



2023

New River Anthology

2023 New River Anthology

A Collection of Student Art & Writing

Volume 27

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Jacksonville, North Carolina

The **Right to Write Award** is sponsored by George and Lora Cole of Jacksonville, given in memory and in honor of their daughter. George earned an Associate in Fine Arts from Coastal; he is an accomplished artist with awards received from many campuses and local art exhibitions. The Coles are passionate about recognizing the academic achievements of successful students, and we are pleased to present this award to three writers in particular:

"Losing Sense" by Joslyn Bakion (Poetry)

"The Apartment" by Julie Pabon (Nonfiction)

"Think of Me" by Casey Murphy (Fiction)

Publication Note

The New River Anthology is comprised of writing and artwork created by Coastal Carolina Community College students during the 2022-2023 Academic Year. The various works within this publication represent ideas expressed or artwork designed by students; in addition, the works may incorporate words or phrases, as well as explore themes, that some may find potentially disturbing or distressing. Therefore, any ideas expressed or artwork designed by students within this publication are not purported to be reflective of any views or positions of Coastal Carolina Community College.

Coastal Carolina Community College is committed to not only educational excellence — by fostering an engaging teaching and learning environment that embraces inclusivity as well as promotes personal and cultural enrichments in order to enhance the student experience — but also student success.

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**Artwork pieces are bolded.*

Losing Sense

By Joslyn Bakion

I see my way through the world.
Wide eyed and ambitious,
blinded by fantasies drawn by hope and defying odds
I find myself craving luck but never relying on it.
I discover a penny,
At last, on heads
The penny stays as it was.
I see my way out,
In fear of reversing its luck.

I feel my way through the world.
Sensing the best course of action.
Touching all that is alluring.
Always appreciating the warnings and shocks from adversaries.
I feel all sorts of things.
I feel the rough edges of quarters as I toss them into fountains,
grasping onto the possibility of success and prosperity.

My sensitive nose,
twitching at the slightest inconvenience.
My nose guides me through the world,
yet I feel myself always coming back to what's familiar.
The smell of a certain perfume,
the comfort of a certain aroma.
Leaving me with a blanket of complacency,
Perhaps I'll choose what I know.
Nickeling my time to adventure down,
To my few remaining cents.

"I feel all sorts of things.

*I feel the rough edges of quarters as I toss them into fountains,
grasping onto the possibility of success and prosperity."*

I hear my way through the world,
listening to my own voice.
Relying on others.
I'm easily influenced.
My juvenile, clay mind becoming more vulnerable with passing age.
unsure of the future.
I hear the endless clatter of a vending machine,
dispensing small fortune tellings out of meaningless plastic balls.
I enter all my dimes,
Just to hear one more voice.

I envision my dreams in fine detail
so detailed, I can taste them
or so I tell myself.
With the progression of time,
I feel as if my taste buds have shifted.
I yearn for another taste.
I crave another dream.
I spend my last cents on the meal I've craved for so long
It doesn't taste the same,
At last, I've lost all my sense.

Content Warning:

The following piece of non-fiction explores the theme of sexual assault, which some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

The Apartment

By Julie Pabon

Julie, run! I felt as if I was running as fast as the speed of light. Burning up, I could feel the back of my shirt drenched from the sweat dripping down. I was out of breath and panting exhaustively. My heart was pounding rapidly; I could hear it in my ears. *Boom, boom, boom.* I couldn't tell if it was from the running or from fear that I was going to get caught by them. *How could you be so naive, Julie?* I knew I had to keep running; I just didn't know when to stop.

My boyfriend Adam had called me the night before and asked me to skip school, so I could go hang out with him and play video games all day. I was flooded with joy because I was finally going to be able to hang out for a whole day! I strolled by my school on Burnside Avenue and stopped at the bodega to get a delicious bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich. The Bronx is famous for the bodegas on every corner! As soon as I left the store, I blended in with the busy morning rush like a chameleon to avoid being seen by anyone from school, so I wouldn't get caught.

I reached Adam's building and climbed up the long four flights of stairs to his apartment. Adam was 18 and I was only 14, so I thought I was cool for having a boyfriend much older than me. The door opened, and there stood Adam with his caramel complexion and dark brown hair that reached to his shoulders, tied up in a neat ponytail. "Hey baby," he said to me in his broken English. He was from the Dominican Republic and had a strong accent. I leaned in and gave him a kiss as he ushered me to come inside. As I stepped into the living room, I saw Adam's brother and two other guys who looked to be in their 20's.

"You ready to have fun today?" one of the guys asked. He was tall and muscular.

"Of course," I said. "What games do you have?"

They proceeded to look through their games, and I started to eat my breakfast. Adam's brother was very nice to me, and his English was like mine. I could tell he was raised in New York, unlike Adam. "If you want to go to school, I can walk you, so you don't get pulled over by the paddy wagon," he said to me. I really didn't want to leave, especially when I could get pulled over by a cop for skipping school.

"No, I'm okay," I replied. He looked worried for some reason. It made me feel nervous. It felt like something was wrong, but I brushed it off. *Julie, everything is alright. You need to relax!*

The strong scent of marijuana had filled the air as the guys sparked up a joint. "You want to try?" asked the other guy who had not spoken to me yet.

"No, I don't smoke," I replied. Adam got up and took my hand to walk with him to his room. He had put Grand Theft Auto on the PS2 for us to play. I sat on the twin size bed, got the remote, and started playing. We were having fun and laughing out loud together. I really had no intentions of anything else. It was just a day to skip school and hang out with my boyfriend—until he started to kiss me; that is when things took a different turn.

He took the remote from my hand very gently while he kissed me on my neck. We started to kiss, and he said in Spanish, "I want you." I knew he meant sex, but I was a virgin.

"Let's keep playing the game," I had said to him. He ignored me as I kept trying to speak. I finally succumbed to his kisses, and he started to unbutton his pants even though I tried to stop him. Unbeknownst to me, the door had opened and in came the tall muscular guy and the other dude with the broken English. I saw Adam's eyes move in the direction of the door, but I just thought he was trying to make sure no one came in. I was wrong.

Adam's demeanor changed in an instant. His touch was now a firm grip holding the back of my head. "I'm going to get what I want," he said in Spanish. He ripped my shirt and held me down. I screamed, "NO ADAM, PLEASE!" It was then that I realized the other two men were in the room, and I knew instantly what their plan was to do with me. Fear rushed all over me as I saw them unbutton their pants. Adam just held me down and touched me in ways that made the hairs on my arms stand up from how disgusted I felt. I laid there with a half-ripped shirt and bruises on my skin.

I wasn't familiar with the layout of the apartment; I had no idea which way was out, but I knew I had to get to that door. They were still trying to get undressed as I kicked Adam off me. I made it to the door, but as I turned the knob, it didn't open. It was locked. I was frozen with fear as my head was aggressively yanked back by Adam. He had my hair tightly wrapped around his hand. He was in plaid boxers and no shirt. His skin was glistening with sweat from the struggle I was putting him through. The muscular guy was trying to touch me while the other man tried to hold my legs. They looked like wild animals trying to fight for a meal. I had given up. I couldn't fight them off me. They slapped me around trying to stop me from fighting back. I was just a small petite girl against these men. I wished I had just gone to school.

