must smoke in it all the time. The person? The person...

There is a person sitting next to me.

Assuredly, undoubtedly, there was a person now sitting just one seat down from me.

I pressed as much as I could into the window, the armrest jamming into my back and the freezing window sending shivers down my neck like icy fingers, forcing me to look at that pale figure a mere few feet from me.

I sat there like that, for who knows how long, just watching this slumped, pale figure. If it noticed me it gave no indication. The stench of smoke moved with it, though, overpowering my nose and causing my eyes to water. I couldn't tell why though. I didn't see a cigarette, or anything of the sort. In fact, the entire time I had been watching, it seemed like it wasn't breathing at all.

“Excuse me,” the figure turned in my direction and I lost all semblance of what I was going to say.

What I thought was pale skin shone like candle wax in the dim lighting of the train car. Flesh melted and sloughed off its face, and a single orange spark glowed from within its skull where an eye would be. It opened and closed its mouth, trying to speak but all that came out was dark smoke. Eventually its guttural mumbles poured out, deep and scratching, “*Faysal, take the box.*” The mound of waxy flesh before me lurched and reached for my wrist, pinning me in conversation with it. “*Take the box!*” Its hand burned me, searing me with an intense heat while the smell overwhelmed me. Not just smoke, something else burned with it, something rotten and pulsing.

I woke up with a start. The train attendant was shaking my wrist gently. “Sir, we’re at our last stop of the night,” she glanced back at the surly conductor who seemed close to throwing me off the train himself. I hurriedly gathered my things and rushed off the train, giving them a quick thanks. Outside the station the night air hummed with the sound of the fluorescent lights.

It was just a dream. I looked down at my wrist, where long streaks of smudged ash were left on my sleeve, forming a crude, warped handprint. *It can’t be real.*



“birds of a fAlther consume together”
Beetlegoose

Cosmic Fruit Juice

The Florida Tech Five

It was January 2020 in Illinois, and the world had stopped spinning. Or at least, that's how seven-year-old Richie Kowalski felt. Two hundred and eleven days indoors. One hundred and nine since he'd seen another kid. Thirteen since his mom hid the batteries from the TV remote because "the news is too scary for a boy your age."

They called it "COVID." The government said the air was sick. You could catch it just by standing too close. Breaking "Proximity Law 6-B" meant punishment—rockets to space for "re-education," or The Deep Cleaning, a mysterious process whispered about online. Some said it meant being sprayed with chemicals until your skin burned; others said no one ever came back from it.

Richie didn't care much about space or rules. He cared about coconuts.

It started when school closed "temporarily forever." A man on YouTube cracked one open with a machete, and the sound—the chop—lodged in Richie's brain. He read everything about them: how they floated across oceans, how they grew in hurricanes, how they tasted like heaven. Then he saw an online rumor that drinking the milk of three coconuts in a row could make a person "see the world like the birds do." He didn't know what hallucinations were, but he wanted to find out.

So when Richie read that a retired botanist had grown the only coconut tree in Illinois, he decided he had to see it. It didn't matter that it was twenty miles away, or that going outside was technically treason. He was certain the tree would tell him something no adult could.

He planned for three nights. First, he stole back the batteries. On the second day, he packed a flashlight, a banana, and his dad's GPS watch. On the third, a snowy Saturday night, he watched Penguins of Madagascar for the hundredth time. His favorite was Kowalski—the smart penguin with the clipboard. He grinned at the reflection in his spoon. "Analysis: I'm bored out of my mind," he whispered. Being a Kowalski watching Kowalski felt like destiny.

When the credits rolled, he crept to the door. He hesitated—the news

had shown another disappearance in McLean County that morning. He also remembered the homeless man outside the grocery store, screaming, “Aliens! They’re among us!” The man’s wild eyes still haunted him. But Richie’s curiosity was louder than his fear. He opened the door and slipped into the night.

May 14th, 2037. Earth.

Richie Kowalski was a mango farmer. He had never planned to be a mango farmer. Back in 2020, when he’d been stuck inside for a year and a half, he’d wanted to go into computer science. He had even gone to school for it, for a while at least, until the accident. After that, it was all too much, staying on campus was too hard, so he bought a few acres and started a farm.

