

Arrow Rock Literary Journal: Spring 2021 Issue

Poetry

Arm Wrestling

By: Victoria Lane

My clock stopped a long time ago
I wasn't there when it happened
And I didn't notice what was wrong
Until I watched the second hand
Thrust itself forward
Only to be pushed back by another invisible hand
They must be arm wrestling

A broken clock is still correct twice a day,
but I never seem to look at it at the right time
Maybe tomorrow, my timing will be better
Maybe the next time

I could reach up and fix it
But I don't know how
So I won't even take it off the wall
And time slows to a crawl

The time it stands on means nothing to me
And the frozen moment keeps the hand floating,
Hovering there at the 12,
The precipice of some type of change, I'm sure,
However miniscule that change might be
Insignificant, and I wouldn't even really mind
If it weren't for the fact that the clock is still up there
Ticking on my wall and endlessly in the darkness
as I lie there awake, listening
Refusing to tell me the time
But reminding me that it is moving on anyway

Die Well, Like Trees

By: Gia Mesz

Everyone I know
Is learning to let go
Of something
Or someone
They love.

Hope becomes unclear,
And then it reappears.
Life is sweet
And out of control.

Like trees we're stretched over ourselves,
Love inscribed in our cells.
We're falling,
Leaving our rings to those left behind.

We're trying to die well.

Teach us all that that means:

To see things of eternal weight,
To glimpse joy in the in-between;
To take life as it comes—
The beauty and the misery.

Then, on our dying days,
May we *and* the trees sing praise
For how you taught our lifetime
To be a song.

Execution for a Rose

By: Jasmine Tanui

For once I wish for time to pass
Just to heal the waiting that seems to last
I yearn to grow wiser so that I can feel the sweet wind
Because to be young and know of too much is promiscuous sin
I have broken commandments in the past, but this one is grand
Stepped over, past the ocean, and sucked deep into hot sand
Yet this warm burning seems to chill me
Keeps me alive and never kills me

An old thorned rose has plucked me from the soil with its bare paw
It poked me but never drew blood, yet it opposes the law
I don't concept why, I tell you this rose is different! It is bizarre
O' you'll never find another like it, trust I've searched near and far
This rose makes me open vile black poison to drink that fills my white womb
Yet I never die, the fumes of its petals awaken and lift me from my bleak tomb
This rose makes me grip the sharpest dagger and twist it into my broken heart
Yet I never die or hurt, but the thorns of its stem makes my heart one from its parts
This rose makes me hike to the highest cliff and step off, a million feet I fall
Yet I never die or hurt or crash, the roots of the rose pull me back up, I fly, I am tall
But for an unknown problem, it is forbidden to deal with a rose
No one will have to be executed if no one knows
For I possess secrets that stay hidden under the sun above
People wonder and ask but I'll never tell, that I carry forbidden love

I Know Why You Left

By: Victoria Lane

A cold spot in the room
A light flickering off then on
A little piece of you left in a place
Where it doesn't belong

It feels like you're still here
But I know you weren't here for long
I know that once you were able,
You insisted on pressing on

You headed off into the direction
of that endless unknown
Far from these tethers and chains
Far from this home

With that same gleeful curiosity
You stepped through the gate
With that same reckless ambition
You refused to wait

And if you'd been asked
You'd give your radiant smile
And politely refuse the request
To stay with us for awhile

This room is now empty
I can feel it deep in my bones
Even though I carry you with me
I know that I am alone

I don't blame you for leaving
I couldn't ask you to stay
I know why you left
So I hope you're far away

It feels like you're still here
But I know you weren't here for long
You were exploring the edges of the universe
Before we knew you were gone

I Want To...

By: Fernanda Poblete

I want to see
the people I love,
to hug them without gloves,
and devour the world
with my beloved.

I want to smile with
my mouth uncovered,
without feeling smothered.

I want to take the hand of my lover,
to feel that I hover,
forgetting the suffer,
and to go out on the street
detaching myself
from my bed cover.

I want the night
with its old attributions,
that in the air
dance the illusion,
disappearing the reclusion.

I want the world
to trust again and
turn without spreading pain.

It's 2 AM

By: Victoria Lane

My hair is wet
My air is frigid
My floor is ice

My floor is lava
My legs are noodles
My bed is spikes

My ears are bells
My breath is hot
My skin is hotter

My light is blinding
My fan is loud
My clock is louder

My project is unfinished
My pen is horizontal
My hand is still

My jaw is clenched
My soup is dry
My bread is stale

My eyelids are heavy
My pillow is lumpy
My blanket is newspaper

My morning is early
My mind is frantic
My sleep is later

My project is unfinished
My paper is clean
My target is far

My room is empty
My door is locked
My door is ajar

Jayber's Poem, Inspired by Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*

By: Gia Mesz

To those about to deconstruct or analyze
Their wisp of life on earth:
Take heed,
Lest ye interpret your self
As something understandable.

To you I say:

What do you make
Of love
That floats, unspoken
That settles between
Old friends
That stands at the threshold,
But never takes a chair?

Have you met the irony
Of a death bed
In a living room?

See how souls are carried away,
How the grain has turned silver,
Heads speckled by the sun:
Squeamish boys
Now dignified men—
Their laughing eyes
Sober,
Accepting,
Resigned.
They drop dollars on the tobacco box
On their way
To the grave:
'A clean cut,' they say
To the Death Barber.

Speak, if you have understanding:
Is the river youthful,
Or is it an 'other,'
An old man like me?
Is the water new,
Or does it recall
What was borrowed in the floods?
If the water is old,
Does it carry inside it
The memory of the ground it bore away
To make room for its younger self?
For I remember what / have borne away,
And that makes me think
That there can only be
The one river.

Look into my face,
At the husk
That holds me together.
Can you measure a life
In lines and freckles?

Do my eyes still tell the
Old
Familiar
Story
Of a lamb without sight
Who wandered in the valley
Til he collapsed in the rain
And had to be carried
The rest of the way
Home?

I've felt Love,
And it's carried me to the
Edge
of
the
world.

I do dishonor to this Beauty,
For I fail to love it as I would
And it breaks me.

And yet I'd not abandon this post
For anything,
For the brokenness of my own heart
Is a small price to pay
That Love might go on in this world.

Analyze my life, if you can—
Take my years in your hands
And clench;
But know that I've already
Sought understanding
Of myself,
And that I know this man less
Now
At the end of the road.

My life has been Love.

And Loneliness.

I hope to be around
When I die.
To lie still,
To become one more piece of furniture
That folk can say,
'Oh, that was lost in the flood.'

But I won't be lost,
Just buried
'Neath the ripples of time;
And when the waters still, maybe you'll see me,
Drifting by in the new old river
Which will carry me
To the edge of the world,
Where Love lives.

What do you make of my life?

What do you make
Of yours?

Kings and Queens

By: Jasmine Tanui

We were kings and queens
Once upon a time in Africa, the motherland
Black skin was our pride and we had power in our hand
We walked freely on our native land, breathing pure air into our lungs
We built kingdoms that were spoken to life with our native tongues
We had great power over our area and the many beast,
We were the baddest around to say the least

We were kings and queens
We remained one but always competitive between our tribes
This went beyond thought when we took the white man's bribes
A conquered tribe for ten thousand pieces of gold
And it was done, the ones with our skin had been sold
Packed tight onto a boat to go far across the sea,
The beginning of oppression and slavery, a fate we could not foresee

We were kings and queens
Our people were enslaved for over 200 years,
We built life for the whites with our blood, sweat and tears
From picking cotton, and raisins their babies we did it all
With tortuous beatings and suffering, God was all we could call
We survived years of following the white man's doctriation,
To finally being freed by the Emancipation Proclamation
That led to share cropping, separate but equal,
Jim Crow laws, or should I say "slavery's sequel"

We were kings and queens
Things were separate, but not equal, so we opposed with civil rights
A movement led with words, protesting and spiritual fights
From pure ignorance the lives of our young they would steal,
This is shown through the brutal deaths of the four little church girls and Emmitt Till
We fought for education because that was considered a crime,
Our first chance of that came with the integration of the little rock nine
Don't forget about Ms. Rosa Parks who fought for the right of her seat,
It may sound simple, but as blacks these were obstacles that we had to defeat.
And never forget about our great hero reverend Martin Luther King,
His words were reminisced as the words that let freedom rings
We fought and we marched on as far as the rising sun,
It took time but the civil rights era is a battle that we won

We were kings and queens
Now people with different skin may live together as a nation

We have rights, freedom of speech and education
Gabby Douglas, Usain Bolt, Serena Williams, all black people that dominated in the Olympics
We don't only dominate in sports but in education, check the statistics
We cannot forget about Barack Obama, the beloved President who showed melanin is
intelligent,
He made it evident
And now we are so much more

We are teachers, leaders, doctors, poets, physicians, CEO's, preachers, writers, actors, lawyers,
Mechanics, inventionalist,
We are anything we put our minds to
We are kings and queens

Ocean

By: Arianna Amann

Night broke against the sky,
Sunlight twinkled across the horizon.
Disco balls and dancing teens,
There were flutters of attraction.
Laughter fluttered lightly in the air,
Circling and grasping attention.
The sound of crashing waves amplified,
Whispering, wondering, waving.

I bolted to the ocean, my feet slapping and spraying sand.
My clothes fell off as I approached the water, slipping and sliding down.
I leapt into the crystal abyss,
Immediately caught in a cradling wave that swept me into a sweet embrace.

For a moment, I was cherished.
Waves of thought spiraled and swirled.
I was sucked, pulled, and dancing.
Laughing sprinkled and the crystals floated through the air.

The next, I was spat out, slammed back onto the sand.
I tried to sit up, but I could not stand.
The ocean vomited debris,
It sloshed back into the void, scurrying away from me.
I screamed! The sky, gathering in large dark clouds, lightning flashed.
The waves struck again, throwing me on my ass.

Horrified and hurt, I cowered from the sky.
I slid back on my clothes
Didn't wave the ocean goodbye.

Ode to Chuck

By: Zane Bell

Light upon a new day
Arrives with the
Forcefulness of none.

My dear friends,
Twice a drink
On Budweiser beer
Has rendered me
A hapless fool.

Yet beautiful poetry,
You say? Well, I Say
This in sincere response:

The man you
Doth not know
Also does know
The world for
Its cruel paths.

****CONTENT ADVISORY – death****

one more theory about grief

By: Emerson Gray

After Paul Guest

That it will come to me in the most inopportune moments: when I'm thinking of kissing my now ex-boyfriend, when I'm brushing my teeth, when I pass the golf course where we went on our only real date. That I don't want to live the rest of my life dealing with it. That I'm tired of seeing your face every time I close my eyes. That I want to forget you. That learning to cope with you being gone isn't a linear process; it's more like a cow spinning around in a tornado, tossed back and forth until its skull is smashed to pieces against a telephone pole and then rewinding the clock, forcing bits of bone to come together and stuffing vital organs back into an

empty cavernous carcass. That you told me you didn't think a queer could make it out of this town alive but somehow despite the Catholic guilt that plagued every caress you gave to me, I never thought you were talking about yourself.

The Farewell

By: Fernanda Poblete

Take me in your arms, don't let go of me.
Hug me until fear and pain leave my mind.
I will be your voice and the strength that you lost.
I will achieve the justice you deserve.
Give me this moment to frame your essence.
I want to retain the warmth of your hands,
and feel how your heart beats, which was wounded,
a damn September night away from home.
I would like to be with you on this trip.
But I'm not yet ready for such approach.
I hope that where you go is beautiful,
where the life of women is valuable,
where you can be yourself without being judged.
Here I will stay, so that you can be heard,
so that your story is remembered,
and no angel open their wings so soon.

The Protagonist

By: Victoria Lane

I don't want to be
Just another maiden
Affixed somewhere
In a man's story

I, too,
Want the power,
The adventures,
And the glory

Not Persephone,
Eurydice,
Medusa, Helen,
or Demeter

If my choice is between
supporting actress
And love interest,
I choose neither

I know the perils,
The hardships,
And the trials
That may come my way

I will choose the life
Filled with choice
Every single time
And every day

I want to travel far
And solve mysteries
And slay the beast
And save the world

And I'll do it all
To be the best
Just like all the rest
Not just good for a girl

The Shadow

By: Fernanda Poblete

Here I come,
but with your permission.

I don't come alone.
I come with my shadow,
one that doesn't leave me alone,
since a long time ago.

I don't like her,
but I can't take her away from me.
She says that she loves me
but who loves you,
doesn't hurt you.

I don't want to
drag you with her.
I don't want
your world turned dark
because of her.

Maybe,
someday,
with your joy,
I will stop being her toy.

Your light
and attitude,
makes her concern
in a way that I didn't expect.

You are a skylight
that appeared without request,
but that illuminates
every corner as a bless.