I lay there as they forcefully tried to remove my remaining clothing. My mouth was salty, and I realized it was my tears streaming down my face. I didn't even know I was crying. The adrenaline that rushed through my body didn't let me feel anything. I just felt numb. As I laid there feeling sorry for myself, the door flew open. In came Adam's brother. He must have had a key on the other side. *Now there are four, Julie.*

I expected him to join the group in the heinous act they were about to bestow on me, but as I saw a punch fly in Adam's direction, I knew he was there to help. Red blood splattered everywhere from the hit Adam took. I didn't think twice about running. I sprang up so fast from that bed and bolted out of there. Adam's brother ran right behind me and threw my coat at me to put on. As I put on the coat, I got goosebumps from the coldness of it because I had no shirt underneath. I stood around in a panic as I had no idea where the front door was. Adam's brother rushed me to the door and told me to run. Once again, I didn't think twice. I ran down the stairs like I was in an Olympic obstacle course, so fast I skipped three or four steps at a time. I could hear the footsteps catching up behind me, but my muscles tightened and didn't allow me to turn my head to even look. I had finally made it out of the building and ran like my life depended on it, because it *did*.

"I wasn't familiar with the layout of the apartment; I had no idea which way was out, but I knew I had to get to the door."

Content Warning:

The following piece of fiction explores the theme of military combat and violence, which some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

Think of Me

By Casey Murphy

An icy hand pulled him from the water. Gasping for air, his swollen eyes opened barely enough to see what remained of the plane. The wreckage was now the only source of light or warmth for miles. What used to be a rebuilt Curtiss P-40 Warhawk had been reduced to scraps of fuel-soaked burning fuselage littering the North Atlantic. Drifting in and out of consciousness, Casey reluctantly collected as much information as he would need for this day to haunt him for the rest of his life.

The sun had given way to an ink-black sky peppered with pinholes of white starlight. He would normally be home by now. His long-haired mischievous rescue cat, Croissant, and his small one-bedroom apartment above the noisy bicycle shop seemed so far away. Casey remembered spending so many hours working on that plane. It was older than most, and it had its flaws, but it was a damn fine plane after he got done with it.

His eyes opened again. He was on his back watching the night sky dance above. He felt the wood of the ship deck beneath him. A circle of sailors in life vests stood over him wearing varying expressions of bewilderment. "Is he going to make it?" asked one of the younger men. Every blink of his eyes felt like an eternity. The air was cold on what was left of his tattered wet clothes. Casey was being dragged by two of the crew. There was a trail of thick red blood that streaked the freshly swabbed deck.

An older gentleman shouted, "Get him below deck as fast as you can!" It was the last thing Casey heard before the group of men disappeared from his vision as it faded to black.

The quiet unconscious darkness of his mind exploded into vivid color as it raced to weave a tapestry that transported him back. Almost a year ago Casey was dropped off by a hulking gray Navy vessel in a small town called Ushant. It was a tiny island a few miles from the northwest coast of France. A modest gemstone bordering a sparkling diamond on the finger of a goddess. Beautiful in its own right but dwarfed by the shadow of its neighbor. The island was home to a remote air base used to refuel and repair fighter planes. "No letters in, no letters out. No phone calls, no nothing," said the commanding officer as soon as Casey stepped off the ship's ramp. What a pleasant greeting. The base was so small and secretive that the enemy had not yet identified its location.

"Yeah, we are not about to risk losing the war so you can send love notes to your girlfriend," echoed the CO's parrot dressed in a Navy Senior Chief's uniform. He could already tell their relationship would be problematic. Casey's mind was a storm of pain, guilt, and regret.

He remembered what Mackenzie last said as she held his hands and kissed him: "Think of me." Her words rang through his mind like an echo since the day he left: "Think of me." Neither of them knew that's all he'd be able to do. All communication with everything he loved was completely cut off. He was physically sick. He was a prisoner on this island.

The cool air was kissed with the warm, sweet smell of the bakery in town mixed with the salty air that blew in over the water. The narrow streets were lined with charming stone homes that had been built with the skilled touch of a patient craftsman long before he was born. She would love it here. The

sun seemed to fall so slowly in the evening over La cloche sous-marine d'Ouessant lighthouse. Casey spent his long days with various tools in his hands. The airstrip truly was vital to the success of the war, and it was his responsibility to ensure planes were in working order. He was no fighter pilot, but Casey knew his way around the planes so well that he would run his own test flights. None of the pilots seemed to mind as this gave them an excuse to spend their layovers at the pubs in town chasing after women whose names they couldn't pronounce and didn't bother to remember. Casey loved the feeling of restoring a plane back to its full capability after it arrived with varying degrees of damage from dog fights over Europe.

Right before the sun would sink into the vast dark water, he would set his tools down and step out onto the flight line to breathe, think, and watch the daylight wither. Casey wondered if Mackenzie was thinking of him. When the sun finally disappeared, he would quickly climb into one of the aircrafts he had staged in perfectly straight lines flanking the small repair shop.

Their weapons had been unloaded, their propellers faced west, and their wings were no more than twelve inches apart, so he could walk from one plane to the next without climbing down. "Propeller function, check. Flaps, check. Harness, check. Landing gear operational, check, check, check." Casey stared down the runway, ensuring it was clear as he reached for the throttle. Vibration rang through his hands and up his arms. Casey could feel the machine in his veins. Faster and faster, he moved the length of the runway, his gaze piercing through the panoramic cockpit glass. As he reached maximum ground speed, his ungloved hand firmly grasped the control lever and pulled it toward his chest. The freshly repaired altimeter began to spin with the precision of the Breitling Navitimer perpetual watch on his wrist, a gift he bought himself on his birthday a few months ago. One hundred, two hundred, one thousand feet and climbing. Casey beamed as he felt the roar of the finely tuned engine chewing through the ethereal sky. He always waited until this time of day because if he climbed high enough above the clouds, he could watch the sunset one more time.

His face was warm as Casey flew straight into the sun until it eluded him for the second time that night, like it had hundreds of times before. Lost in thought, he flew farther over the black unforgiving water than he intended. The rhythm of the engine paired with the isolation of being thousands of feet above the hard world allowed Casey's mind to wander. He was thinking of home. He was thinking of her.

As he began to bank and turn back toward base, Casey regained his senses and became fully alert. The instrument panel glowed a familiar dim green that indicated all systems were functioning properly. Then she was back. Mackenzie inundated his mind. She would come and go as she pleased. She would visit him at work and be gone as quickly as she came. Mackenzie would sit with him while he drank coffee at the café on the corner. On Saturday mornings, despite her hatred for anything with two wheels, Mackenzie would ride alongside him and Croissant while the tiny town was still asleep. When Casey laughed, she was there to catch his searching gaze. She'd smile back and be gone too soon. She always loved the way the corners of his eyes looked when he laughed.

Mackenzie was with him now as he flew back east to dry land. There was worry in her eyes. Casey had been to many corners of the Earth, but her eyes were a shade of green he'd never seen. They would change color in an instant like clouds in the Midwest sky. A storm formed in them now as tears pooled in her eyes. Casey looked at her, but he couldn't speak. "Think of me," she said as she faded away. Casey

squinted and his vision cleared. He wiped a tear from his cheek just as he saw something in the distance.

He saw them flying just above the dim twinkling coastline of the tiny island. Scouts. They had surely mapped the island and were now headed straight for him. Three Messerschmitt Bf 109 German fighter planes. He immediately recognized their distinct silhouettes. They knew we were here. They knew he was here.

The sky was on fire as bullets poured from their front-facing dual synchronized cowl-mounted 7.92 mm MG-17 machine guns. He felt shards of glass pepper his skin before he saw the holes that were left in the cockpit windshield. His right shoulder rang with pain, and his arm was now heavy and useless. Another bullet hit him in the chest like a hammer. Blood soaked his shirt, and his breath quickened. Adrenaline coursed through his body, and his left hand took the controls. Casey knew he'd been hit. He knew he wouldn't be able to land the plane. He had no ammunition. His mind was a tangled mess of fear and calculated movement. Thick black smoke poured from his propeller now, spraying oil stains on what was left of the cockpit glass.