It wasn’t mangos at first. No, when Richie first felt the strange call to become a fruit farmer, it had been strawberries. They were a good crop, sweet and bright. People would bring their children to come pick them in the summer months, and that brought good business, but there was a prevailing sense of *wrongness* about it all.

So after that, it was watermelon. Watermelons were better; they were a good hearty fruit, but each time he bent down to take them off their vine, he would feel that terrible wrongness again stinging like wasps in his stomach. “*Trees,*” he realized one day. “*I need to farm something that grows on trees.*”

So Richie had become a mango farmer. He still felt a stab of wrongness from time to time as he ran his fingers over the soft skin of the mangos, but for the most part, he could ignore it.

“Hey! Kowalski!”

Richie looked up and saw Bill Parker waving to him from across the field. Bill Parker was nothing like Richie. He had been a farmer all his life, and he had the tanned leather skin and permanent outdoor voice to show for it.

“Kowalski! How you doin’ Kowalski?”

“Fine,” Richie called half-heartedly, taking another mango off the

tree and placing it in his basket.

“Jus’ wanted to let ya know tha’ me an’ the missus are goin’ on a trip tomorrow, a little vacation, so you’ll hafta drive a bit further than usual if ya’ wanna borrow a cup of sugar!” He laughed heartily at his own joke. Richie gave a weak smile.

“Sounds like fun. I hope you enjoy yourselves.”

“We sure will! Fer the next week we’ll be doin’ nothin’ but layin’ out on the beach and sippin’ drinks outa coconuts!”

Richie felt as though he had just been punched in the gut. He gripped the mango he was holding tightly, breaking the skin. “Out of what?”

Parker gave him an odd look. “Coconuts, I said. You alright, Kowalski?”

Richie didn’t answer. The blue sky above him had begun to spin. It replaced the ground. For a fleeting moment the mango juice on his hand reminded him of another, sweeter, scent. Then all of his senses were gone.

October 13th, 2033. Earth.

Richie Kowalski watched his reflection ripple in the bus window as the vehicle hummed along the interstate. The morning light flickered across his face with each passing tree. He was halfway to campus, headphones on, pretending to reach the textbook he hadn’t opened in a week.

A couple of rows up sat a student he had seen around campus, Nevan. Not a friend, but one of those people you would nod to when you passed. Nevan always wore the same athletic wear and would always get off a couple of stops before Richie.

As the bus rattled along, Richie tried not to think about how the bus driver looked too old to see over the steering wheel. Someone behind him is sneezing. Someone else is laughing loudly at a video they are playing way too loudly on their phone. Everything felt almost too normal, until it didn’t.

For just a moment, the light outside changed. It wasn't the same colour of sunrise anymore; it became a sharp white, almost liquid. Richie cleared his eyes, rapidly blinking, expecting the light to go back to normal, but it didn't. It stayed there, pulsing.

He quickly glanced around at the other passengers, but none of them seemed to notice.

Then, faintly, a voice said, "No fear, no fear."

He recognized the voice, barely. He didn't know where from.

The bus lurched to a stop, tires screaming. Someone shouted. The white light flared up, and the world folded in on itself. Glass, metal, sound all collapsing into one, blinding instant.

When Richie opened his eyes, the bus lay on its side. Some seats were torn from the floor, and the air smelled like burning oil and smoke. His ears rang and drowned out the world around him. Trying to get himself up, his legs did not respond.

He looked around the bus only to find disarray. Across the aisle lies Nevan, blood soaking his shirt, unmoving. Richie didn't scream, didn't say anything. He just watched.

Outside, through the busted windows, the white light was still there, drifting like a fog. He thought he saw some shapes floating in it. They were small, round shapes, almost spherical.

Then everything went dark again.

January 20th, 2020. Earth.

The streets were silent except for the buzz of dying streetlights. Billboards glowed with cartoon lungs that read "Keep Distance—Stay Human!" Five miles in, Richie pedaled through the empty fields, breath fogging in the cold. He felt alive. Free. Close to something sacred. Then a faint hum rose behind him. Headlights spread over the snow. A white van crawled beside him, matching his speed. The window slid down. A man leaned out—thin, pale, with a long,

bulbous head and eyes that seemed to blink out of rhythm.