The Tree

By: Jasmine Tanui

Written in memory of my late grandfather, Larry F. Dunlap

Tall, strong, independent tree
Bark covering the trunk stretched wide
Sprouting from the head green leaves
Bold branches emerge from side to side
For me, the tree has always been there
When in need, it gave me fresh air
The tree was there when I took my first steps
Its very own trunk held my hammock as I slept
When the sun shined too hot, its leaves covered
The tree prayed for me when uneasy spirits hovered
When I was numb, I could always feel his bark
The tree reminded me of light when I was afraid of the dark
When I came to the tree with rivers in my eyes,
the tree would soak my tears into its soil
When I would play and scrape my knee under the blue skies,
the tree would heal my wounds with its sweet oil

I never carried hunger because the tree would provide fruit
The tree would tell me, "You are of me, blood of my blood, we have the same roots"
Now the tree has aged, broken branches, withered leaves
But I will never forget how the tree fulfilled all my wants and needs
Now it is I who must plant new seeds
For the tree was the greatest provider
But the one above everything, has called him higher

The Years Do Not See Equal Growth

By: Victoria Lane

These days
I'm realizing that
The people I look up to and admire
Are more often younger than me
Than I used to find
There were always others
Outliers that hit stardom young
And I thought that I would be one
But I'm getting older
And older

It's hard not to realize
That they're two years younger
And a hundred and fifty years more successful
But who's keeping time?

Part of me worries that
This feeling will never go away
Not even at the very end
When I am an old woman
The oldest person left on earth
And all people
And all of their achievements
Continue to make me feel small

I worry that this pain will keep going forever
But I wonder,
Will this pain remain the same
As the years go by?
Or will it get worse
And worse?

****CONTENT ADVISORY – sexual assault****

why I didn't make a #metoo post

By: Emerson Gray

I'm sorry. I love you. He's sorry. He gets like that.
He feels really bad for putting you in that situation
I've talked to him about it
He keeps like, sobbing on my bed
That's a really strong word
You can't take it back.
Maybe don't use that word
If he'd done something like, really wrong, I'd leave him
But you know, it wasn't like that bad
Try to forgive him. He's sorry
He wants to apologize
I'll keep him away from you
But you should talk to him
I want to understand
Did you tell him no?
I know you have trouble saying no to people
Were you drunk? Were you high?
You shouldn't have gotten into the car with him
If that's not what you wanted
You got a motel room with him?
Well of course that's what he thought was going to
happen
This is why we got you pepper spray
It doesn't matter how well you know him
Doesn't matter how nice he is.
Doesn't matter how he talks to you.
Boys only have one thing on their mind
I taught you that
I can't believe I failed you like this
No, don't go to the cops
They'll ruin his life
No, don't go to the cops
They won't believe you
No, don't go to the cops
All cops are bastards, anyway.
No, don't go to the cops

They'll laugh
And drag you through the mud
Tell everyone to cool down about it.
It's not fair to him
Why are you still so angry?
He said he's sorry he's sorry he's
sorry.

Mondays

By: Amanda May

I was still heavy from the Benadryl.
I tolerate the weight of waking up.
Coffee does nothing for me anymore.
Neither does cold water to the face or
screaming the lyrics to America.
All the fucking creamer is going to
spoil one of these days.
I pour it out at night,
like a lot of things,
when everyone's asleep and won't see.
And the moon rose over an open field
I've tried tea and it tastes like piss.
Green tea tastes like the stale disappointment of disturbed mothers.
Earl Grey blends remind me of an old friend.
Laughing on the bus Playing games with the faces
We were seventeen, and even then I wanted to end things.

Fiction

Blackmail

By: Fernanda Poblete

No one made the slightest sound. Each one harbored their thoughts to themselves because of the immense terror that gnawed at them inside. The knowing glances that the four college classmates shared fed the agony that gripped that cabin on the shores of the lake, hidden among the larch trees.

"No one is going to say anything?" Javier asked nervously, unable to avoid biting his lower lip.

"This cannot be happening. I thought this was in the past. Two years have passed." Clemente grabbed his straight hair as he walked in circles.

"Can you calm down a bit?" Sergio exclaimed, with a voice much more relaxed than the rest. "We are going to solve it." He leaned back in the green leather chair, raising his feet.

"How can you be so calm? Do you realize that someone knows what we did?" Javier asked desperately. "Or is there only room in your head for alcohol and women?"

"Look, I suggest you keep your mouth shut."

"Stop arguing and let's fix this, please," added Pedro, the wise man of the group.

Pedro went over to his backpack and took out a piece of paper, which he laid on the table. Each one looked at the writing, trying to read what was inside.

"I know what they did, and they are going to pay for it," Clemente read aloud.

"That's completely impossible," Javier exclaimed, shaking his head quickly. "No one, absolutely no one, was in the cabin that day. It was just us. It is impossible that someone saw us."

"Unless someone has broken the pact and opened their mouth," Sergio said, as he took a sip of his drink.

"Are we going to distrust each other now?" Clemente asked, with an ironic tone.

"Because, if that's so, everything goes to hell."

"None of us benefit if the truth comes out, so let's stop implying stupid theories." Pedro picked up Sergio's glass and threw it into the kitchen sink "Has anyone else received any of these threats?"

Silence grants the points, as the saying goes, since no one answered the question immediately, but somehow or another, they expected to see who was going to be the brave one to raise their voices and admit what fate was in store for them.

"Two days ago, I received a letter addressed to me, without a sender," said Clemente, as if he did not want to acknowledge it to them. "When I opened it, there was a photo... of Andrés" He stopped and bit his nails. "And a note that said, *'the truth will be known very soon.'*"

Tension was in the air, trapped within those wooden walls, desperately searching for a way to escape.

"Any idea who it might be?" Sergio asked angrily.

"Maybe Andrés's ex-girlfriend?" Javier suggested.

"Martina? There's no way. She never doubted what happened," he answered, sure of himself.

"Anyone who had known Andrés well could have doubted," Pedro answered Clemente with a serious face. "But we can't rule out anything."

Suddenly, Sergio picked up his phone and read a text message from an unknown number, "*Neither power nor money will save you from jail, friend of the year.*" After he pronounced the last sentence, Clemente straightened up and began to walk from one side to the other, without stopping. Meanwhile, Javier hid his face in his hands, sinking into despair. Pedro slowly approached Sergio's cell phone to confirm if the user who had sent the anonymous message could be called, but there was no response.

The four friends began to slowly sink into the memories that their minds harbored from that night. An innocent party that promised to be fun and friendly ended up becoming the nightmare that would haunt them forever.

"We should have told the truth at first," Javier said suddenly, his forehead covered in sweat.

"Don't you think it's too late for regrets? And this should have already been prescribed; it has been a long time," argued Sergio, who stood out for being the most relaxed of the four, the one who constantly came up with ideas to do the weekend and who never lasted more than a week with the same girlfriend.

"At least five years are needed for a simple crime to prescribe and as everyone knows... ours was not a simple crime" explained Pedro, thanks to his knowledge as a second-year law student.

"Clemente, why don't you talk to your father? Let him hire a private detective and find out who is doing this to us," Javier asked, on the verge of a mental breakdown.

Clemente's father was the prime minister of the current government. A powerful man with many contacts, but who also carried a public image that he had to take care of at all costs.

"No! No way I will ask him for help," he answered. "My father would kill me if he found out that someone else knew about this. He has helped us enough."

"And what if they are just threats? Maybe that person has no proof at all and is trying to drive us crazy to make a mistake."

"Pedro..." Javier answered fearfully "I think he may have proof."

Javier slid his cell phone over the table, so that everyone could see what he just blurted out, while the fingers of his left hand went directly to his mouth as a self-reflection. The device showed images of Javier together with a man in a black jacket, looking haggard, possibly due to nicotine addiction. Both were talking in the first photographs, until Javier handed him a brown package in a suspicious way.

"You are an idiot!" Clemente shouted angrily after he looked at the screen.

"It was the only time I made a transaction in a public space; I swear." He took a couple of steps, back with his hands outstretched in defense.

"Javier ... for these things, we had agreed that it had to be inside the bar, not at the exit, where the whole city can watch you!" Clemente pushed him hard, causing him to fall to the ground.

"Enough," said Sergio, pushing Clemente aside, while Pedro picked up Javier, who was shaking in fear.

"Can you think for a moment with a cool head? There is not enough evidence to incriminate us" explained Pedro serenely, but with a certain concern.

"But they do check the drug," said Clemente.

The atmosphere became even more tense than before. The glances did not cease; each tried to find a haven of peace in the eyes of the others, but none were successful. They knew that the situation was turning negative and that was something that no one could hide. The regrets were not long in coming, nor were the reproaches, blaming each other for the mistakes of the past.

The four inseparable friends from school, those who seemed to be brothers despite not sharing the same blood, whose families shared lunches and celebrations together, now looked at each other with distrust and fell down in the dark.

"I thought that when we entered the university, we would be able to forget about all this," Sergio said, overwhelmed, showing a mask that had not been discovered before.

"I always knew that I would never be able to forget about that; how is it that you can?" Pedro asked with an anguished face, that denoted a deep sadness "He was our friend..."

"It wasn't our fault," Sergio replied quickly, getting up from his seat, gesturing authoritatively. "We were not responsible for what happened to Andrés."

"At least we could have told the truth," Javier responded suddenly, with a fearful tone of voice.

"Right now, you would be in jail if we had told the truth." Sergio placed his face intimidatingly close to him "We had a life ahead of us, dreams and aspirations, while Andrés did not. Sorry for saying it like that, but we did what we had to do, even if you don't want to accept it."

"It is true. My father's career would have been destroyed in a second. No university would have accepted us. We have to be realistic," said Clemente.

"Have you even thought, for a second, about his family? They believe that their son committed suicide," Pedro responded furiously, due to the great closeness that he had with Andrés. They were both the most responsible of the five.

Andrés came from a middle-class family. However, thanks to a soccer scholarship, which Pedro himself had helped him get when they met playing a friendly match, he was able to study at the same school as them.

"I'm sorry for his parents, but if they find out what really happened, it won't give them much peace either," Sergio said, after a long pause.

"At least they would know," Pedro argued.

"Okay!" Clemente yelled. "If that is what you want, let's go to the police station and admit everything. Let's admit that our friend, Andrés López, never committed suicide and that we were the ones who took care of making it seem so." His face hardened. "But forget about your current lives because the only thing you will see for the next long years will be the iron bars in your cells ... or perhaps, we will end up dead."

Clemente's words perpetuated in a profound and dominating way, causing each one to begin to go back to the scene where it all happened; there on the same floor of logs that they were stepping on. Two years ago, Clemente's father had granted him the lake house after much begging and many tantrums, as well as a little help from his mother, because she was the golden child in her eyes. It was supposed to be a weekend of friends there to sunbathe, swim in the pool, and drink like there was no tomorrow. However, the plans did not go as expected.

After a long day riding the jet skis and enjoying nature, the vices began to appear as soon as the moon was rising. Alcohol bottles flooded the kitchen, and glasses only lasted seconds with liquid in them, but things would soon reach another level. Suddenly, Sergio took, out of his suitcase, a bag full of pills of different colors, which he showed them to the others with great joy.

"The fun is here!" He showed them off, with a smile from ear to ear.

"You are a genius." Javier congratulated him, excited.

"But... Sergio, why did you bring them?" Pedro rolled his eyes "They are supposed to be sold, not consumed."

"It's true," Andrés said, interfering. "We made a promise, and we should keep it. This is serious; we have to be cautious."

"Andrés." Clemente approached him and wrapped his right arm around him. "The idea of selling was so that we wouldn't have to depend on our parents, giving us our luxuries and so you could pay for college, but... you can't sell without trying first, right?" He smiled mischievously. "There are no parents; it's just the five of us, and it's our last summer before going to college. So, open your mouth and enjoy it." He took a tablet and placed it on his tongue, without Andrés being able to refuse.

All the members did the same, unconsciously making what would be one of the worst mistakes of their lives. After a long and happy revelry, in which laughter and fun abounded for long hours, the sun appeared the next day, to bring the consequences of their actions. Little by little, they woke up, accompanied by terrible headaches and extreme thirst.

"I don't think I've ever had a hangover like that," Sergio complained, settling on the sofa.

"Imagine the one that Andrés is going to have," Javier mocked. "He had never tried anything before."

"He hasn't woken up yet. I think he's going to sleep all morning," said Clemente.

"We better wake him up so he can sleep in one of the beds. He is going to break his back lying on the floor," suggested Pedro, approaching his friend, who was face down on the red carpet in the main room, although when he tried to lift him, something caught his attention. Andrés did not react to the calls of his name, or Pedro's movements. "Hey, Andrés. Help me a little, you're not very light."

"Just let him sleep on the floor. He needs to rest," Sergio added, with his usual calm.

"He doesn't wake up," replied Pedro, concerned, "Andrés! Do you hear me? Please, say something!"

"Calm down, man," Clemente exclaimed. "This is how it is when one consumes for the first time."

Pedro patted him on the cheeks to wake him up, but Andrés's eyes remained closed. Suddenly, the most feared thought crossed Pedro's brain, causing his heart to race from one moment to the next, and his mouth to go dry. The tips of his index and middle fingers were placed at the level of Andrés's neck, on the Adam's apple very carefully, so that Pedro could feel his pulse, but unfortunately, he could not find it.