The controls were completely seized. Regardless of how hard Casey pulled, the plane was nose-down and heading straight for the hard black sheet of ice-cold water below. His foggy mind was shaken awake by trained hands doing anything they could to survive. The pain was mended by the need to make it home. "Mayday, mayday, mayday," he shouted through the radio handset. The altimeter read 3,600 feet, and the dial was spinning counterclockwise as fast as it ever had. Casey's hands worked to remove his harness while his mind calculated the time until impact. "7.42 seconds per 1,000 feet," he said aloud to himself. Just over 20 seconds of freefall.

Blinded by night, Casey felt above his head for the handle to slide the glass canopy to the rear. "Sixteen." He quickly checked his parachute lanyards to ensure both were within reach.

"Fourteen." He stood and positioned himself so that when he jumped, he would not hit the tail of the plane that was now directly above him.

"Eight." The engine burst into flames, and the heat was immediately unbearable.

"Six." Casey jumped into the night and felt the heat of the burning plane grow distant.

"Two." His left hand reached across his chest to pull the primary parachute. The lanyard released, and he held it in his hand as he heard the canopy fill with air. The jolt of deceleration caught him just in time to be surrounded by freezing cold water.

His waterlogged boots, uniform, and pack were all getting heavier as he swam to the surface. After swimming straight up for what felt like an eternity his head finally broke the surface tension of the water. Gasping for air, he realized there was none. Only the black canvas suction of his parachute clinging to the water was waiting for him as he emerged. Casey closed his mouth and reached for his knife as he was now back in the deep, unforgiving saltwater. With his knife now firmly in his only working hand, he reached above his head to cut a hole in the thick material. Casey's lungs filled with needles.

In every direction, it looked like campfires on a hillside. The plane was in pieces. Casey cut himself from his parachute completely and swam toward the wreckage. The warmth pouring from the burning aviation fuel was an oasis in the watery desert. He sought refuge on a broken panel and floated as

close as he could to the fire. His body was tired. His mind had shut down. Casey's eyes gave way as the darkness closed in.

His eyes blinked open, and his heart was beating slowly. Casey could see bright fluorescent lights above him, and he felt cold clean steel under his skin. He was on his back again wearing nothing but a sheet-thin gown. His whole body was sore. The group of sailors that stood over him before had transformed into doctors in surgical masks wearing thick latex gloves and aprons. "Lieutenant, can you hear me?" asked one of them with a baritone voice. He was speaking English.

"Casey, can you hear us?" another doctor asked. She was also speaking English, but he detected an Irish accent.

Casey nodded his head, afraid to hear what his own voice might sound like. "You're in Dublin, sir. You've been asleep for a few days," said a nurse as she filled out the chart that was attached to her clipboard. They explained how lucky he was that the patrol boat heard his call over the radio.

From his left, another Irish native voice added, "They weren't close enough to see the crash, but they spotted the fires just before they were extinguished."

"Lucky me," Casey said. "Ireland," he managed before it hurt to speak. He tried to sit up, but he was immediately met by nurses telling him to rest.

"We'll be moving you to a more comfortable room in a few minutes. You just had surgery to remove three bullets from your upper body," said a voice that he hadn't yet heard. He wondered how many people were in this room.

"Wait, three?" Casey almost shouted. "I only counted two."

He was released from the hospital on December 16th, 1944. The nurse that wheeled him to the taxi rank said, "Your friends in France had your belongings shipped here, I'll run and grab them. You wait here."

As she turned to walk back inside, he sat uncomfortably in the hospital wheelchair and muttered to himself, "Where the hell do you think I'm going to go?" A few minutes of silence passed before she came around the corner carrying his canvas duffel bag and a cardboard box with carefully placed holes cut along the top. The nurse placed the box in his lap and opened the lid. "Croissant!" Casey winced in pain as he lifted him from the box. They needed each other equally, and his eyes began to fill with tears. "I missed you, buddy."

A voice boomed from behind him. "You owe me a plane." He recognized the voice almost immediately. It was the voice of his commanding officer.

"Sir, I..." he cut Casey off.

"Listen to me, Lieutenant. Half of the damn fighter planes in the skies above Europe have had your hands on them. You don't owe me or your country a single thing." His presence certainly wasn't coincidental. The uniformed man, gray with experience, stood next to him in silence. They bathed in the moment and neither man dared to disturb the stillness. Finally, the older man said, "Go home, Lieutenant. Watch your damn sunsets knowing you did your best." The Colonel handed him his termination orders and shook his only available hand.

"Thank you, sir," he managed, unable to render a proper salute.

The Douglas C-47 Skytrain that carried him back across the Atlantic was leaking fluids into well-placed buckets and making sounds he tried his best not to diagnose. His anxiety was in full swing as every pocket of turbulence sent a tremor of jagged current through his body. He sat among pallets of equipment draped in cargo nets. Croissant could sense Casey's uncertainty and stayed in his lap for most of the flight, only taking the occasional opportunity to investigate his surroundings.

Every so often, a crew member would systematically walk through the maze of cargo toward the rear of the plane to check the security of the straps that held everything in place. Casey's body ached from the trauma and his mind was beginning to recount the experience that led him to this moment. It was too much. His eyes broke contact with the nothingness they were locked on, and a calm washed over him. He was headed home. He was headed home to her.

Casey's body jolted awake. His eyes were frantically assessing as the plane descended. As quickly and as unsolicited as a gunshot wound, the dim red lights of the cabin turned a bright white for landing. The wing flaps extended upward, landing gear mechanically whirred into place, and the pilot touched the runway with expertise. Croissant was purring loudly in his lap in an attempt to convince them both they were going to be okay. They had flown through the night. One of the crew members threw an oversized switch, and the harsh white cabin light was off. The low morning sun leaked through the round porthole windows, illuminating beams of dust and dirt stirred by the landing. When the hydraulic rear door slowly dropped, Casey was already standing with his duffel bag on his back. Croissant, who had displayed a clear and warranted animosity toward his cardboard carrier, stood by his side.

It was Sunday. She would be at her grandmother's house for chicken. Her grandmother was truly one-of-a-kind. She had a love for her family that ran deeper than words. She often overlooked her own well-being for that of her children and grandchildren. Casey was lucky to have met her briefly before he left. He hoped that when he returned, she would be happy to see him. Nettie had a visceral distaste for men that was well-founded, to say the least, but he hoped he would one day be an exception to her rule. Mackenzie's entire family would be there. They made a whole day of it. Some family members would show up after church service, while others would be there all day. There would be place settings for every family member regardless of age. The laughter and happiness that emanated from her modest home seemed to radiate for miles. The kitchen was the heartbeat of her home. She would cook enough food for the entire Navy to have multiple helpings. Becoming a member of her family was all Casey ever wanted.

He didn't dare show up unannounced, especially after being gone for so long. Casey had the taxi take him to her family farm. As he pulled off the rural road, just past the brick walls that flanked the driveway, he told the driver this was far enough. There was about an inch of snow on the ground, and the house was lit for Christmas. Casey could see the freshly cut cedar tree through the front window. They cut their own cedar tree every year from somewhere on the farm. The brick house looked as if it had grown from the land. It stood proudly in front of hundreds of acres of fertile farmland. The house had been in Mackenzie's family for many years. Her grandfather's skilled hands created this place and passed it down to her father. Her father, Mack, was the best builder in the county and had spent so many years shaping this home into what it is today. She was the oldest of three children, and her brother,

Bubbie, would surely be the heir to this beautiful landscape when it was his turn. She came from a long line of individuals who put others before themselves. Her mother, Debbie, was a saint and carried her grandmother's selfless legacy flawlessly. He considered himself lucky to have ever met them at all.