“Child... greetings, yes?” the man said, voice smooth and strange. “The name for me is Doran. Tell, tell—would you wish to see the tree of coconuts?”

Richie froze mid-pedal. “How do you know where I’m going?” he asked.

Doran smiled too widely. “Ahh... the seekers shine. Those who dream of the forbidden fruit—bright as stars, you are. Brightest of all, little Richie.”

Richie’s hands trembled on the handlebars. He wanted to leave—but what if Doran really knew where the tree was? “Yes,” he said quietly.

“Good, yes. Then come. In the back we go. A short ride. Before sunrise, the truth you will see.”

The van stopped. The back doors swung open, and a white light burst out—so bright it swallowed the snow. Richie shielded his eyes.

“What’s that light?” he asked.

“Ah, the light—it cleans. Sanitization, yes. Very clean must one be before the tree. So clean you will shine.”

Richie’s mind told him to run, but his heart leaned toward the light. Maybe this was part of the journey—some test before seeing the tree. He let his bike fall, boots crunching on the frost as he stepped closer.

The light grew hotter, heavier, like it was pressing against his thoughts. His vision blurred until Doran became just a shadow behind the glow.

“Come, little one,” Doran murmured. “No fear, no fear. We have many coconut trees.”

The warmth wrapped around Richie’s body. He thought of Hawaii. He thought of coconuts floating across endless oceans, still alive. For a moment, he smiled. Then everything went quiet.

Somewhere in the white, Doran's voice echoed one last time: "Good boy. Big and strong you will grow."

And then Little Richie Kowalski stopped thinking altogether, and his vision faded.

October 13th, 2033. Earth.

He woke up in the hospital with the heart monitor beeping like a broken metronome. A nurse called his name out twice before he responded.

"Bus crash," she told him softly. "You're lucky."

Richie didn't feel lucky. His whole body ached, and when he closed his eyes, the light was still there, the light from the crash. Sometimes it pulsed slightly behind his closed eyelids, and he swore he could sometimes hear it humming.

They told him he had been out for almost a day. He didn't remember any dreams, but the phrase "*no fear, no fear*" circled in his head like a mosquito.

He asked about the others on the bus.

"Four dead," he was told. "Including a boy named Nevan. You might have known him?"

Richie nodded, but the sound of her words did not feel real.

Later, when the doctor came, Richie tried to explain the light and how it had filled everything right before the crash. He told the doctor how it was nothing like he had ever seen before, not sunlight or fire. The doctor simply smiled. "Shock," he said. "Your brain's protecting itself."

Richie wasn't sure because sometimes, when the hospital lights dimmed, the pulse came back. He'd blink, and, for a split second, the room wouldn't be a room anymore. He'd see sand, hear waves.

Once, he even smelled salt in the air.

He thought of the floating orbs again as something alive, something watching him.

He looked down at his hands and didn't see his own. He saw an older, weathered pair of hands. He blinked, and they were back to normal.

He pressed the call button for the nurse, but when she arrived, everything was normal again. She said, "You must've been dreaming."

Richie just stared at the ceiling and just whispered, "Yeah. Dreaming."

He didn't tell anyone that in the corner of the room, where the IV pole met the wall, a small, round shadow was pulsing in rhythm with his heartbeat.

Unknown, 2020. Doran.

Richie woke slowly to a bright light. At first he thought it was Doran's sanitation ray, but this felt different, felt familiar.

His eyes opened with a start, the pulsing light of the sun momentarily blinding him. Salty air pricked his nose, and his eyes drank in the ocean's blue hue. He was on a reclining chair on some sort of island paradise.

Memories of his experience with Doran came flooding back, but when he looked around, he couldn't see him anywhere. In fact, when he looked around, he didn't see much of anything besides the large expanse of white sand and short, tropical grass.

His first thought was how he was going to get out of there. Doran had clearly done something to him and left him in the middle of nowhere.

He continued to scan his surroundings and glimpsed a small island along the coast. It could not have been more than a hundred yards away, but a thick fog had just rolled in that made it almost impossible

to see. But he could see the faint swaying of a coconut tree. The sight of it ignited something in him: hope. Food. Water. Shelter. Answers.