"He doesn't have a pulse ..." he stammered, scared. "I can't feel it!" cried Pedro, anguished, trying to give him cardiopulmonary resuscitation with his hands.

"What are you talking about?" Clemente urged, approaching him so that he can do it himself. "I can't feel it, either..." he whispered, his face pale.

"No, no. Stop saying stupid things. He's just sleeping," Javier interrupted, with a nervous laugh.

"Can you understand that he doesn't breathe?! Call an ambulance! How much did he consume last night?" Pedro asked, distressed, while he kept trying to revive him.

"The same as us," answered Sergio, scared, without being able to divert his gaze from Andrés's face "Maybe a few more..."

"I told you it was a bad idea that we gave him so many!" Clemente was enraged.

The discussions increased the deep fear they felt at that moment, making a monster grow that consumed them inside and that would divert them from the right path. Pedro maintained the compressions without giving up for long minutes, until Javier stopped him, holding him in his arms to face reality.

Silence stole the leadership of the story, becoming the defense weapon of each one. Neither had the strength or courage to articulate a word. Their minds sailed through dark seas, where the light was dimming more and more; panic and despair flourished.

"You have to call the police," said Pedro, breaking the secrecy. He got up from the floor and walked over to the counter to take his cell phone.

"Wait." Clemente unexpectedly stood in front of him. "We cannot do that..."

"What do you mean? We have to call them for sure" Pedro brushed him off uneasily, wiping away the tear that fell on his cheekbone.

"And what are you going to tell them? 'Hey, our best friend just died of an overdose while we were sleeping?' Or, better yet, tell them that the drug that caused the overdose is the same drug we trafficked." Clemente looks at him defiantly.

The last sentence exploded like a bomb in everyone's reasoning, showing a possible scenario they hadn't considered before.

"Clemente is right," Sergio supported him suddenly. "If we tell the truth, we have a lot to lose."

"Are you serious?" Pedro couldn't believe what he was hearing "The person lying there is Andrés...our best friend."

"And you don't know how much it hurts me that this happened." Sergio's voice trembled. "But, at this moment, we have to watch over us." He paused. "Either we end up in jail for drug trafficking, or our boss kills us before we can even get there."

"Sergio...please. Wake up. Listen to what you are saying. Javier?" Pedro looked at him; he was sitting in a corner, with his legs and arms against his chest. "Can you help me?"

"I... I..." he stammered, scared "I think they are right. The boss would never forgive us for a scandal like this, especially if he relates it to his business."

"My father's political career would be over," added Clemente. "And, well, not to mention ours... if we didn't end up in prison or dead, no university would want four drug dealers with a dead friend."

Pedro only observed them, without commenting, seeing how the people whom he considered his family became complete strangers.

"I really can't believe it," Pedro shook his head in denial. "What do you intend to do?"

The thoughts of the three were immediately synchronized, generating an almost invincible complicity.

"We will make it appear as a suicide." Clemente threw his shoulders back, as if to give conviction to his words "And we will take this secret to the grave."

The plan was carried out with three votes to one. Pedro under the loneliness and nostalgia, had no choice but to give in and stick to the idea, despite the fact that he would transform into the shadow that would haunt him like a conviction.

The two leaders entrusted Javier to be in charge of writing a farewell note, due to his vast experience falsifying signatures and letters to excuse himself from attending classes, or to request money from the bank without the authorization of his parents. On the other hand, Sergio transferred part of the drugs that he had brought to the cabin to Andrés' suitcase, while the rest were buried in the backyard of the cabin. Clemente devised the alibi that they were going to hand over to the police after they were notified, making them believe that Andrés had been going through a severe depression that could be linked to the inability to pay for higher

education, which eventually would have led him to take the drastic decision to ingest a sufficient quantity of amphetamines to suppress his pain.

"Let's stop having regrets; the sooner we do that, the better it will be." Clemente interrupted the regression suddenly, causing everyone to abandon their hidden memories. "What's done is done. You don't have to keep stirring up the past. Now, you have to concentrate on finding the extortionist."

After that impromptu meeting, the threats did not stop, despite his great attempts to halt them. It got to the point that, a few months later, the four friends found themselves on the edge of the abyss, when they unexpectedly received a summons to court for the case of Andrés López. They thought that the day would never come when they would have to get to that point, where they would have to wear their best suits and ties, escorted by the best lawyers in the country, in order to hide and lie once more about the trip to the lake house.

The trial began at the assigned time, punctual as the judge himself, who appeared with a rather thick folder under his arm. Andres's family was sitting in the back seats, with an aura of concern that could be seen from afar and broken hearts that had yet to heal.

"Please, take a seat," ordered the magistrate, addressing the entire audience in the room. "We begin the oral trial in the case of Andrés López. The first witness, Clemente Echeverría, is called to the stand."

Everyone's gazes quickly fell on Clemente, causing his chest to constrict and his breath to hit. He got up and buttoned his jacket while trying to maintain his composure, staring in awe at that dais, where the power of the law would fall on his shoulders.

"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" An officer asked him.

"I swear," he answered seriously.

"Is it true that you were present on July 11, 2018, along with Javier La Torre, Sergio Campos and Pedro Larraín, when Andrés López committed suicide?" asked the prosecutor in the case.

"Unfortunately, yes." His pulse quickened, but it wasn't reflected on his face.

"Do you confirm that it was a suicide?"

The question made Clemente extremely uncomfortable, as he did not expect to receive it. Nonetheless, he focused his concentration on the questions and answers he had practiced with his attorneys prior to the trial and adhered to them.

"Yes, I confirm it," Clemente answered, convinced, without moving the slightest muscle in his body.

"So, how would you explain this video?" The prosecutor frowned.

The prosecutor took a remote control that he had on his table and turned on a screen, on which he could see the group of friends at the lake house a couple of months ago. The video showed the exact moment where Clemente admitted that, together with his three companions, he had made Andrés' death look like a suicide.

"Mr. Echeverría? I remind you that you are under oath," pressed the prosecutor.

Clemente was paralyzed. His skin prickled, and his body temperature soared through the roof. He felt that the air had become stagnant in his lungs, and his mind had gone unusually blank. The rest of the members could not hide their surprise when they saw the recording.

Everyone--except one, Pedro, who dropped his head back, looking at the sky relieved, feeling that he could breathe for the first time after two long years.

Christmas Dinner

By: Samia Williams

BANG!

I've been waiting for the phone to ring for the past two hours—it won't. The last time I bored holes into the clock's face as it evenly ticks about in my kitchen while it performs its simple life purpose, it was 5:30.

BANG!

I've never had a problem breaking down meat for dinner. The heavy cleaver always weighs down my hand like an expensive tennis bracelet some woman will wear every day for two months after December 25th; that is, of course, until someone spots her gleaming diamonds and mugs her on the way to her car in a dark parking lot after work to put food on their family's table.

I, too, intend to put food on my family's table, that's why, each time, I swing the cleaver down *faster*.

BANG!

And I find it fair to mention that I've never had much of a like for Christmas.

BANG!

The sharp blade slices through tendons, meat, and bone as I aim it directly so. The wet meat glistens and glitters under my fluorescent kitchen lights; the blinding white light highlights the veins and vessels covering the wide expanse of the tender, delicate, moist meat. As my serrated blade bites into the flesh, teeth gnawing and tearing apart softened tissues, juice and blood ooze from worn vessels.

I've never prepared a meat as fine as this before—a meat as *rich*, as *valuable*, as this before. I'm so nervous to touch it, so... so hesitant to swing down and crack this ivory bone into fragments of what it once was, and what it once convinced itself to be.

In the end, we're all mindless cattle.

BANG!

But, as I break down the meat, patiently rendering the portions of hearty sustenance ready to become gloriously marinated and cooked to perfection, I find courage and comfort in the fact that this Christmas will be different—I know this because I promised myself so.

You see, I've gotten myself quite the gift.

BANG!

The gift of peace.

BANG!

It's nightfall, and the phone's still not ringing—the acid in my stomach curdles with unexplained joy. As I shuffle about my kitchen with purpose, my dog, Neo, watches me curiously dance about in my corny, store-bought Mrs. Claus outfit, and I feel at great peace.

My chihuahua, my little boy, my little Neo. How I'd move heaven on earth for him and then some. He stares on at me with his buggy, booger wet eyes and I stare back intently. The phone doesn't ring, but that's quite alright: I've got Neo.

His nails scratch across my floor as he scuttles closer to me, his tiny body rubbing against my ankle; little canine leg bones brushing against taught human muscle. His nose picks up, the wetness catching a glint of light as he scrunches it in wild undulations. He smells the meat.

He's never been a fan of raw meat—as I've tried a few times to bulk him up with a protein rich diet—so I find it endearing that he's decided to join my feast this special holiday. My little Neo knows how important this is for me, and I'm quite sure he knows of my promise.

BANG!

Neo perks up, his tiny tail slaps against my ankle in anticipation. If it weren't for his little tan body, my dear son would look like an obscenely large sewer rat, one that's been prowling around in the labyrinth of the sewer system that lies beneath our homes, watching you from the gutters at night to snatch your scraps from the dumpster.

Even that I find myself slightly fond of.

I dangle the meat between the tips of my fingers for a moment—just a tease—before it slips out of my hand easy enough and into my hungry boy's mouth. Albeit small in stature, my Neo's teeth are the biggest part of his body.

He gnaws and rips at the flesh with his sharp k9s, molars helping to squish and shape the residual meat that's been munched into near perfect bolus texture. I brush his teeth often enough that they're a gorgeous white, and his breath is one you'd find yourself more inclined to take a second whiff of.

Not of enjoyment, but out of confusion—does this sewer rat's breath smell... good?

I stand there, paused, watching the heartfelt scene unfold before me: Christmas music filters in gently through the dining room, some song I recognise from my time spent forcibly entertaining my husband's colleagues during the holidays; the fluorescent light washes out his ugly tan coat, making him look sickly pale and morbidly shadowed; and he's absolutely devouring my precious meat.

I could cry.

BANG!

As I finish up my parting out in preparation for my husband's annual Christmas feast tomorrow, I absentmindedly drop Neo some more scraps; just things I find myself not inclined to eat. I like *meat*: big cuts, thick slices, or healthy portions—whatever you like to call it. The texture of meat as the fibres give under the dedicated force of my teeth is overwhelmingly sublime, and so then the best parts of this Christmas dinner's main course will be reserved for such.

I glance up at the clock again as the song transitions on to something new, something fresh and funky—something beyond my years and then some, but something I can't say I don't enjoy.

It's 8:36 PM and I'm sliding the meat into vacuum sealed bags as I swing my hips to the beat of a song that'll never make it to next Christmas season. I hit the on button and Neo runs away, threatened by the loud roar of the air-sucking machine I got three Christmases ago from my husband's co-worker's wife, Belinda.

Thank you, Belinda, I said to her. I'll be using this for years to come.

And so I have. So thank you again, Belinda.

One-by-one and piece-by-piece I pack the meat into its bag and suck the air out. Neo is hiding somewhere in the Hallmark home that is my house, most likely burrowed under the cushions of my sofa.

My husband hated when my little Neo would run and hide under the cushions, face fire red as he cursed my little boy for “messing up the living room.” If it is a living room, then it must look lived in by the living things that reside in this house. Our way of living, and Neo’s way of living, simply look a little different: but they’re both ways of living, nonetheless.

The amount of the meat I sordidly underestimated, and as of now I find myself wondering how it is I plan to stuff it into my deep freezer. Once the machine clicks off, I place my last sealed bag precariously on top of a pile I started in my sink and give my work a once over.

Twice over.

Thrice over.

The bells from the radio jingle and chime in a way that sounds like what I’d consider to be what snowfall sounds like; and I soon-after hear my little boy’s collar clink around as he unearths himself from the couch, knocking the cushions into the floor in the process, and gallops into the kitchen.

Back and forth his tail wags and back and forth I toss bags of meat into an oversized trash bag. Neo cutely pretends to help me as I drag the bag across the floor on our journey to the basement. My arms are much too weak to carry this all at once, but that’s never stopped me before. I’m a dedicated woman, one who’s never tired enough to give up: that’s why my husband fell for me, you see.

Innovative-ly so, as a method for me to move the precious cargo with ease, I haul the black bag while it rests atop a blanket that functions to provide a cushioned barrier between the black bag, the treats inside, and the floor. In my Mrs. Claus costume I transport my sack from one floor of the house to another, and here I stand against the task that is my deep freezer.

Neo sits near the trash bag, head cocked to the side. *Don’t worry, I pleasantly reassure him and mostly myself, I’ll figure it out, boy.*

We don’t use the deep freezer for much, only to store meat. This last season my husband went on an annual weekend getaway with friends whom I don’t ask much about, and whom—I’m assuming—don’t ask much about me. High school buddies, ruggedly handsome men with no tolerance for nothing but work, work, work. My husband tells me he goes on these trips for peace, just as he’s told me he has Christmas dinners for peace and has an office in our house for peace. It’s admirable, this concept of doing things for yourself for the sake of personal *peace*.

As I open up the deep freeze, I’m met with eyes of a deer.