Casey and Croissant sat together on the swing under the carport in front of the side entrance to the home. It was eerily quiet between the bellows from their cattle. He looked out over the field to the east and cherished the fact that he had finally made it home. There were so many times he thought he never would. The sun was setting over his right shoulder when Casey heard them pull into the driveway. First, her brother and his obnoxiously loud truck. The family farm was only five or six miles from her grandmother's house, but Bubbie would surely arrive a few minutes before the rest of the family. He drove like a madman, but with the precision of a professional.

"Alright then, where you been?" Bubbie asked as he hopped out of his barely street-legal Chevy.

"What's goin' on man?" Casey answered.

"I thought I seen a ghost when I pulled up," her brother said as he strode past. Bubbie was every bit of six-foot-three and then some.

"Just glad to be home" Casey replied as Mackenzie's brother opened the door and went inside without another word. He had a way of condensing hours of conversation into a few sentences. Bubbie's truck was still running. He was certainly headed somewhere as there was still a little daylight left and plenty of work to be done. Exhaust poured from the straight chrome tailpipes, and the idling engine was all Casey could hear until he heard the distinct crunch of gravel beneath tires.

There had been an ocean between them, but he was no more than fifty feet from Mackenzie now. The distinct circular headlights of their old Cadillac shone on his face as it inched toward him. Mack won it in a bidding war a few years ago at a local auction. Mack and Bubbie had to tow it back on their trailer because it didn't run. They had since cleaned it from top to bottom and painted it a deep mirror black. Casey squinted and tried his best to look past the beams of light to find the green of her eyes.

Bubbie was carrying a bag of tools as he emerged from the house. The car came to rest, and the headlights dimmed. The engine went silent, and his eyes adjusted. "She's probably at her house," Bubbie guessed as he headed back to his truck.

"Jump in, I'll give you a ride."

"Her house?" Casey asked.

"I'll tell you on the way," her brother offered.

"Hey, Casey," Mack said as he stepped out of the passenger side and headed to the door of their home. Mack always had an uncanny ability to read the room. Her father knew who Casey was here to see, and there would be plenty of time to catch up later.

By the time Mack had reached the door, Debbie had gotten out and given him a hug, and said, "I'm so glad you're home! Mackenzie left supper about an hour before we did."

Casey smiled and said, "It's so good to see you guys; I missed y'all."

"Well, go on and catch her while she's home. She don't sit still too long," Debbie said to him with

that laugh only she can achieve that can make a total stranger feel like family.

His mind was racing. Casey tried frantically to fill the void of lost time with bits of information. His confusion must have shown as he struggled to lift his bag and convince Croissant to follow him toward Bubbie's thundering metal beast. His left arm still did most of the heavy lifting. Casey tossed his bag in the back of the truck, which was overflowing with tools and various containers of fluid. Croissant stood on his back legs and pawed at his leg, begging to be held during the ride. That cat had been through a lot in the last two days.

While Casey held Croissant like a football, he pushed the thumb button and pulled the handle of the truck door open. He winced as he climbed into the cab and shut the door. "You good?" Bubbie asked.

"Just got a few more holes in me than I left with," he answered. A few moments went by, and Casey was certain he would have to ask specific questions if he wanted any details. The ability to exist in silence in the company of others was a genetic trait that all three children had gotten honestly from their father. At this point, they could be on their way to New York for all he knew. "Her house, huh?" Casey said over the engine.

They turned right out of the driveway and headed east, so this at least narrowed it down to the original thirteen colonies. Bubbie's use of pauses in conversation was as frustrating as it was admirable. After what felt like a whole minute after being asked an open-ended question, Bubbie spoke. "A few months after you took off, she bought the old Francis Jerrell house."

"The one over by Cardinal Baptist?" Casey asked.

"That's the one. She been goin' room by room redecorating and fixin' it up," Bubbie added. Casey stared out of the passenger window and vanished into his mind. He was so proud of her.

Mackenzie had always loved that house. It was enormous. From the road, you could see multiple buildings on the property past the four-plank white wooden fence. The driveway had a decorative brick entrance and was lined with trees that had been there forever. The main house was two stories plus an attic. She loved attics as much as most people loved ice cream. The house was bright white with black shutters that framed floor-to-ceiling windows. The brick chimney was a beautiful contrasting pillar. The front door was wide and flanked by two glass lantern porch lights under a two-column covering. She loved the mature trees that covered the yard in shade during the day. The way Casey had heard her speak about that house and imagining living there made him smile every time. "One day," she always said.

Casey thanked her brother for the ride with a nod and walked toward the house. As the sound of the engine faded, it hit him. He was nervous to see her. Questions swirled in Casey's mind. What would she think of him? Did she even want to see him after so long without even receiving a letter? Had she completely moved on?

The house was more gorgeous than Casey remembered. Mackenzie had planted rose bushes, hydrangeas, and her favorite pink and white peonies around the base of the entire house. In the summer, it would look like a two-tier wedding cake with decorative floral icing. He heard music coming from inside as he walked toward the large wooden door. As he carefully managed to ascend one step at a time, Casey noticed movement through the living room window. There was a fire roaring in the fireplace

and her singing was now louder than the Ella Fitzgerald song pouring from the record player. Mackenzie went up and down the ladder with ease, carefully applying the first coat of paint to the newly installed crown molding. She stopped painting every so often to close her eyes and spin while she sang into her paintbrush microphone. "Stars shining right above you. Night breezes seem to whisper, I love you. Birds singin' in the sycamore trees, dream a little dream of me."

Mackenzie wore a white t-shirt under her paint-covered overalls, and her hair was thrown in a loose bun, wrapped in a white bandana she had carefully tied in the front. Her hair was a different color every other month. Currently, it was a bright shade of pink she hadn't worn in a while. It was brighter near her roots and the pink faded into platinum blonde. She was barefoot, as usual. She was beautiful.

Casey stood still. "Say nighty-nite and kiss me. Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me. While I'm alone and blue as can be, dream a little dream of me." She continued to sing as he watched her every move.

He continued up the brick stairs of the front porch, and Croissant followed closely behind. He reached for the brass doorknob that looked as if it had been reclaimed from an English castle and realized it was unlatched. She rarely locked her doors until it was time to go to bed. "Here goes nothin'," he said to himself. "Either she'll be happy to see me, or I'll get shot a few more times." The music poured out of the house as he pushed the door open slowly. Mackenzie was on the ladder carefully adding more paint and humming quietly as the song began to fade.

The record player clicked and popped as the needle rode the vinyl grooves, searching for the next track. Casey watched her as she backed down the ladder, still humming the chorus of the song that had just painted the walls with her. As soon as both of her feet were on the canvas, he dropped his heavy duffel bag on the dark hardwood floor with a thud.

Mackenzie turned to face the sound. He saw her lungs expand as she inhaled sharply. Their eyes locked as the can of paint slipped from her hand and fell to the floor. Seconds passed as she stared straight through him. Mackenzie's mind was awash with uncertainty. She didn't say a word. Casey stood there in his uniform and waited for her to move first. He owed her that, and so much more. So many months of emotion exploded from her eyes as she walked toward him. She jumped into him and hugged him around his neck. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and she held him tightly. His shoulder ached, and his chest throbbed in pain as she tightened her grip. "I'm never leaving you again. Not for a single day," he whispered.

She pressed her wet cheek against his face and said, "You owe me a can of paint."