He stared at it for a long time. It looked close enough. He could swim there. He had to.

Richie stood on the hot, burning sand and slowly walked towards the island. His walk became a run, and he leaped into the water, beginning his swim to the island. Now there was only the ocean and the faint shimmer of that distant tree.

One arm in front of the other, legs kicking, water crashing in his ears, he could feel how difficult this task would actually be.

The current shifted about halfway through. The gentle rhythm of the waves turned to resistance, pushing him sideways. Richie kicked harder, his lungs burning. The island didn't seem any closer. Panic flared like fire in his chest.

He flipped on his back to float. The distance from where he came was just as far as where he was going. There was no turning back.

He closed his eyes, and with a groan, Richie rolled back over and continued his attack on the water. He was growing more and more tired with each stroke, and when he finally made it, he collapsed on the dry sand.

When he gained the strength to pick up a fallen coconut, he was surprised by a voice coming from the coconut: "Get your grubby, human hands off of me!"

December 8th, 2034. Earth.

"I'm dropping out."

"What?" The kind, grey haired woman who served as Richie's advisor gave him a quizzical look.

"I'm dropping out. I'm sorry."

"Richie, sweetie, why don't you have a seat?" She gestured to the

chair in front of her desk.

Richie hesitated for a moment, but finally complied.

“Would you like a candy?”

He glanced at the bowl that sat slightly to his left. The wrappers advertised some kind of fruity, tropical flavor. Richie shook his head.

“Alright then, let’s talk about this. Dropping out?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you do a thing like that? You have excellent grades and I’ve heard great things from all your professors.”

Richie watched raindrops roll down her window. “I know. It’s not the classes that are the problem.”

“Is this about the... accident?” She said it in an “I’m-so-sorry-you-poor-thing” tone that made Richie clench his fist.

“Yes,” he said again. “I just- it’s hard to be on campus after that.”

He thought about the blood, the bodies lying at odd angles. The face of someone he knew, made almost unrecognizable.

“I know it’s hard Richie,” she started, softly. “I just don’t want you to throw away your future.”

He shook his head. “No. This is right. I can feel it.”

She sighed. “Well, I suppose that’s a decision only you can make. Do you at least have a plan?”

He closed his eyes, smelling the dirt and fresh air already.

May 14th, 2037. Earth.

A rush of emotions hit Richie so strongly that all he could do was slowly swivel and start stumbling away, in any direction far from here. There was something about that word, “Coconut,” that felt like

the piece missing in him the whole time, but “what even is a coconut! Why can’t I remember?” Richie thought.

“You feelin’ alright, Kowalski? You need me to call someone?” said Parker, genuinely concerned with this change in attitude.

“Yeah, no, no, I’m fine, I just-I just forgot I have to go do something,” Richie stammered, actively picking up pace, trying to gather his disordered thoughts.

“Well, I’ll just head back over. Let me know if ya need anything.”

Richie threw the door of his small ranch wide open, crashing and clattering into everything in his path to his computer, that’s been sitting idle since he got down here. Scrambling to scrape the countless years of dust and gunk from every surface and gap, he finally got everything powered and turned on, and within the search engine, typed “COCONUT.”

A flood of images, articles, and even videos of people cutting them open with machetes covered the screen, each bringing back a memory lodged deep in his head. The hole he’s been feeling in his chest was finally beginning to take shape, an oblong shape, and Richie now knew what was missing this whole time. How could he forget about all this? What else was he forgetting? All of these questions filled his head until he clicked on one link. The last coconut tree in Illinois.

Unknown, 2020. Doran.

Here Richie was—face to face with a talking coconut—and there wasn’t a doubt in his young mind that it was real. Maybe it was because he was only seven, or maybe because the world had already stopped making sense the moment he’d woken up on that strange beach.

Either way, the coconut was talking, and he was listening.

When he released the coconut, it rolled slightly in the sand and shook itself off. “I said,” the coconut repeated, “get your filthy human hands off of me! You have no idea how sensitive coconut shells are!”

Richie blinked. “You... you can talk.”

“Well of course I can talk,” said the coconut.