Originally, I found myself arguing that this manifestation of peace, his search for something greater, had tunnelled his vision and there he finds himself caught within headlights, unable to see the reality in front of him.

The deer’s eyes look dead. They are dead.

Neo sneezes behind me.

He is not dead. I am not dead. But my meat?

My meat is dead.

I roughly grab the head and toss it over the side of the freezer, and it hits the floor with a heavy clunk. I hear Neo's nails scratch against the concrete floor of the basement as he trots to the side of the severed head to get a closer inspection.

The first hunting season I spent with my husband, he taught me to break and process down a deer. First, the hide as it dangles from the gambrel—from the top and then you work your way down, taking delicate consideration of the spine and precious musculature. Then, you butcher the shoulder, tugging the thick flesh away from the torso to reveal the coveted "pass through cut zone."

As I throw everything out of my freezer, preparing it for my meat, preparing it for a fresh start...I remember the warm press of my husband against my back as he taught me to cut with my knife parallel to the rib cage to pass through the shoulder joint, or how it's better to pull the front leg up and away from your view of the torso if you can't get a clear sight of where to cut.

Butcher the back straps, the neck meat, and the excess front meat in that order, because the next part requires a clean view and a clean cut: saw off the body at the hips. Cut the sirloin, remove the rest of the hind quarters starting at the Achilles' tendon before cutting upwards around the knee in order to free the succulent meat from the leg and pelvis bones. Then, you bone out, trim, and pack.

As the body parts of unprepared animals rain on my concrete floor, I look up to check the time, but my clock isn't there. Is it 10:00 o'clock now? Perhaps 10:30? My stomach churns but I catch a glimpse of Neo licking at the eye sockets of the deer and my blood rushes to my face in joy. He's so small, yet here he triumphs even the mighty buck. Like his mother he powers on, small but mighty; determination running through his veins.

I choose not to shoo him away, as it's my intention to rid my freezer of this grotesque meat. This meat that I've butchered, this meat my husband killed for peace but left me to maul in anything but a peaceful fashion. This meat that I've prepared for my husband's colleagues and their brain-dead wives, all in the name of holiday *peace*. I served, I cooked, and I slaved away but it was for *peace*.

One-by-one I throw my meat into my barren freezer, free from the oppressive weight that is my husband's baggage, full of the new weight that is *my peace*.

Neo licks and gnaws at the head of the deer, and the phone will not ring tonight. It'll ring tomorrow, perhaps around 8:00 when I wake up to prepare the rest of my Christmas feast and return the plug from the landline back into the comfort of its home that is an outlet in the wall. White and off-white packs of meat cover the floor in a sea of flesh, and my dog skips about it and rolls around in it as if it were as soft and plush as snow.

Without my digging around in the freezer, the sound of Christmas trickles downstairs from the radio, and then swarms my ears a tune my husband loved more than any other Christmas tune—"(There's No Place Like Home) for the Holidays."

It's as gentle as he wishes he was and as loving as he considers himself to be. The phone won't ring, and he won't call; and it's not snowing in here, but Neo sure thinks it is. The "is" and "is not's," the uncertainty but certainty about all that unfolds before me as it supposedly exists,

the scepticism, this is my peace. The reclamation of my identity, myself, my freezer, and my god damn kitchen lights is my peace.

To hell with florescent as it washes out the life in a room that's already used to prepare death. To home death, to house it in the freezer or the fridge, to house death in the acids of our stomachs. In the headlights of our cars and the tunnels within our vision.

My stomach grumbles and Neo looks up at me. I'm not sure when the last time I had eaten was. I've been worried sick over my meat, over my Christmas celebration, over my peace. I make no move to clean up the mess as I manoeuvre around the mess of meat and hurry up into the kitchen to put some food on my stomach. Surrounded by all this meat, preparing all the food, and not a bite of it myself to eat—how foolish am I, how foolish indeed.

Neo sticks to my side in hopes of nibbling on some more scraps, but the fingers he's stripped clean, and the toe's he made quick work of already. His hunger for this meat is insatiable, but as is mine because above all things, it is this meat that is the greatest testament to my gift of peace this Christmas holiday.

Quickly, I pull open my freezer door, grab a freshly cut steak marinating in the potent mixture that once made my husband drool and quickly sear it up on the stove with expert hands. I've been trained to wait on my husband hand and foot, cater to his needs to matter how morbid, therefore I move quickly, and efficiently—every decision made for perfection.

I shuffle to my dining room, walking into a mirage of the North Pole and there sits my husband, eyes fixed on my seat in waiting for my arrival. My steaks on hand, nearly rare, perfectly tender and bloodied. Neo nestled close against my crossed ankles, and I stare my husband down while I cut into my steak and slip a piece in my mouth, teeth shaping that bolus, eyes rolled back in pleasure.

The seasoned juices dribble down the slightly cracked corners of my mouth as I gnash through the tenderly cooked meat. The pink interior peaks out within the sliced cut of steak, and I bring my knife down again, cutting back and forth in an excited rhythm: the fork can't reach my mouth fast enough.

From under the table Neo licks at my ankles and I peak down to see his little face, bug eyes wide, wet nose flaring in want. My sweet little Neo leans into me as I scoop him up, nestling him close to my chest. He wiggles and squirms, tongue making quick work of the left-over sauce on my face as I prepare a slice big enough for him and his teeth *clank* as his mouth snaps shut around the cut of meat. I press obnoxiously loud, wet, meaty kisses all over his flesh covered skull as he munches down before I submit another piece of my peace into my mouth.

"Oh, it's divine." I moan.

My husband says nothing in response. His head rests upon the cherry wood table I'd gotten for Christmas six years ago, eyes once tunnelled, now frozen in time, caught like a deer in headlight in search of his precious peace.

My husband's eyes look dead. They are dead.

Neo sneezes under me.

He is not dead. I am not dead. But my meat?

My meat is dead.

Conditions

By: Zane Bell

It had been suppressed from the beginning. There was no platform on which such rage could stand, for it was larger than himself -- larger than his tiny theater of the world. He could not even begin to fathom the size of the injustice, and so he left his rage to the winds of war -- so that it might swirl around him, ever-present yet ever-fleeting.

Even so, affairs were maintained much as they had been prior to that new year of broken lines and mended brotherhoods. There could be no pause here, for who, if not he, would push onward in that great forward movement of captains and corporals? In this question, he was decidedly invested.

"How could you not be?" A renewed voice came. "That constant battle, more similar to the Somme than you know, took the solid ground right from under you. That you should spend three years grappling for some semblance of consistency is a natural thing. I have seen men go twice -- nay -- thrice as long simply shaking off the shock of muddy engagement. I see no reason why you should exist as an anomaly to this."

A sigh escaped through his throat, as though it were still pressed upon by the leaden boot of Dunkerque, and he began again. "And yet I--"

"And yet you *what*? And yet you sit there sniveling into your sleeve?" Her voice took on a mismatched tone. "No, you have pushed and pushed and pushed, but now that you lack another redoubt to take in your effort moving forward, you think it useless altogether. It is understandable, yet you will think it different in due time."

The word "perhaps" had scarcely left his lips when the shells of Korea began landing all around him. The woman was gone -- again -- but her impression remained ingrained in his mind. How could she have been right when the fight continued on in spite of her? It was injustice, yet he remained impartial to it as ever.

That good fight -- nay -- that great fight was moving ever closer to his home and ever further from hers. They had both been christened in conflict, yet she moved away from it as he repeatedly retreaded the old path.

"And what path is that, my brother?" A new voice reneged its earlier resignation. "What do you plan to do when that path leads nowhere as it always has in these recent days? Can't you see that the very world falls apart beneath our charge?"

He stared at the speaking soldier and knew that the emissaries of death were retreating. Not from him, but from the prospect of peace. The cause was ailing, their resolve failing. Could they not see that it was only on these fields of battle that salvation would be reaped?

The woman had foreseen this, and yet she had not warned him. For the sake of all that was sacred, why? The winds of war were dying in these final days, just as his brother had been felled in that year of broken lines, but still he had received no promulgation of this new age, this new millennia of the mute.

It tortured him as he returned to the woman. She received him with affability of a secondhand nature, for she had grown out of the vices he now occupied. Indeed, she could not remember what it was to hate, and for that, he resented her. Could she not see his pain and know its origin?

She had served once too, but now she relegated herself to the passive judgement of his enemies. He wondered what had befallen the world that it would move in such a sickening way, and so he departed once again, the words of wisdom from her tongue barely remaining on his own as he shouted out across a new field.

Connection

By: Tevye Schmidt

Wind whipped around rocky cliffs, fresh and salty from its journey over the sea. Along the craggy coast there were a few scattered stretches of pure white sand, settling in ripples around the islands of thick black rock that thrust up from the ground. They were tall and rough, pointed as if reaching for the top of the cliffs, longing to be returned to their home.

It was on one of these beaches that Asher stood, wringing out his shirt. Seawater poured in rivulets through his clenched knuckles and down his wrists, paving clear tracks of skin through a fine layer of sand. When the fabric was merely damp, he draped it over his pop-up chair, looking around for a long moment before walking closer to the water. After a time, he kicked the sand and sighed dramatically, flopping down to the ground and letting the sounds of the incoming tide wash over him. *Solitude*, he thought, closing his eyes and soaking up the dying dregs of heat as the sun winked its way down past the horizon.

Night came suddenly, or so it seemed. Asher had spent the earlier part of the day with his friends, but they'd long since returned to their hostel. He had been alone in his decision to camp out on the beach for their last night of freedom, although now that he'd been out here goofing off all evening, he regretted not making more of an effort to convince anyone to stay with him. With a loud groan, Asher rolled over, spitting sand away from his face. He stretched, and his joints sounded like fall, his granddad teaching him to crack walnuts in the palm of his hand.

The evening had been great. Asher had felt the low buzz of a crowd in the tips of his fingers and made the snap decision to follow. Sand had cascaded around his feet, slipping into his sandals as he'd crested the hill, both hands fully tingling with awareness. The activities had stopped, the air arrested in stillness, as his face came into view. He could taste the energy of the crowd, and it was inquisitive. Asher left himself open with a shy grin, and the reflection of his own smiling face with the emotions and perceptions of others washed over him, jarring as always.

Asher wondered if sense of self was so uneasily defined in the pre-connected past. He remembered reading somewhere in undergrad that a well-known psychologist of the past said that who people are is the sum of three parts, and that they're constantly at odds with each other. He wasn't sure that he believed that, but he knew that repeatedly seeing himself tinged with others' perceptions was sometimes frustrating, if only because it seemed like the sense of connection should keep those misinterpretations at bay. This was, he reminded himself, the

very point that his Rabbi had spoken about last Friday. Deeper connection requires time. This was true of G-d, and true of humanity.

Eventually he'd been invited verbally to join the circle of smiling faces around the fire, and it turned out that many of the people involved were also in his grad program, celebrating one last night of freedom. It wasn't long before the others felt comfortable connecting with him, and as Asher tended to follow the social cues of others, he let his own walls fall slowly as well. The muffled buzz of the crowd gave way to rapid reading, and he knew from experience that fighting to control it would make for a rough ride.

Images and sensations passed in a breath and were gone again. He was having his quinceañera, he was graduating with honors, he was holding his son after hours of grueling labor. He lived each memory, cherishing them as he felt the sum of his own self being experienced. In the span of a few seconds Asher knew and was known, and he felt himself better for it.

Afternoon faded into evening and Asher broke bread with strangers turned friends. He'd connected with them and past the initial outreach he had grown to understand them. The more that they spoke aloud, the more their connection grew, leading to more communication between their thoughts and feelings. Eventually they had reached an easy rapport born of both connection and familiarity, and time passed both quickly and not at all.

Asher and his new friends had chased each other through the waves, playing a game called telephone from long ago that involved passing a thought from one person to another to see how clear and unchanged it could remain. The sun moved across the sky in a blazing arc, dipping deeper with each moment. Their laughter followed it through the clouds as they played. Asher stayed as long as his new friends could, but eventually everyone made their way back into town, and he took to walking along the beach alone, watching the tide come in.

Stars were beginning to shine by the time Asher finally wrestled his tent into submission and unrolled his sleeping bag. He was shivering slightly by this point, though his skin glistened with the exertion. He would be the first to admit his lack of skill in this area. Asher unashamedly shucked his wet clothes off into a pile on the sand. His deep brown skin was pebbled from the chill, and he dove gratefully into the warmth of his waiting blankets, zipping the tent closed behind him. He lay on his stomach, head pillowed on his arms, and let his own breath warm his face for a moment.

Night moved on, and still Asher was awake. He'd put his pajamas on and was pouring himself tea from his thermos when he finally felt it. There was a gentle pulse that started at his extremities, warming his whole body and then centering in his chest. He exhaled heavily, always feeling more like himself when he wasn't alone.

"Took you long enough," he projected into the connection, and with it went the taste of hot cider on a fall day and the smell of coconut oil.

“I’ve had a busy day,” came the response, and it was tinged with longing and affection.

Asher stepped out of his tent, careful not to spill his tea, and with a billow and a shake gently rested a towel down on the sand. He reached back for a blanket and sat down to watch the stars, projecting the image of them into himself and beyond himself.