They were married in a month. It was just the two of them in her parents' backyard. Hanging lights illuminated the lace and floral arch. She wore a white floor-length dress with a surplice neckline and a flared train. There was a slit up the left leg just above her knee. Her long sleeves were sheer, and her back was open. Her hair was intricately braided like that of a high priestess in a far-off elvish world. She was gorgeous. They spoke to each other honestly and vowed to live every day together. They laughed and cried while they held each other. As he placed his hand on her cheek, wiping a tear away with his thumb, he kissed her and said, "I will always think of you."

As soon as Casey felt the electric heat of her lips on his, he was awake. It was bright in his

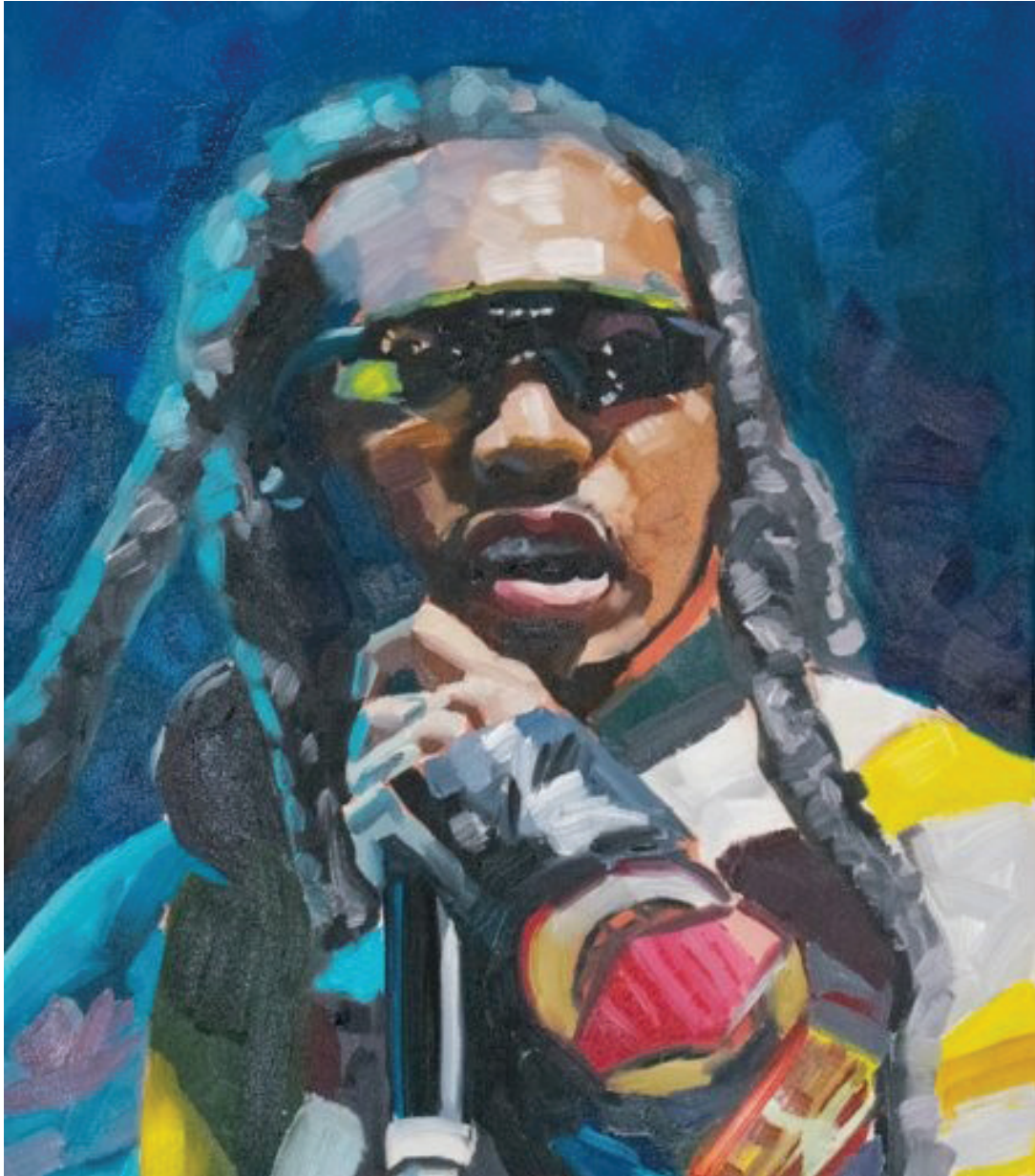
bedroom. The sound of Eggs, their all-black foster cat, purring next to him brought him back to reality. A dream. Sparrow was in the hall, staring at him. Casey grabbed the shirt he had shed on the floor before taking a nap. He checked his phone. It was Saturday. He gave Sparrow a scratch on the head as he passed, and his youngest son, Rory was running up the steps just as Casey descended. "Daddy, I have a field trip. It costs eleven dollars. The paper is in my folder."

Casey's oldest son Oakley was right behind Rory. "What time are we going to the party at the laser tag place?"

He mentally acknowledged them both but only managed a "Not sure, you guys." Casey reached the bottom of the stairs and turned left into the kitchen. Mackenzie was wearing one of his shirts and her hair was up in a messy bun. She was throwing a frozen pizza in the oven while she listened to music.

Mackenzie was more beautiful than she had ever been. He had everything. His life was a dream he could never have imagined before he met her. Casey loved her more now than he ever had, and he would love her even more tomorrow.

"They spoke to each other honestly and vowed to live every day together. They laughed and cried while they held each other. As he placed his hand on her cheek, wiping a tear away with his thumb, he kissed her and said, 'I will always think of you.' "



“Takeoff”

By Myron Kimble

The Hunter Becomes the Hunted: Prologue

By Noah Curran

A loud cry could be heard from afar, along with it a mob of people chanting triumphantly. In this fight, soldier and citizen were of little difference. The rebel soldiers wore neatly tailored uniforms and were armed typically with bayonets and muskets. Meanwhile, civilians wore cheap and musty rags and armed themselves with whatever they had available. Both were just as capable of harming the opponent, both as siblings in arms.

The town of Palmyras was once a prosperous high-class town. Neat three-story buildings had once lined its streets, along with kerosene streetlamps that shone during the cold, freezing nights. Now they lay vandalized, destroyed, and scorched, the occasional balcony serving its only current purpose of being a post for the Rebellion's flag. The once clean and grand glass windows had now been reduced to tiny, hazardous shards, while the plaza's center fountain turned to rubble.

The mob was currently escorting criminals that were charged with association and cooperation with "them." They would be sentenced to death by guillotine at Palmyras' center plaza. Some of the criminals, primarily the elderly, willingly placed themselves near the front. The reason for this was that the guillotine blade got duller and duller as the executions went on, eventually to the point of no longer cutting through, leaving the trapped individual to live in suffering rather than a quick, painless death.

Three soldiers lined up next to each other and led the march. The one in the middle was the general, and on his right and left side were his lieutenants. The tall man on the general's left maintained a serious, undisturbed expression on his face and looked to be no older than 20. Contrarily, the general and the other lieutenant appeared to be in their early to mid-40's. The general had a grouchy and stoic expression that strangely matched the gray hair and wrinkles on his face, and he carried a short stature. Meanwhile, the hair of the lieutenant on his right had yet to gray, and he was not much taller than his general. He had a charisma that matched his posture, which raised the mob's morale significantly.

"Out with the old!" the charismatic lieutenant would yell out with his musket raised high.

"In with the new!" the crowd would reply with an echo that lifted the dust off the street.

This exchange would repeat until they finally reached the defiled fountain. The commoners would utter under their breaths the word "swine" towards the criminals. The poised lieutenant stepped atop the rubble before clearing his throat.

"General, may I give a word to the crowd?"

"You have my permission."