Richie sat up, brushing sand from his arms. “Are you—uh—an alien or something?”

“Something like that,” the coconut replied with a sigh, its small carved-looking eyes blinking open for the first time. “I’m Doran of the Doranians.”

“Doran?” Richie frowned. “Like the one that brought me here?”

“Of course,” said this Doran. “We are all called Doran,” he said matter-of-factly. “He was just in human form. You are here because of your obsession with the Illinois coconut tree.”

Richie’s mouth fell open. “But I was planning to see it. It’s the only one in all of Illinois!”

“And that,” Doran said gravely, “is the problem. You see, the Dorans believe in spontaneity—living in the moment, without plans, without shackles. But sometimes, when a human plans as much as you do, it complicates things. So, we decided—spontaneously, of course—to help you forget.”

Richie tilted his head. “Forget what?”

“Forget your plan to go see it of course! And some minor things like how you got here, what you learned here, and everything about that tree.”

Richie stood there, shocked.

“If you ever remember any of these things, it will be spontaneously. If you ever see that tree, it will not be due to any plans, if the Dorians have anything to say about it.”

“But... why bring me here again if you didn’t want me to remember?”

Doran chuckled softly, a sound like waves tapping against driftwood. “Because, little one, we don’t plan things. We just do what feels right. And that’s what you will do. Stay spontaneous, kid!”

Richie yelled, “Wait!” But it was too late. With a snap of Doran’s coconut fingers, everything disappeared.

June 25th, 2037. Earth.

At long last, he had finally made it to Busse Woods, where the last coconut tree in Illinois is. After waiting for dusk to hit, he began walking through the poorly paved path, wondering if he would finally reach where he was meant to be his whole life. Following the guide board, he carefully crept onto the dirt side road, hoping the railing blocking the path, and continued on.

After walking for what felt like an eternity, the canopy opened up to reveal a tall, slender tree bathed in moonlight. Perched on the long, fan-shaped leaves was a cluster of small, green, and brown oblong spheres. This was it. He finally found what he had been searching for this whole time! Breaking out into a disordered, wobbly sprint, He couldn’t wait to finally grab hold of something so precious to him.

Upon finally reaching this obelisk of organic matter, the sheer magnitude of all that had happened caused Richie to fall to his knees in tears of joy, screaming and flailing as he tried to release the overwhelming emotions coursing through him. But, wait, how was he to get it down? He didn’t care anymore and began slamming himself into the tree over and over again. His torn T-shirt and bloodied shoulder weren’t going to stand in the way of achieving his goal.

With one last powerful shove, Richie collapsed to the floor, defeated by the tree. Staring up at the midnight blue sky, he watched as the tree continued to sway side to side from his attempts to make it fall. The rustling of the leaves, the wind patiently blowing through, until a faint cracking sound emerges from the tree. One of the coconuts was growing larger. How could this be? And larger and larger right above his eyes. *THUNK* And so it goes.

Last Math Problem

Jacob Roberson

Paper slips. The sands of time
filling out hands, slipping, rolling
into a machine of ink

levers. A thousand human brains,
embryos shocked and shook.
Relaxing flesh. The skeletons stand in the rain,
reigning in the new year's nonsense.

Screeching tames it. Limits a rhyme
to a pulp. It presses and prints
a growing rhythm. Steps bones
across its work. Balls up the sheet
and tries again.

An oasis burns
Is born. Factored
A million more trees
chop paper. Grow leaves
paper slips



“The Field That Watched Me Heal”
Kiersten Gantek

My Eve

Ash McClelland

The way he designed you, my love,
has mistakenly become an abusive punishment.
Your freckles make me crave the fruit
from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.
Let's break the flesh of the pomegranate
and feast together,
celebrating, as the juice
drips
down our chins.

Imagine us.
How unattractive we would be,
we could never be pretty.
Nothing holy ever is.

*I feel that our bodies will
spiritually tie to one another,*

Enfold the softness of your body close,
wander this abyss of solitude,
until my eyes blur -
 you make me reconsider God.
and I will still walk through the heavens
and crave eternal damnation
and that's putting it lightly.



“Spanish Depth”
Anthony Robledo