Jacob responded in kind, and Asher let the duality of nearly identical night skies consume him for a moment before letting it fade. The two of them sat in silence for a time, Asher on the beach, and Jacob many, many miles away, back at home.

Asher’s next projection was soft and deep blue with longing. “I miss you.”

“Your program will be over in six months,” came the swift response, and it too was nearly overflowing with emotion. “We can manage being apart until then.”

Jacob was still, and they were connected just well enough that Asher could make out the view of his mother’s kitchen table. “You’re visiting my parents?” Asher asked.

“Your mother insisted I come over yesterday evening to break the fast, and I stayed today because of the snow. It kept us all locked in.” Jacob projected an image of the news forecast last night, followed quickly by a view that Asher recognized as the street from his bedroom window. He hummed in response, letting the buzzing playfully fill their connection.

“Your room still smells like you,” Jacob continued, and Asher swallowed. The wave of longing that followed was harmonious and beautiful, even in all its sadness. The two of them had forged their connection young, and it had bloomed as they grew. Asher knew that their harmony was close to being unmatched; it had to be to communicate so well over such distance. Their connection was unlike any other Asher had ever known, and it was almost physically painful to be this far apart, regardless of their ability to maintain their tether from this great a distance.

From Asher came the quiet calm of the waves and a sampling of the day’s events, his new friends and their game, the way the beaches shone when the sun was high, and the accomplishment he’d felt at putting his tent together by himself. Jacob’s joy at his happiness reverberated between them, bouncing around until it burst outward, and Asher hoped that there wasn’t anyone near to feel it and become curious. As much as he’d desired company earlier, he wanted the rest of the night just for them.

In the stillness it was easy to feel the longing between them, eclipsed as it was by joy. Even at the level they were bound together, the distance was still difficult. Before Asher had left, the two of them had discussed the opportunity at length, and Jacob had insisted he couldn’t pass it up. It helped that both of them knew it was only for six months and that they would reunite like nothing had changed. Although that knowledge was only a small comfort in the actual face of reality.

The stars provided a glimmering background for the rest of the night, and after their initial conversation, there was little in the way of active thought shared. They simply existed, experiencing each other's perceptions in a quiet whisper that lapped at the edges of their conscious minds. Eventually they fell asleep, still connected.

Fresh Fruit

By: Victoria Lane

They didn't believe him at first. Neither one had seen Sam in hours, and when he appeared to them back where he'd gone missing from the trail and told them what he'd discovered--it seemed too strange to be true. It couldn't have been. It was actually *impossible*. And yet, there he was, standing in front of them, perfectly upright, never even *flinching* as he reached into his pocket, withdrew a folded knife, and raised it to his own neck. Before either could stop him by convincing him his delusions of invulnerability were untrue, he slashed his throat in one quick, decisive motion.

The cut was deep, so deep that they worried his head may loll too far to one side, snap off, and roll to a stop at their feet. But it remained attached, despite the amount of flesh that had been torn away. He stayed standing and smiling, giddy as he watched the horror fill their faces. They screamed, and Jeanette turned to run for help, for anyone that could possibly be out there with them whose phone actually had service in the middle of nowhere, but he grabbed her wrist and held her there with a grip that was startlingly strong for someone who must be drowning in their own blood.

Blood came, but then it stopped, and the hole that had once been gaping near his trachea squirmed and swelled until it was only the thin line of a faded scar. And then, finally, nothing remained as evidence of what should have meant his death.

"This can't be real," Maggie had said. She had watched with wary features and a cynical distaste as he cleaned the blade on his now blood-drenched hoodie. "That's not funny."

"It's not a joke," he replied. "Couldn't you tell?"

Maggie's eyes deepened with concern, but Jeanette's brightened with a morbid curiosity.

"Did you just heal yourself? How did you do that?" she asked as she ran to him, inspecting his throat and the knife. The blade drew blood as soon as it touched her finger, even sharper than she'd imagined.

"I can't hurt myself anymore," Sam replied with a shrug. "I don't think I can even die. I was walking in the woods and then suddenly I was falling through the air. I fell for a long time, and when I hit the ground, it didn't even hurt."

“That’s incredible,” Jeanette breathed. “What do you mean? Where did you go? Why did you leave?”

“I was just walking, and I heard something out in the trees...” He trailed off as he tried to recall. Eventually, he seemed to remember something, and his smile returned. “I found an old, dead tree, but it still had some weird fruit growing on it. I was starving, and it looked... delicious. So I reached out to grab it. Then nothing. I just woke up back here. Cut my arm open on a branch and saw the wound close right in front of me.”

“You’re an idiot,” Maggie chided, some of her usual playfulness finally forcing its way through her unease. “And it did this to you? You need to go to a hospital or the police or... something.”

“I’ve never felt better than I do now,” he replied, shaking his head with a shrug. “I can show you the tree. Help me make sure it’s real and not just a hallucination from eating strange plants?”

“Shouldn’t we tell someone about it?” Jeanette asked, crossing her arms and looking down the trail. “As much as I want cool powers like you... Maybe we should leave.”

“We can’t do that,” he countered hastily. His reaction made Jeanette tense, and it seemed to disturb Maggie as well, though she didn’t voice her concerns. Sam looked embarrassed and then tried to reason with them, apologetically. “We don’t even know it’s real yet, and I can’t leave until I know for sure. Don’t you want to know?” He walked backward off the trail and tilted his head toward the dense thicket of trees in invitation. “Come on. It wasn’t far.”

It didn’t take long to convince them; the allure of the mystery would be difficult for anyone to refuse. They knew they were miles from either end of the trail and turning back then would have meant possibly losing their chance to find this secluded phenomenon and gain this power for themselves. Yes, it drew them to it, despite the warnings of the little voices in their minds they usually heeded. The voices screamed and their nerves were alight, minds on edge, jaws set, and the hair on their arms and the backs of their necks standing on end. But none of this managed to dissuade them. They, too, heard the noise as their feet lifted from the path, and it drew closer and closer.

When the tree actually came into sight, they never stopped to inspect it or question its existence. It felt like they were floating, and maybe they were; they didn’t see their feet or the autumn-leaf-covered forest floor below them. The leaves and twigs crunching and breaking underfoot hardly made a sound. They saw the towering tree and the tree only. Its gnarled ash-gray branches held a singular red fruit, fleshy and emitting a sickly-sweet smell that lingered in the air around them like ghoulish hands pulling them forward. They could almost feel the jagged fingernails of the hands sinking into their skin, but if it was unpleasant, they didn’t seem to mind. It was like the journey of a dream where the walking is made easy, and even though you have no destination in mind, you somehow manage to arrive. They didn’t notice Sam stop

walking behind them at the edge of the clearing, and all senses seemed to dull and fade away except for the pheromonic scent and melodic hum that called out to them.

They both approached the tree with greedy hands, outstretched and ready to receive the fruit. But they collided and fumbled, both falling out of their haze long enough to look down and find themselves at the edge of a precipice--a steep, narrow ravine that seemed to appear out of nowhere--hidden there behind the grass and colorful flowers and unseen while staring up at the tree's high branches. Jeanette held out a shaky arm to stop both of them from falling in. At the bottom of the rocky pit lay a pile of decaying corpses, some old and weathered bone, and some newer with half-torn flesh, matted hair, and mouths agape in silenced terror. All were pitifully broken and so far down that hope even one among them may still be breathing was nonexistent. And then their eyes were drawn to the very top, to the freshest corpse of them all, with its eyelids frozen open, its eyes vacant and glazed over, its mouth filled with drying blood and fallen dirt, and its face telling them that the thing standing behind them was not their childhood friend, Sam; it was simply wearing his skin.

They turn back, to run as far and as fast as they can, but the creature parading itself as Sam stood right behind them. No longer did it even attempt to appear alive, or even friendly, as it once had. It was certainly not Sam, but Sam's face is the one that eyed them up and down and gave a grin so wide that it tore into the flesh at the edges of its mouth.

"Go on," it growled with bared teeth and something that could almost be mistaken for a voice. "Take a bite."

****CONTENT ADVISORY -- Mentions of suicide and graphic death****

Jericho

By: Amanda May

It began as a whisper.

The file was named Jericho. It started showing up on all sorts of social media- the forums first, and then onto the more mainstream sites like Twitter at the beginning of October.

It made its way into the news cycle early on. A sophomore at a high school a few states away supposedly listened to it and killed her dog and then herself. The file was mentioned in her suicide note. That's when other instances began being reported more seriously. Cases where people died with earbuds or headphones covering their bloodied ears were re-opened.

One of the worst parts was when several accounts, most of whom had substantial followings, were hacked and the audio was uploaded to them. To which, of course, multiple people died, and more were substantially injured-- many lost their hearing partially or entirely (it depended on how loud the audio played when they listened to it, and if they were wearing

headphones or not). It caused a moral panic, as these types of situations usually do. It only made the audio more sought after. It became a trend to make reaction videos listening to the audio. School administrations were panicking and enforced zero-tolerance policies for the audio. If a student mentioned Jericho at school, they were given out of school suspension for at least three days. One kid, who was expelled, plotted to play the audio over the school's intercoms.

No one is able to pin down what exactly the audio is of. Those who have listened to it, before their deaths and in their suicide notes, claim it's a never-ending sound of an emergency siren, or an echoing scream. Others, who have survived and weren't afflicted in any way, claim it's nothing more than white noise. Some have even claimed it's just the sound of someone breathing. There were theories that there were multiple versions of Jericho.

Regardless, it plays in your head endlessly after you listen to it.

Jokes

By: Amanda May

Like everything, we thought it was a joke.

It was late March when the reports began, people going missing and their loved ones turning up dead weeks later. We thought it was an early April fool's joke, a fucked up one of course. But April first came and went, and the reports never ceased. Instead, they infested the media, more so than politics and celebrity fodder. Everyone loves small town mysteries, and this is where it started. We were given a curfew, which of course did fucking nothing. We had idiots claiming it was a violation of their rights. A lot of them died, good riddance.

Then it started happening in other, bigger towns. People thought it was copycat criminals. The police thought nothing of it, of course, until their people started dropping too.

Then came the sightings of tall, strange creatures in the woods.

The news reported different things every day: The creatures weren't real, then they were; they were only out at night, no, they like the sun too.

They were easily identifiable. This was the biggest piece of bullshit reported.

It made everyone question everything. Suddenly your best friend of 10 plus years, your grandma, or your neighbor's akita could be a vicious cannibal. The latter caused much controversy, people began killing their neighbor's dogs if they barked too much.

We all, for the most part, became nihilists, it's what happens when the world ends.

I was in college when it happened. We were ordered to move home, or completely isolate within our dorms. I chose the latter, seeing as my family believed this whole thing was a hoax and refused to abide by guidelines put in place. I don't know where they are now, nor do I really care. I was able to stay with my friend, Mags, she also didn't have a family worth staying with either.

No, we never fucked. I know you're curious about it, but we didn't.

We hid at her apartment for a couple, until the landlord began knocking on the doors of tenants and shooting them if they didn't pay him immediately. We were able to sneak out of the bedroom window, luckily Mags lived on the first floor. She always complained about it, the

walls were thin. We had to be quick, we left almost everything behind. When we made it to the apartment's parking lot, we discovered both of our cars had been broken into, but mine had the better gas mileage and more room. Plus, a red truck is the perfect apocalypse car. We spent a majority of our days on the road, with no destination in mind.

"I'd kind of like to go to Montana."

"No," I said, "It's all nature there, it's these creature's breeding ground. We wouldn't survive a night there."

"I don't know, we've been doing pretty well so far. I think we could make it work."

That's why I hated her sometimes, she was always optimistic. Even in the midst of the end of the world, she found something to look forward to. I turned on the radio hopeful to find some sort of decent reception. Radio was still popular, only sometimes would we find music to listen to, mostly it was news and updates—where these creatures had been spotted, ways we could escape them if needed (there were no known ways to kill them), and the signs of turning (while a rare occurrence, were still important to know).

Cities, both big and small, succumbed to hysterics. Within only a couple of years the world was an even more desolate place, it was every dog for himself. We were able to find out more about these creatures as well, they preferred the night (though it was not unheard of to be attacked during the day). Sounds could trigger an attack, but it was the smell of blood that ensured your death. They weren't that perceptive of seeing, you could manage to escape their wrath if you stayed still- or had some sort of distraction (we had flares and sparklers should this event occur). We didn't know if they could be killed, and I don't think anyone cared enough to find out. It was about surviving, not defending. Big corporations, really big anything, were taken down in dramatic occurrences. Every now and again we'd hear about it on the radio.

"Turn it off," Mags would muse. "It's too depressing."

"You do realize the situation we are in, right?"

"Yeah," she'd groan. "Which is exactly why I don't want to listen to this shit."

"But it's important."

"I just want to listen to music."

"We will, later."

We met Luca at an outpost.