It was mid-winter. The overcast above was beginning to break. The rooftops—or at least what remained of them—were covered here and there with snow, yet there was not much snow on the ground. There was a great wind chill, though due to the combined body heat of the mob, one could likely go shirtless and feel completely fine. The sunlight that began to peek through the clouds seemed to better

the already high morale of the mob.

"We gather here today to celebrate yet another wondrous victory. It has been a tough and bloody journey, but we have persevered, and it has paid off. For decades—nearly a century, in fact—the Tsar-Anglican officials have held their position on the backs of the working Gaulan people for far too long. We have been taxed and worked to a breaking point, all to achieve nothing. Meanwhile, the upper-class officials lived lavish lifestyles with not a care in the world, monetizing our suffering. When we cried for help, they turned their backs. When we gave our demands, they flatly refused. While we struggled to survive, they thrived..."

The methods used in his speech were meticulous. Not just his words, the hand movements and expressions were concerningly impressive. With an expression of disgust and the mere mention of the Tsar-Anglican officials, he could incite a wave of booing from the crowd. By simply raising his arms, he could get a wave of cheer. He was like a conductor directing a symphony.

"...Today our march is nearing its end as we are a few kilometers away from the capitol, and when we arrive, we will prove to them that we are no longer submitting to their pathetic rule! For the Rebellion!"

Expectedly, the crowd roared so loud that it felt like the earth shook. The inferno of hatred and envy boiling in the souls of the crowd would be enough to forge a thousand blades. The speech was quite effective.

As the guillotine was being set, a disturbance suddenly occurred. As the mob's attention shifted, a young boy no older than 10 sprinted past the mob. He had an infant swaddled in rags and a two-year-old girl at his side. His clothes were not cheap yet not too expensive either, but enough to warrant suspicion from the rowdy mob.

"Halt!" yelled one of the soldiers.

Yet the boy did not stop, breathing heavily as he sprinted. Unfortunately for him though, restricted by the speed of a toddler and having an infant in his arm, he could not move quickly, and he was eventually cornered in an alleyway. As he cowered, the soldiers aimed their weapons towards him. In response, the boy tucked his head over the infant and put his hand behind himself, signaling the toddler to stay behind him. Only when the general and two lieutenants arrived at the scene did the boy lift his head. His brown eyes widened in fear at the sight of the general's piercing gaze.

"What is going on here?"

The boy shivered. He looked up towards the general, breathing heavily as white breath escaped his mouth. His cheeks and nose were bright red. Each tear that slipped down to his cheek froze nearly instantly.

The young boy pleaded. "Please, if not me, at least spare my brother and sister!"

He looked towards the lieutenants, then back to the general, expecting a reaction, but the general's stare remained unchanged. The soldiers aimed their muskets at him; each held their finger at the trigger.

"Please, if not me, at least spare my brother and sister!"

"He must be a spy for them! It's best we end him right here!" said one soldier. The other soldiers agreed, maintaining a more watchful eye on the boy. The general, though, was not as hasty, only giving the boy a questioning look.

"Where are you going?" he inquired, his tone harsh and cold.

The boy hesitated. His answer could be the difference between life and death. As he bit his cracked lips, he looked at the general and simply replied with "South." In response, the soldiers held their muskets at eye level. The boy held the infant tighter. He mumbled quietly, quiet enough that the soldiers could not hear him. "Please, stay behind me and look away." He rested his chin on the infant. As he prepared for the barrage of musket balls, the general spoke.

"Let them go."

The younger lieutenant stared at him in shock. "But general, we can't just—"

"Are we really letting that brat get away?!" the elder lieutenant interjected.

"I said let them go," he repeated as his patience was being tested.

The soldiers protested further, yet the general persisted.

"Did I stutter?!" he yelled, echoing loud enough that a fleeing crow could be heard nearby.

Both the young and old lieutenants backed away and dropped their muskets, raising their hands in surrender. The lower ranks would then repeat the same actions; however, it did not mean that they were pleased with his decision. The general began to walk away, his posture as cold as his gaze was towards the boy, all while his soldiers glared at him.

"The boy poses no threat, nor is he worth our time or our energy. Even if he is a spy, he won't make it very far, let alone provide any useful intel."

The tension among the soldiers eased somewhat as they followed him, but the crowd was eavesdropping and was evidently upset. The word "traitor!" could be read on each individual's face.

"As I said, the boy poses no threat to us," said the general towards the antsy mob, standing atop the rubble from the destroyed fountain. "He is worth neither our time nor our energy. Even if he's a spy, he won't make it anywhere. He's practically walking into our hands. Just in a different region—that's all. It's likely he and his two companions will die on the journey anyways."

The mob's protests quieted as they hushed their fussing, and they begrudgingly accepted his explanation. General's orders were general's orders, they had to remind themselves. Without him, they wouldn't have made it as far as they did.

Meanwhile, the boy swiftly left the alleyway and started towards the entrance south, infant in arm and toddler in tow. He did not look back and ushered the toddler to only look forward. Tears fell from his eyes like raindrops. When the sound of the guillotine blade falling followed by the mob cheering came from behind, quivering upon each breath, his emotions finally burst. After composing himself, he looked towards his sister and let out a pained, slightly forced smile, before staring off towards the road ahead. He clenched his teeth before continuing forward.

You Be in Charge

By Hazel McClendon

There were regular seven-year-olds, and then there was me. My mother has seven children, and I am the oldest. One would think being the oldest of seven children, it would be fun to be able to boss someone around. It may have been fun for others being the oldest, but I hated it, especially when my mom and aunt would go to work. No one told me I would get in trouble for what they did, or that I had to watch them every single moment of the day.

What would have been a typical day for kids stuck in the house ended up being very eventful. My mother was getting ready for work and giving me my usual "You're in charge" speech. At the time, my mom had three children. We lived with my aunt and her son in a two-bedroom trailer. My mother was 23, still trying to find her way in life. My aunt got my mom a waitress job with her at Olive Garden. They worked the same schedule so my mom would have a ride to and from work. We had a cousin that lived right across the street from us and another cousin a block over. Every time they left for work, my mom would remind me of my cousins being close by and that the number to their job was taped to the base of the phone. One of them would always say, "Alright, Hazel, you know what to do. And DO NOT answer the door or the phone. Love you," before locking the door and leaving. Technically, my cousin was the oldest of all of us. I was seven and he was 12, but he had the mind of my two-year-old sister. I knew he had special needs, but I still didn't understand why I had to be the one in charge. Being in charge meant I had to make sure we ate, and no one used the restroom on themselves. Being in charge meant I got in trouble if something went wrong, no matter whose fault it was.

One day in June, my mom and aunt went to work, and my cousin started acting up. My brother was five, and he followed behind my cousin whenever he thought my cousin was having fun. This particular day, nothing was fun about what my cousin was doing. First, he got every racetrack set my brother had and tried placing them all as one giant monster track. Those toys were expensive, and I knew I would get in trouble if they were broken. Once I got all those picked up and put away, my sister insisted on a snack, which led to the other two screaming out their demands of what they wanted. I only knew how to use the microwave, but they all wanted grilled cheese sandwiches.

As I was coming up with a master plan on how to make grilled cheese sandwiches in the microwave (I had only seen my mom make them on the stove), my cousin and brother stuck one of the sandwiches in the toaster. The amount of smoke the toaster created sent us all into a panic. The smell of burnt cheese filled the house. My brother started crying, which made our sister cry too. I was too nervous to dial 9-1-1 or call my mother at work. I called my cousin across the street, scared, and told her to hurry up before we caught on fire. When she got inside, she unplugged the toaster and shook it upside down over the trash can. She told me to open the front door so fresh air could come in. Once she got us fed, she asked, "How did this happen?!" I told her my brother and cousin did it, and she laughed! I saw *nothing* funny. All I could think about was if I was going to get in trouble or not. She stayed with us until my mom came home.

My mother immediately asked, "Why did you let your cousin in?" forgetting she had given her a key. My cousin chimed in right on time and explained what had happened. I thought I was going to get in trouble. Instead, my mom laughed and said, "Hmmm, that was a good idea. Too bad they didn't think about the cheese melting." All the adults laughed harder as I sat there quietly, my heart racing. I just kept thinking to myself, *I never want to be in charge again.*

"No one told me I would get in trouble for what they did, or that I had to watch them every single moment of the day."

She is woman

By Crystal Whaley

Sweet goddess
whisper the language of love
lie by the garden
bare your skin to the moon
worship her shine
dream of her beauty
She is woman

"worship her shine"



“Chadwick Boseman”

By Myron Kimble

Content Warning:

The following poem explores the theme of sexual assault, which some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

Unspoken Pain

By Rachel M. Cordero

I was eleven when I buried my innocence.

Hold up

Rewind

I don't think my words quite strike a chord with you

So, let me respeak them into existence so that you may understand a part of my pain
only a part of it, though.

No one can truly understand all of it, not even me.

I was eleven years old, barely a girl when I buried my innocence

It wasn't long after that before I started to carry the guilt of what had happened.

Even now as an adult, some days it feels like a weight is pushing down on me and there's nothing that can
make it go away

Skip a few years into the future

Despite the ups and downs, I managed to survive.

It was a bumpy ride, but in the end, everything worked out.

When I turned sixteen, I relived my old trauma

Everything I had worked so hard to forget came rushing back to haunt me.

I thought that part of myself had vanished.

The scared little girl who feared the world was back.

Peace never finds its way into my chaotic life.

That was inevitable, though, at the age of eighteen.

I had finally decided that enough was enough and that I needed to heal and move on—only that is not
how things played out.

For months afterward, I struggled unsuccessfully to get rid of the memories of my past; they seemed
determined not to disappear despite all my pleas.

As if they were never even spoken of in the first place...

Turning nineteen, something snapped.

That scared little girl had to die for me to become the person I am now.

For so long, I had to carry this burden because it was a long-kept secret.

I never wished to have this pain, but without this pain, there would still be that scared little girl who buried her innocence at eleven years old.

She relived her trauma at sixteen years old.

At eighteen years old, I was just starting to feel the effects of my trauma, but after turning nineteen last year, I began to work on repairing the damage that had been done.

Now at twenty years old, I am finally thriving and healing from what used to be an aching hole in my heart.

"Even now as an adult, some days it feels like a weight is pushing down on me and there's nothing that can make it go away."

When Boys Become Men

By Nicholas Shisler

Every day, young boys from all walks of life make a transition into what is known as “manhood.” It is at this moment in their life when an event, milestone, or experience shapes them forever. For most boys, however, they do not get to choose when they enter “manhood” because it chooses them. In 2006, “manhood” chose me and the 44 other boys in my platoon as we boarded a white bus headed to March Airforce Base bound for Fallujah, Iraq. Nestled in the sun-kissed foothills just above the sleepy little surf town of San Clemente, California is where you will find Camp San Mateo. This is the destination that was stamped and smeared on my official orders like barbeque sauce on a napkin. San Mateo is home to the 5th Marine Regiment known as the “fighting fifth.” I was 21 years old and so fresh out of boot camp you could still smell the aftershave from my last haircut when I arrived at the doorsteps of the battalion. The creases on my uniform were ironed and pressed with precision, probably sharp enough to cut you from all the starch I sprayed on them. I was ready. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, I reported in for duty the next morning. San Mateo was officially my new home for the next four years.

Shortly after I arrived at the unit, our platoon was formed, and training began. One morning, we were brought into the briefing room and told that we would be heading overseas in a few months and needed to be ready. Preparing for deployment means preparing to put your life in a time capsule for seven months. The training and preparation were rigorous and demanding, but necessary for our survival in combat.

Training kicked off, and it was full steam ahead in preparation for our upcoming deployment. I was fortunate enough to have a few seasoned Marines in my platoon who recently returned home from overseas. The most experienced Marine was Sergeant Elisha Parker. Sergeant Parker was the epitome of what a Marine should be, and the countless hours of mentorship we received from him made him like a father figure to the Marines in our platoon. We signed a blank check for our lives to our country and took an oath to defend her at all costs, but we were still young boys with no idea of what “manhood” meant.

As we continued our preparation, the platoon was sent into the administrative building for deployment processing. We were all crowded in a small conference room that reeked of stale coffee and a microwaved breakfast someone cooked just minutes before we entered the room. Down the hallway, I could hear footsteps approaching. A few seconds later, I walked a “butter bar” Lieutenant. “Butter bar” is a snarky term used by Marines to describe the gold insignia worn on the lapel of a 2nd Lieutenant’s uniform, as well as their inexperience as a Marine officer.

“Do you all know why you are here?” asked the Lieutenant. A few mumbles were heard but nothing tangible to his question.

“You are all here to fill out wills, in the event that you die serving this great nation.” replied the Lieutenant, answering his own question.

The air in the small conference room became staler as the mood thickened from the Lieutenant’s

response. All sidebar conversations abruptly ended, and everything grew eerily quiet, so quiet, in fact, that you could hear a pin drop, which is a rare occurrence in a room full of Marines. The emotional roller coaster I rode that day was indescribable. Most people will never have to describe their own funeral arrangements to their parents at just 21 years old, but these are the sobering realities of war.

At this point, I felt accomplished. I had finally made it through the rigors of boot camp and was on to my first assignment. I was eager to put what I had learned into action. Like all jobs when you first start, you are the new guy and often given nicknames as a rite of passage. In the Marines, new guys are called "boots," a term referring to their clean boots and lack of experience. The term "boot" is typically worn like a scarlet letter until a Marine gets promoted or deployed. One thing was for sure: we were not wearing our scarlet letters for very much longer.

Fast forward a couple of months later, and we were just a few weeks away from leaving on deployment. During this time, we were able to go home on leave to visit family and friends. As we all returned to San Mateo, we made our final preparations to depart. This included gear inspections and accountability for the equipment we were taking with us. There is one thing that is symbolic to Marines that the general public does not know: the white buses that we ride on are commonly referred to as "Great Whites." We refer to them that way because of the manufacturer's name "Grady White," written on the side of them. These white buses are symbolic to Marines because they are same buses that take us to the recruit training depo known as "boot camp," which instantly brings back those memories. "Great Whites" are also the same buses that take us to the airfield when we deploy, so they have a special meaning to all Marines.

"05:00, I will see your smiling faces with all your gear ready to go tomorrow," said our Platoon Sergeant.

"Aye, Aye Staff Sergeant," the platoon replied.

I must have slept a total of three hours that night. My mind was playing a vicious game of tug-of-war between emotions of confidence and doubt that I was ready. In true Marine fashion, we were up before the rooster crows and the stock exchange, as I used to say. Walking to the staging area, I could see the other Marines and their gear. As I approached the platoon, I noticed they were all missing the smiles that our Platoon Sergeant ordered us to have.

"They must have forgotten all their smiles in their rooms, Staff Sergeant", I yelled as I approached the platoon.

"Shut the hell up, Shisler," a Marine shouted from the back of the formation.

"It is too early for your bullshit," replied a second Marine.

I always tried to find humor in situations that I felt needed it, and this was one.