Mags and I had to pee and stretch our legs. She found Luca in the bathroom, huddled in the corner, he was malnourished. His pinecone eyes sunk into his pale face. His clothes clung to his skin, he stunk horribly. His blonde hair roamed to his shoulders and was black with dirt. The water still ran, by some miracle, in the outpost. Mags rinsed him as clean as she could while I stood guard outside. It was a futile effort, nothing could stop the creatures should they come, but it still gave us all a sense of security.

I had my apprehensions, and I know Mags did too. But it made the both of us feel better bringing Luca with us, we knew leaving him behind would only cause guilt and pain on our ends. You tell me, would you leave a five-year-old behind?

We were lucky to have found him when we did, Mags and I had raided a Walmart looking for scraps of food and hygiene products. We let Luca eat and drink as much as he could. He didn't speak that much, just told us his name and age. If we ever asked him question, his

eyes would go wide and he'd put his finger to his mouth, begging us not to speak. We knew through his mannerisms that he had seen a lot.

"Ari," she cried into me one night while Luca slept. I may be a jackass at times, but I couldn't help but cry along with her then. We stayed quiet, as to not wake Luca or beckon any of the creatures to us. Sometimes, if we were lucky, we would be able to sleep in an actual bed. Some motels had been abandoned, having Luca with us helped garner sympathy. We'd still have guns drawn on us in the beginning, it was protocol. We had to prove we were living- our birthdays, the name of the street we grew up on, the name of our favorite pet; the questions used as bank security questions now determined your morality. Those who had turned couldn't answer those sorts of things. They could speak, sure, but they didn't know their lives, they were shells of their former selves.

We were a merry little trio, even if it was silent most of the time. We discovered Luca liked music. Anytime it came on, we could see a faint smirk on his lips. He'd stop immediately if he caught us looking at him, so we had to sneak looks at him through the rearview mirror. I wondered what his life was like before, had his parents like music? Were they musicians? Perhaps there was an older brother, or uncle. Was he the eldest sibling? What happened to his- no, I didn't want to think about that.

"This is Johnny Cash," Mags beamed and turned up the radio while we were driving one day. "God, I haven't heard this song in forever... *Love is a burning thing*," Mags lowered her voice as she sang. We turned at the sound of laughter. Luca was covering his mouth, but we could see the open smile on his face.

"You like our singing?" Mags said as she continued to sing, causing Luca to laugh even harder.

"Silly you!" Luca beamed.

"No, you silly!" Mags laughed back. "Come on Ari, sing with me."

We had made home at an abandoned cabin in Colorado. It was in the mountains, sure, it was dangerous to live in considering it was isolated in the wild. But it was peaceful. There were skid marks in the driveway, and moldy dishes—the owners left in a hurry. There was some canned food, the water was connected to a well, and the electricity was solar paneled. It was too good to be true. Which was why it wasn't a shock when Luca developed a fever.

It was winter. It was one of the beginning signs of turning.

"It's just because of the season, or maybe he is dehydrated" Mags tried to rationalize. We'd steal medicine and remedies in hopes of healing, but nothing helped. It only made things worse.

"Maybe we can find a hospital..."

"Mags, they're all gone, you know this."

"Well then what the fuck are we going to do?" She cried.

"I don't know."

"Fuck," she breath and clutched her head. "I can't do this. Tell me we'll be okay, yeah?" I stayed silent. "Tell me, Ari!"

"I CAN'T, WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?"

"I want you to tell me this is a dream."

"What?"

“I want you to tell me that this is a dream, some fucking nightmare that I’ll never wake up from,” she turned to me with tears in her eyes. “I can’t do this anymore, Ari. I can’t.” She collapsed at my feet and sobbed.

We decided to let nature take its course, we made sure Luca was comfortable, and kept him company. The turning wasn’t contagious, as far as we knew, so we didn’t mind holding him as he cried in pain. That was another symptom, a ravenous hunger.

Mags and I would take turns driving to the nearest town to get food, which was scarce as it was. One of us would stay behind and watch Luca.

It was my turn when it happened. I was able to score some canned goods, and more medicine for Luca. It wasn’t much, some canned sweet corn, green beans, and apricots. I tried looking for canned peaches, Luca liked them, but apricots were the only ones I could find—it’s hard to be picky in the end of the world. We would have to become more creative with our food sources sooner or later. I had hunted in my previous life, and I wouldn’t have minded the idea of doing so, the only problem was the blood of the animal would make for easy prey. The creatures would get the corpses before I could.

When I arrived at our “home”, Mags and Luca were gone.

I knew bad things were to come, sure. Should I have gone and looked for them? Probably. Would I have been able to change the outcome of it all? Probably not. So, I remained at the house in the off chance they would return. It was stupid of me, I know. I suppose I should’ve just left. But imagine yourself in my situation, you would’ve done the same thing. Don’t try to deny it. You realize the idea of being alone is scarier than confronting these things.

I don’t remember falling asleep, but it was dark outside when I woke up. Mags and Luca still hadn’t returned, I refused to believe they were dead. I opened the can of sweet corn and ate half of it, staring outside and waiting for them to return. There was a field connected to a small, wooded area in the backyard. You could see the clearing, even though it was far away, from the kitchen window. We’d sometimes see deer eating in the field. Mags and I would take turns standing guard, watching the clearing for any of the creatures to come. We’d been lucky, too lucky, we’d never had to come face to face with one of the creatures before.

From the clearing, I saw Luca running and crying. I grabbed onto my gun and waited for him to make it to the house. I knew Mags was dead at that point, as much I didn’t want to believe it. It was dark out, so I didn’t see the blood on his face and shirt.

I thought it was him, so I unlocked the door.

Silly me.

My House the Atoll

By: Gia Mesz

The sunrise on the other side of the fingerprint-smudged window broke into my view with its musty, tainted rays. Although I couldn’t see it through the glass, I knew the light was pouring onto the mountain grass like a starburst. I counted the cows we passed— they were one of the only easy things to see through the haze.

“Kaholo,” said my brother.

I continued staring out the window: *Four*, I counted.

“You pay better attention than this when you’re at work, lōlō,” he added, shoving my head to get me to look at him. “Lōlō, you listening? You better not lose your job, they’ll have a Haole in there to take your place before you can say ‘colonize.’ Don’t mess this up.” Then he went back to scanning the horizon, and I went back to counting cows.

I’m Kaholo, I’m seventeen, I work for Volcano National Park in my homeland of Big Island, Hawai’i, and this is an essay I have to write for school. Miss Okulani, you told me to write the truth. To write what concerns me. I think, if I’m honest, I’m most concerned about my worry, and I’m most worried about my concern, and I wonder if either will ever come to anything in real life. This essay, more than just an assignment you told me to do, is my attempt at understanding my own thoughts.

My ohana’s not special. At least, we’re no different than any other. My brother Aka and I were raised under the guidance of both our parents and our grandparents, and also the nosy neighbors and church members. We learned the legends, the words, the phrases, the ideas. We learned to swim before we learned to walk. We like Spam, and we don’t turn up our noses at any food that finds its way to our table. Our father trained us to keep our heads down, our mouths shut, and our hands busy. And outside the odd interaction, we avoid white people. No one in my family has ever married a Haole. You don’t mind that I use that word for them, right? Everyone does. I have one cousin who owns an espresso machine, but that’s as close as any of us come to the culture of the white people.

But now that I think of it, maybe *I’m* the one who comes the closest to their culture. Every afternoon for the past two years, Aka, the cousins, or anyone with an open seat or truck-bed has driven me to work at Volcano Park. I know the only reason I have my job is because I’m a native. Sometimes being the minority has its privileges, I guess. Sometimes. And yet the managers thought they couldn’t put me in control of something as valuable and complicated as a cash register. They didn’t even give me the math test; they just immediately handed me a trash picker and a safety vest and pushed me out the back door before anyone could see the mud and red dirt plastered all over me from my ride in the pickup. I’m bad for the business side of things, I guess. But I’m good at cleaning up after Haoles, so they keep me around.

And I don’t mind it, really. The work, I mean. Volcano Park lives inside my head, in a way. My lungs are used to the altitude; if the hair of my arms does raise up at the cold, mountain air, I don’t notice it; and I’m small and quick on my feet. *Kaholo*: light-footed. Funny, right?

Anyway, all things considered, I enjoy my job. I enjoy the view, I like being outside rain or shine, and I especially like bringing home extra money.

But like I said— I have concerns, and I have worries.

You see, I don’t personally *love* the white people, but I don’t hate them either— especially not as much as my family does. What I hate is the *way* they are, if that makes sense. I mean, I hate the way they walk, for example. It’s not even like a normal way to walk— it’s like a possessive saunter, which I didn’t even know was possible to do. It’s like when they walk, they think *they’re* the ones blazing the trail under their feet, a trail which has already been cut down for their convenience for years.

And their clothes. I hate their clothes, how they either dress like they’re going to the gym or like they plan on going to a tourist-trap luau after a nice hike across sacred land. They

remind me of the colorful lizards that are all over the islands— generally harmless but present enough to be a nuisance.

But what I hate the most, what keeps me awake at night, turning over and over in my bed, making Aka grumble and cuss at me as the springs of my mattress squeak, are the footprints.

Footprints: they're like thumbprints, but more arrogant. I find them everywhere in Volcano Park. Every day, I stare at the thousands of impressions made by their shoes in the volcanic soil. This print here is made up of close-knit hourglass shapes— someone with those white-people strap sandals, which they wear with socks for some reason. Those prints there are tiny— probably made by a toddler, a tiny creature with just as much power as an adult to smush the earth farther down into itself.

So I guess I don't really have a problem with white people— I have a problem with their feet. But I never complain about the footprints to anyone. I can't complain, or I would lose my job. The customers' feet are always right, too, ya?

But it does upset me. I look at the thousands of imprints in the dirt, along the rocks, among the plants, and I remember sitting in my grandparents' living room, listening to Pa Kupuna tell me the legend of how the islands and the whole earth were created by the moon and sun; how the ocean came into being and washed into its place; and how the anger of the gods, broiling beneath the surface like soup left on the stove for too long, caused the volcanoes to rise out of the sea. As I make my rounds, picking up garbage, I think of Pele— the goddess of the volcano— and how her anger bubbles and sloshes down the mountainsides when she's upset. Her anger would look so beautiful if it wasn't so deadly. Mostly though, I think of how Pa Kupuna said that one day, the islands will return to the sea from whence they came, and I think of that a lot as I follow my trash route. Picking up little kid trinkets and plastic lids that've popped off tourists' sunscreen bottles, I can't help but also look at the footprints that wear down the trails over time, and I swear— every day the top of the island seems a little bit closer to the ocean, just as Pa Kupuna predicted.

There was one day when I stooped to pick up the sixteenth cigarette on my trail, and my butt accidentally blocked the way of this white family trying to walk past me. I put my head down and stepped out of the way, but I didn't apologize (I was taught to keep my mouth shut). The white family paid me no mind, except for the little girl. She was probably like three years old, cause her head was a third of the size of her body, and she had on a pair of those jelly sandals that light up when she walks. She looked up at me.

The eyes of white people always startle me. What right do they have to have eyes the color of the sea, or the open sky? They kill the coral with their name-brand sunscreens and then they harness the blues and greens of the oceans to put in their eyes.

Anyway, the girl looked up at me with her stolen-blue eyes and blinked— and then, instantly, she seemed to forget me, and hopped away, jumping from one rock step to the next.

Hop. *Light.*

Hop. *Light.*

Hop. *Light.*

And in that moment, I could imagine it: Pa Kupuna stretched out in his chair, his cancer-discolored skin bronzing in the sun as his chair floats across the ocean to another island, if another island exists at that point; I imagined Aka, cussing with every word in the book and

grappling for something to float on; I imagined that cute wahini from my church— the girl who never says a word— swimming to my open arms as we both go down into the wild blackness of the ocean depths. Imagine the suction of an entire nation being swallowed by the sea— the creation story in reverse: Pele, the goddess who gave birth to these lands, finally gives in to the centuries upon centuries of footsteps, groaning in pain as she returns to the depths with every bit of her body, taking all of us with her and leaving behind nothing but a torrent of bubbles and socks that have been ripped off our feet by the undercurrents. A de-creation story.

And the devil, in this story? A toddler in light-up, jelly sandals.

Last night after work, I climbed into the truck, all my worries outnumbering the reassurances I could come up with for them.

“You get your check?” Aka asked, and I nodded. He pulled away from the visitor center and asked, “You talk to anybody?”

Usually, I would’ve just shaken my head, but something about my vision of the island sinking, had untangled my tongue: “I never talk to anybody,” I replied.

Aka started a little at the sound of my voice, but he nodded and replied, “Good. That’s good, bruddah. Keep ya mouth shut and everything stay good.”

I wanted to look at my brother after he said that. I wanted him to let me look at him, into his eyes that he gets from Ma Kupuna. I wanted to ask him so many questions that I thought he must have the answers to, because he’s older than me: Why are white people treated as so important to the islands if so many of us hate them? Aren’t there any other ways for the islanders to make a living, other than handing over the trees and the fields and the cliffs and the coral and the whales and the lizards and the sunshine? Where will the white people be when the abyss comes to eat us? Are we *all* going to sink, or will help come for the Haoles?

I wanted to ask all these things of Aka, but I didn’t. I kept my head down. I kept my mouth shut. I kept my hands busy, pulling at the fraying threads of my jeans with my fingers. Looking at them, I realize I’ve been so distracted with work and homework and the idea of our imminent plunge into the sea, I’ve forgotten to keep my nails trimmed.

I thrum my fingers on top of that door panel thing that all cars have on the inside. As Aka drives us home, I don’t try to count cows. They’ll be in their barns by now. I wonder if they know they’re gonna drown with the rest of us. If they knew, would they care enough to worry, as I do?

Well, cows, if you *are* worried: keep ya mouth shut. And everything stay good.

My Sister`s Button

By: Jessi Basler

“Here`s the room, Mr. Jones. They will be with you in a little bit. If you need anything, just ask,” the secretary said.

“Thank you.” She nodded and closed the door behind her after I entered the room. I pulled out the papers and started setting up the material necessary for this presentation. I even laid out my clothing products. I finished what I needed to put out and stood there as my hands reached into my pockets. I felt the button in the right pocket of my coat jacket and started to

weave it through my fingers in a nervous habit. It was my sister's button. The clothing button had white flowers painted on the brown wood. I remembered the moment that she told me about her idea and when she showed this button which was her inspiration that started this business.

"So, I have an idea, Jake. I found this button and that got me thinking," she said. She took the button out and handed it to me and continued. "I'm great with designs and I think I have a great business idea. I already got it started but I'm having trouble and I need your help."

"What kind of help?" I said, as I leaned against the counter in our apartment, and I examined the button that didn't have the faded flower pattern like it does today.

"I need money and I know that you already support us both, but I really want to do this. If this is successful, like I think it will be, it will bring in a lot of money." She paused and said, "I will pay you back and it can be our thing, you know." She smiled wildly and swayed a little bit placing her hands together in front of her.

"Stella, how much?" I said, crossing my arms and sighing.

"That's the hard part. It's about \$100,000," she said, as she squinted her eyes. We continued the conversation as she shared her idea and her outlook for her business idea, which was called The Playful Button. The more we talked, the more she had a twinkle in her eyes. She was always dreaming of being successful with her own business. I decided to go into The Playful Button with her. I was an accountant, so I knew money well and she was the creative force. I owned half of the business at that point in time. I had to quit my job later to help expand our business. It became financially tight, but we managed. But I missed moments like that with her.

My reminiscing thoughts were interrupted when the door opened and three executives walked into the room. I pulled my hand out of my pocket, leaving the button, and shook each of their hands one by one. I plastered a smile onto my face and focused on the meeting. It was a clothing business, but the shirts and sweaters had buttons placed in particular ways to form a design like a smiley face, which made the clothing unique. It had made a pretty good amount of money, but I was negotiating to get my products in the big box stores. I pitched the business which included me pulling out the button and explaining where the business idea started where I told them as well how important this button was to me. They said the products would fit well in their stores, but it needed to be beneficial for both parties. Then, we negotiated. It took longer than expected but we finally settled. They selected some of my products to be sold in one store for a trial run.

Later, I entered my apartment to start into the business paperwork and worked for hours until I reached into my coat jacket pocket out of habit. The pocket had developed a hole and the button was gone. I frantically looked all over. The button wasn't in my clothing anywhere! It wasn't close by and not around any furniture that I checked. Earlier that day, I had gone other places, which included the meeting, and now, I needed to retrace my steps. I looked at the clock and realized that all the places that I had gone were now officially closed. I didn't go to sleep because I thought about the lost button and where it could be.

*

The next morning, I had to organize the supplies and coordination to get ready for the store. I had to manage my work schedule that was long with the search for my button. It had been an unsuccessful search. The stores had sweep where I had gone. But I hadn't gotten a chance to go back to the store where I had the meeting. The Playful Button was successful to

expand to other stores, but we were having many issues with the manufacturer and the big order since I lost my button. The manufacturer was starting to give up.

The fire changed everything. The phone rang and I picked up. The big box store was wondering when the next order of my product was coming in and I said it should be soon. I left and went to the factory to make sure everything was going well. Once there, I saw items were everywhere and in a mess. The products were scattered around and the people scrambled all over the place.

“What’s going on?!” I screamed. My hands were in the air.

“We can’t handle this product load! We’re extremely behind schedule!” The manager said, panicking. He was trying to stop a machine that was malfunctioning, and I went to help.

“Well, can you get it back on schedule?” I said. I pulled off many tops from the assembly line and placed them onto a side table.

“Not for a while,” he said. A fire burst out in another area behind him and a smoke alarm sounded. People sprinted to the fire to help put it out and I tried too. It was one of the machines that had caught fire. I still remember the buttons dispersed on the floor as they all melted away. The buttons were all unattainable because they were close to the middle of the flames. The side of the building was burning and everything in that area was destroyed. The sprinkler started to water the facility. I felt soaked by the time it stopped. Some workers used the sweaters as a way of stamping it out and others used their feet along with the sprinkler which reduced the fire. It took a while, but the fire finally stopped but the clothing and buttons were ash and the factory building was partially burnt as well. It would take many things to fix this facility and we were going to lose the big box store soon because of our late arrival already.

“I quit! I can’t take it anymore!” The manager screamed. Some others yelled out a similar sentiment and left, but a few remained. There were not enough employees to run this factory now, especially in this condition. The fire department came, and everything was worked out. I had to call the factory owner, but he said that they were announcing that they were going out of business and they apologized for the “inconvenience.” The last employees closed the doors with this announcement and went home.

I entered my apartment and frantically called manufactures, as many as I could, to get a deal with. Fast! I didn’t reach many but the ones I did suggested that they would call me back. I called the big box store and made an appointment in their earliest convenience which was in a few days. I took those days to call manufacturers and had a hard time to get through to anyone. A few days later, I talked to the executives. I told them that I needed more time and explained what happened. The executives gave a deadline before the contract would become invalid, based on our agreement. They said they didn’t want to lose us because of the response and requests from so many customers. They would, however, if we couldn’t produce the minimum amount. I would be racing the clock. We shook hands and they turned to leave. However, the top executive turned back to me and pulled something out of his pants pockets.

“I found this on the floor. I believe this is yours,” The top executive said. He held the button in his palm.

“Yes, thank you!” I said, relieved.

“I remember you mentioning that this button was important to you. I knew that if I lost my daughter’s bracelet that she made for me, I would want someone to get it back to me,” he said, as he raised his arm that showed a colorful, thread bracelet. He lowered his arm and I

pocketed the button in my pants pocket. I again thanked him and he nodded. We said goodbye and left to get back to our separate work. I was so grateful! I exited the building to go to my car when my cell phone rang, and I answered. It was another, bigger manufacturer that reviewed The Playful Button's products and business and thought that we could make a deal together. I made the appointment as soon as possible which happened to be the next day, luckily.

The next day, we conversed about the possibility of them making the clothing. I asked how fast they could make it. The first order would be the minimum amount, which would take a week, but then the next batch would take more time, but more product would result. I barely kept the contract with the big box store and fulfilled the bare minimum for now to keep The Playful Button running. The new manufacture and I shook on it. They started immediately and sent the clothing out into the stores. In weeks to come, the store received more of my product than they had ordered. The Playful Button was not only in the black, but it was making a major amount of profit! I could finally breath and I kept the button with me while dealing with everything that I did.

*

A few years down the road, I took a Saturday off and went for a drive. I parked in the graveyard and grabbed the rose on the next seat in my car and I pulled the button out. The button was firmly in my hand as I walked out of my car and up to the chipped gravestone.

It read,

Rest in Peace to a Beloved Sister
Stella A. Jones
March 28, 1986-April 20, 2015

Years ago, she went to have a meeting in another state with a smaller business than the one that I had signed. Stella took a plane and I had said I needed to stay here because I needed to negotiate with the first manufacturing company. I hadn't known what was going to happen, that Stella's plane was going to crash, and I still wish she hadn't gone. We didn't even get a deal with the smaller business though they sent their condolences.

That Saturday, I placed the rose on the grave and sat onto the grass near it. I unfolded my hand that contained the button and played with it for a while, then I looked up at the stone. I wore the sweater that she first made for me with our names made out of buttons on the front.

"I miss you." I paused, and fiddled with the single, special button. "I'm succeeding with the business. Thanks for the help, though; I couldn't do it without you. I don't think I would have kept going if it wasn't for this button, and you, or at least my memories of you. I love you so much." I sat in front of her grave for a while and rested. I thought about the fact that her dream was coming true, and I had done all of this because of her. I also did it for me, to keep her close, when she was gone, because, with this business and button, she was always with me, even in death.

Return of the Monster

By: Michael Edele

As I stand in front of the grave for the late Mary Shelley, crowbar in hand, I wonder if I'm just crazy or if the guy I'm doing this for is. See I own an independent bookstore that has really been struggling recently. In order to keep the business afloat I put an ad in the wanted section of the newspaper asking for anybody that is interested in acquiring rare books. Within a week of placing the ad a man contacted me and offered me \$2 million to find a legendary book that was supposedly written by Mary Shelley before she died. He told me the legend states that before she died, she wrote a sequel to Frankenstein. The legend also says that it's buried in a tomb underneath her gravestone. In order to get it you have to pass one daunting test. One that tests your knowledge of literature but specifically of monsters.

As I pry the crowbar between the slot that lifts the lid from the grave, I get this incredibly cold feeling like a sense of foreshadowing. Despite this feeling I know I can't turn back now. I lift the crowbar and as soon as I do the lid lifts up and a gust of air shoots out of the grave like air out of a really powerful aerosol can. It knocks me off my feet.

I stand up and start to lift the heavy lid off the grave. As I look down into the tomb, I notice steps leading down into the darkness. I slowly start to walk down trying to feel each step with my foot since I don't have a flashlight or torch to lead the way. After about two minutes of walking, I feel this cool breeze upon my face and then what feels like cobwebs. Cobwebs? Down here? Underground? The more I keep walking, the thicker the cobwebs become. As I brush the cobwebs away, I come away with a handful of baby wolf spiders. I jump with anxiety as I throw them down and then hear a sound, a clicking, crawling sound. I accidentally walk right into the wall in front of me but I'm able to feel around and turn the corner to see what looks like the shine of the moon, but I know that's not possible. As I get closer to what appears to be a circle courtyard illuminated by the moonlight, I freeze in my tracks by what I see. Shelob. Shelob the giant spider from The Two Towers by J.R.R. Tolkien. She is eating what looks like a human wrapped in her own webs. Across from her is Sting, the sword that Samwise uses to wound her in the book. I start to sneak very quietly toward Sting because I know that if I'm to retrieve that book, I'm going to need that sword. Just as I get a few inches from retrieving it I see Shelob's body shift toward me. I hold completely still hoping she won't see me but she has a bunch of eyes so who am I kidding? About a split second before she jumps towards me, I grab Sting and swipe behind me and manage to cut off one of her legs which inhibits her ability to move. After I do this I back away to see what kind of environment I'm working with. There's a rock to the right of her that I can climb if I'm fast enough. Before Shelob has a chance to get her bearings I climb the rock as fast as I can and I jump off it with Sting raised in the air and as I land on top of her I thrust the sword into Shelob's biggest eye and I hear the loudest shriek I've ever heard in my life. She bucks me off and I roll on the ground. After I realize what just happened, I'm racing through my brain to try and remember how Shelob was defeated in the book. Samwise cuts her leg, stabs her eye and then.....just as I remember I open my eyes and she's staring me in the face and her giant jaws are within a couple of inches of my face. Without even thinking I grab Sting which is lying next to me, and I jam it into the belly of the beast. Shelob shrieks one last time and as I pull the sword from her abdomen all of her blood and intestines spill all over my face. The smell was ungodly. As I try

to get up from the mess, I notice what feels like a book wedged in with all the intestines. I wipe it off and notice the title, *The Return of the Monster* by Mary Shelley.

Two weeks later I arrive at the massive Gothic mansion that belongs to the man that I experienced all this for, The Collector. That's the name he goes by because apparently he doesn't go out much. He has a reputation for living inside his mansion and only associating with his butler. After three rings and five knocks on the door the butler finally answers the door and leads me into the study where my current benefactor is waiting with a steel briefcase, which I assume has the money.

"Please sit" he says to me.

"Thanks."

"Can I offer you something to drink sir?" the butler asks me.

"No thanks I'm having mimosas at the club later." I say with a chuckle.

"So do you have something for me?" the man says back to business.

"Yes. It wasn't easy and the nightmares have almost gone away but I found it. Here you are." I say as I had them heavy leather-bound book.

"It's more beautiful than I ever imagined." said the man.

"Sir, may I ask you a question?"

"If you must."

"Most people have heard about this book, but they don't seem to think that there's any merit to its existence. Why were you so sure of its existence?" I asked curiously.

"I met Mary Shelley when she was 10 years old. Her family was vacationing in the northern part of England, and we came across each other when she went for walk after lunch."

"How can that be? You don't look any older than my father."

"I guess since you retrieved this prize possession to me you deserve the truth. What if I told you the story of Frankenstein is actually true?"

"You're kidding me!" I exasperated not believing my ears.

"No, I'm not kidding. The story of Frankenstein is a story I told Mary Shelley when she was 10. The story I told her was the story of Frankenstein. I told her my story."

"Your story? You're a writer? Or an unknown witness to the story with really good plastic surgery and a life-lasting pill? You can't possibly be...."

"Go ahead say it. You know the answer. You can say it."

I paused for a minute thinking again if I'm crazy or this man is. Then I said it without even realizing what I was saying... "You're the...monster? Frankenstein's monster?"

"I never really liked that term but yes I am the monster from the story."

"You look nothing like Boris Karloff though."

"Hahaha I never liked that movie or that adaptation. No, I don't look like that anymore. I have seen a lot of incredible scientists and some plastic surgeons over the years, but the best were my father's kids. They all grew up and joined the family business by devoting their entire life to, well to my life. I owe them absolutely everything."

"So I guess this book, *The Return of the Monster*, really belongs to you more than anybody else."

"I can't thank you enough for what you went through to find this book. I've been looking for it a long time and you have made a very very old man very happy. Here is your money as promised. I hope it helps with your business."

"How did you know about my business?" I ask puzzled.

"I never hire any investigator without doing heavy research on them first. Plus, I would never trust just anyone with this very important personal wish of mine."

"Well can I ask one more favor of you sir?" I ask with anticipation.

"Most definitely."

"I can't believe I'm saying this after all I've been through but if you ever find yourself in need of another rare book would you consider hiring me again?"

"Actually, I have a friend from the old days that has been looking for a very specific book."

"Oh yeah? What's his or her name?" I ask as I reach for my personal notebook to write down the name.

"Ever heard of Bram Stoker?"

The Wickie

By: Gia Mesz

I came to the lighthouse for solace. Exquisite alone time. I'd welcome the loneliness the same way the beacon welcomed incoming ships. In the weeks leading up to my internment as wickie at Pachad, the port master kept going on about how lucky he'd been to have found me; how their last keeper was "indisposed." I didn't ask questions.

A week later I stood on the barnacled dock, bearing my sole tethers to civilization (identification papers, toothbrush, shaving cream and razor, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) in my hands. I stared after the vessel that had delivered me as it made itself slave to the lustful tide, but abandoned that watch long before the ship disappeared around the crescent jag of the island. The port master's parting words swam through my mind: "*Always keep the light burning.*"

I walked in the bitter wind toward the lighthouse, pushing the image of the port master's pale eyes out of my thoughts.

The lighthouse was sparsely furnished, yet it lent more in the way of comfort than I'd expected: a flannel bedspread, a painting of a vessel as it cut the shimmering sea, a wide, cherry desk positioned in front of the window that would be my eyes on the world for the next year; checking the drawers, I found a matchbox and a canister of cigars— the remnants of the past wickie, or perhaps of the one before him.

I lit a cigar, blinked at its bold flavor. I sat down and made my first recording in the logbook: *25th of August, 1903, 0800 hours— Arrival*. I puffed again, watching the waves as they rolled toward shore, each one more eager than the last to slide up onto the sand.

"Well, it seems you're the perfect man for the job, Mr. Thackitt," the postmaster had said. "*Decorated officer, no wife, no kids.*"

I brushed some fallen ash from my pants.

"A man could lose his mind all alone out there."

Realizing I was breathing anxiously, I stepped away from the desk. My footsteps reverberated as I climbed to the gallery, setting about being that "perfect man for the job."

And I was. I did my duty as keeper. I kept a weather eye, I cleaned the lamp and glass every morning as if it had never been done. If a new barnacle appeared on the dock, I documented it. I did my duty, just like every wickie before me.

So why does the house despise us?

I didn't record it the first time it happened. Can you imagine?

11th of October, 1903, 1600 hours— Painting changed: ship caught in storm. Previously sturdy stair rusted through, fell apart as I ascended to bed. Swollen ankle. Broke portable lantern in fall.

My head spun as I lay in bed that night— this time not with thoughts of drink or of conversation but with thoughts of confusion, and of fright. Until an hour ago, every step in the lighthouse staircase had been polish-black, free of rust; then, suddenly, this— *decay out of nowhere!*

Eventually I could puzzle no longer and fell asleep.

But it's gotten worse. It's so much worse.

Seeing no way around it, I've recorded yesterday's occurrences in the logbook:

27th of October, 1903, 1630 hours— Several stairs rusted through, incapable of holding weight. Dropped portable lantern in attempt to jump gap between stairs, glass shattered and cut hand. Painting changed again: what's discernible in the shreds depicts blood-red sea and corpses in water. Red substance on floor beneath painting: investigated— blood.

But that's not the worst of it. Tonight—... God, I can hardly see to write. The shed is so dark, and besides, my eyes! But it's vital that I record this: tonight, I neglected the port master's one command. I didn't keep the light burning, and someone has died for it.

It's the house's doing, I tell you! I'm *not* crazy. I don't know why it's doing this, I don't know why any of this has happened, and I *certainly* don't believe that the last wickie was simply "indisposed." I don't want to think about what may have happened to him...

Nevertheless, this is what's happened to *me*: only an hour ago I was on the rocks, spying the horizon through my binoculars, and I spotted a vessel with its distress lights illuminated; in the same moment, I looked up and realized that the house's lantern had mysteriously extinguished itself.

Charged with adrenaline and fear, I rushed into the lighthouse, and had gotten halfway up the stairs before the topmost steps caved beneath my feet— rusted away from the wall, they disintegrated right underneath my boots. If I hadn't had the presence of mind to grab onto one of the lower steps, I probably wouldn't be writing this...

By wild feats of agility and grace I made it to the gallery and found the oil well dry and barren as a desert. Pushing aside the fact that I'd filled it earlier, I poured more oil in— and groaned in horror as the bowlful of fuel immediately sank through the bottom of the well, as if the bowl had secret pores. There was nothing else to do for it except hope *some* oil would stay, so I poured yet more in and reached in to light it—...

And this is where my account becomes fuzzy. I reached in to light the well, and as if all the excess oil I'd poured had reappeared, the bowl burst into an inferno so fierce that all the glass around the bowl exploded, and some of it went into my eyes (for I was standing close).

I stumbled away from the globe, wanting and *not* wanting to dig the glass out of my face, and I think I must have stumbled backward over the railing and fallen head-over-heels down the stairs. My head booms now as if it struck every step.

The light is broken. There's blood all over me, but I *know* it's not mine. I can't be sure, but I think it belongs to the sailors in that painting; I just have a feeling that that's where the house keeps them. And there's a ship full of real men, likely dying or dead, out there at sea, and no one will know it until they don't turn up at their next port, and no one will know that the lighthouse is trying to kill me until long after *that*.

If you get this letter, please come. I beg you.

I'm not crazy.

I'm not crazy.

Trick or Treat

By: Fernanda Poblete

It was a cold night and the streets were gloomy, which made her think that there weren't going to be many kids in costumes begging for Halloween candy. Betty had only one bag of goodies left, as she had finished the rest of the candy while watching a horror movie. She was alone, in charge of the house, because her parents had left the city as a result of a romantic trip they had organized for the weekend.

She gave each child who passed by her home one or two sweets, so that she could ration the portions and have enough for everyone who showed up. However, she ran out of sweets when it was only a few minutes to midnight. She turned off the lights to make it appear that no one was in the house and thus prevent the kids from asking.

But, suddenly, someone knocked on the door, despite Betty's attempts to dissuade them. She tried not to pay attention to it, and she kept watching television, but someone knocked a second time and with more force. She stood up indignantly and opened with a serious face. A boy disguised as a skeleton appeared at the entrance, with his candy bag full and without any company next to him.

"Trick or treat?" the little one asks her; she was unable to make out his face because the mask covered it.

"I'm sorry, buddy, but I have no sweets left," she apologized, closing the door with regret.

When she was about to return to the couch, somebody called again, which made her immediately furious. She went to the door to yell at the person who appeared in front of her, although no one appeared. She closed the door, and after walking two steps, the doorbell of the house rang once more. The sound made her despair. The noises took over her mind and stunned her greatly, but when she tried to find someone to blame, the person just vanished into thin air.

Betty preferred to stay outside, hidden in the bushes of her porch, to be able to capture the mischievous one that was bothering her, although with how dark it was outside the house, it was difficult to distinguish someone from the shadows. Suddenly, the bell rang again, and she

jumped quickly onto the wooden boards at the entrance, but there was not a single soul in sight. Her heart began to race, and the air became thin, when, suddenly, the bell button began to rumble, without anyone pressing it.

The horror of what she had observed led her to take her keys and drive as fast as possible, without any direction, driven by the only desire to escape. However, while she was driving, the horn began to buzz with the same intensity as that of her home, and the speed of the car began to slow down without her having anything to do. She was trying to accelerate, but the car just stopped in the middle of the road. The music from the radio began to rise increasingly, causing Betty to rest her head in distress on the steering wheel as she covered her ears with her hands.

"Stop, please!" she begged, with a shudder.

When she looked up, suddenly, she felt paralyzed, her skin crawl and cold seized her from head to toe. In front of her car appeared the same little man disguised as a skeleton, to whom she had not been able to deliver candy.

"Trick or treat?" he asked again in a sinister tone, while a dense black cloud emanated around him in a chilling fashion.

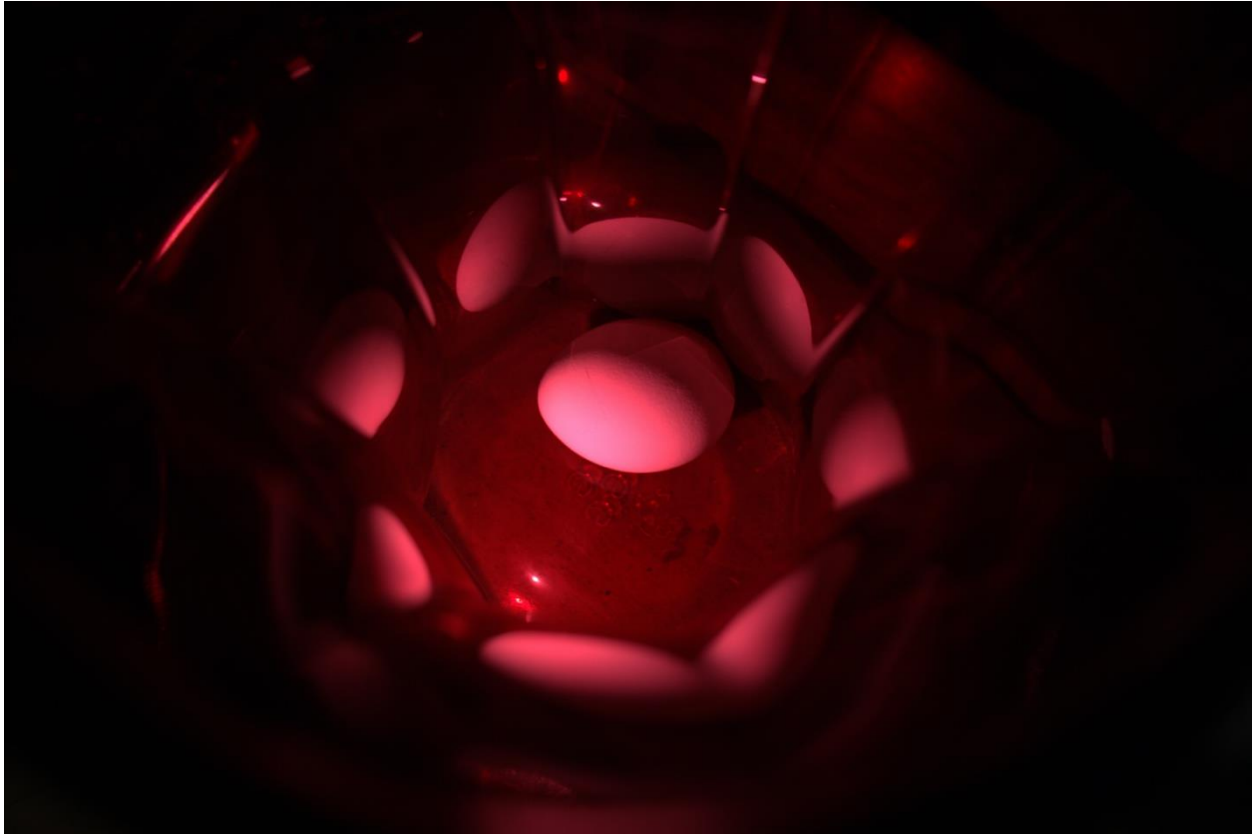
Betty stared at him perplexed, with a terror that was slowly drowning her. She did not know what to do until, suddenly, she remembered that she had left a bar of chocolate in the glove compartment that a school teacher had given her at the end of the class. She got out of the car and showed it to him fearfully. With her shaking hands, she held it out and placed it in his bag while she tried not to look him in the eyes because of the fear it caused her. The instant the chocolate bar fell into the basket, the boy evaporated in the wind, leaving Betty walking away in fear.

Art



Blank

By: Arianna Amann



Environ

By: Arianna Amann