There was a sobering mood cast over the staging area that day. I was surrounded by my family and friends like everyone else, but this time it felt different. Everyone knew that day they were sending us off to war, and the reality that some of us may not come home was starting to sink in. I could hear wives crying aloud while hugging their husbands for what might be the last time. I can still see the images of little children not being able to comprehend why daddy was leaving or why mommy was so sad. Despite

the mood, through the clouds of sadness emerged a shining sense of patriotism. It echoed through the halls of the barracks that we were standing in front of and seeped from the pores of every Marine present. However, what these young boys did not know was that they were about to embark on a journey that would change their lives forever and thrust them into “manhood” whether they were ready or not.

Standing there among our family and friends, we watched the “Great White” buses pull into the staging area. This was it; our time had come. Our nation asked us to answer the call, and that is what we were going to do. We gave our loved ones what might have been our last hugs and grabbed our gear. What was just a very intimate moment, quickly turned into controlled chaos as we prepared to board the buses. I stood in line with my weapon and gear on, dripping sweat, inching my way towards the doors at the front of the bus like cattle being wrangled up for branding.

With the morning sun growing hotter, the salt from my sweat was beginning to burn my eyes. Up ahead, I could see Sergeant Parker standing with a clip board checking names off a list, ensuring that we had everyone on the bus. I finally made my way to the doors at the front of the bus and stopped where Sergeant Parker was getting accountability. In that moment, Sergeant Parker said eight words to me that I will never forget. He looked at me with sweat running down his freshly shaved head and said, “You will never be the same after this.”

I looked at him, a man that I have idolized and tried to emulate every day, the man who wore spiderman shoes when he ran us for miles through the treacherous hills of Camp Pendleton, and the only words I could gather were,

“Aye, Aye Sergeant,” and I took my seat.

Those words could not have been any truer. Tragically, we lost Sergeant Parker along with many other great Marines on that deployment, but those eight words that he said to me before we left that day still echo in my thoughts every time I think about Sergeant Parker and that deployment. On that day, “manhood” chose me, as if it knew the sacrifices that were to come in the days ahead. So, the next time you are driving down the road and see a “Great White” bus full of Marines, those boys might be going somewhere to become men.

“I always tried to find humor in situations that I felt needed it, and this was one.”

Trampled in the Mud

By Zachary Harbison

Before his throat was torn out by an elvish sword, the lieutenant sealed the letter with wax and rushed out of his tent to give it to the courier before sundown. After exchanging pleasantries with the courier, the lieutenant went to marshal his men for the night raid, and they rode into the growing dusk towards the Saathi emplacements.

The courier rode the opposite direction towards Venex, stopping frequently to collect mail from the thousands of units marching northward: Imperial infantry battalions, noble auxiliaries levied from feudal houses, logistic wagon trains, and even two Guardsmen, which the courier gave a wide berth and a high salute to. The lieutenant's letter grew crumpled under the weight of military correspondence, Imperial mandates to His Excellency Baron So-and-So of House Who-Cares to muster enough men at arms to support the war effort, and hundreds of letters from men of all ranks to their womenfolk and children back home. The courier liked to say, especially in taverns with pretty serving girls, that the hopes and dreams of the Moranian Empire were in his saddlebags.

Far to the south, in a nondescript township on the banks of the Ur River, a young woman stood at the gate of her family's farm, just as she did every night since he left. Strands of her red hair danced across her face as the wind blew gently over the fields, and her hands rested on her stomach, which had begun to swell ever so slightly: the result of a passionate night in the loft of the barn during his visit after he graduated the Academy.

In Venex, the courier was escorted into the East Command and given ciphered communications to be delivered to the front immediately. Impressed by the urgency of the matter, the courier rode hard back in the direction he came from.

To the north, in a trench carved by magic, an elvish spellsword prepared his wargear. After ensuring his reagents were properly seated in their pouches, he donned his armor and belted his weapon. Serf-caste bowed their heads respectfully as he walked by, and his own battleserfs stood to attention as he entered their bivouac.

Having entered contested territory, the courier slowed his horse and loosened his sword from its scabbard.

The spellsword and his battleserfs lay behind the top of the moor as they watched the lone rider beneath them. The spellsword drummed his fingers against the ground and considered his options: a single rider wasn't worth a spell, but the rider would bolt before the serfs got close, and if those saddlebags contained intelligence...

Almost unconsciously, the spellsword's hand reached into a pouch on his thigh and retrieved a small black crystal.

The courier had just realized that the crickets had gone silent when inky black tendrils spat

out of the ground and began to eat his horse. The courier leapt from his saddle and winced as one of the entropic tentacles lashed against his leg. He landed awkwardly but pulled his sword free, grimly determined to kill as many of the bastards as possible before they could do him. Behind the courier, the horse was trying to stand on legs that had succumbed to necrosis, and the saddlebags spilled open as the horse fell, letters trailing into the dirt.

The spellsword picked through the mess of papers in the road while his battleserfs dragged the bodies into a ditch. The spellsword stood triumphantly as he broke the Imperial seal on the urgent correspondence. He scanned the cipher briefly, and a smile crept across his face. He called out to his battleserfs, and they went back to their trench with their prize as the rain began to fall.

On a lonely road in the middle of a warzone, a letter lay open in the mud:

"Dearest Maggie,

I am overjoyed at your unexpected news and relieved your family understands. I will, of course, marry you properly when I return. The raiders and I are taking good care of each other and will soon kick these knife-ears out! I hope you don't mind, but I did take the liberty of telling the raiders about you, and I expect many of them will attend our wedding. They are good people, and I look forward to introducing you to them in happier days.

Love, Alphonse"

Another hope and dream trampled in the mud.

"The spellsword stood triumphantly as he broke the Imperial seal on the urgent correspondence."

Dear Mr. Douglass

By Haley Morrow

Dear Mr. Douglass,

To analyze your history
To pick apart your work
 under scrutinizing gaze
 is inherent disrespect

To see it through the lenses
 of stylistic choices
 metaphors and the like
 is inherent disrespect

To analyze your narrative
 with indifference
 as if it were mere fiction
 and not the story
 of a real man
 a human being
 is inherent disrespect

To remove you
 from your art
 from your life
 from your story
 is inherent disrespect

To speak
 on your part
 on your life
 on your story
 is inherent disrespect

*"To remove you from your art, from your life,
from your story, is inherent disrespect."*

Dear Mr. Douglass,
In doing such
I deprive you of
the foundational and fundamental respects
that comprise
the humanity
you deserve
The humanity you reached for
The humanity you fought for
The humanity you were owed all along

Dear Mr. Douglass,
If you could only know
the brilliance
your journey
your freedom
your story
has brought to others

Dear Mr. Douglass,
Through your battle
Through your search
Through your pain
you have empowered a world
you have promoted a freedom at the tips of our fingers
a—dare I say it—far underappreciated freedom

Dear Mr. Douglass,
you read
you wrote
you were liberated

Dear Mr. Douglass,
Though we fought very different battles
And I will never know you
I am forever grateful

Dear Mr. Douglass,
Thank you.

Signed,
A reader and writer who has found freedom



“A Speck of Purple”

By Rachel M. Cordero

dandelion daydreams

By Haley Morrow

I sit down at the table
Honey sunbeams
 soak me in their warmth
I sip at my tea
Etch
 at the puzzle
 sitting in front of me

Next on the agenda
 is picking at poetry
 until the pages bleed
 dandelions and pretty colors

Something settles across from me
Feigned familiarity
 at meeting eyes
 that were once mine

Trembling hands
 pick at the tablecloth
Absentmindedly alluding
 to the entropy
 her skull encompasses

To deny her a place
 in my home
 would be evil

She built this place
 the milky-yellow walls,
 brought to life by the sunlight
 couldn't stand without her

Ghosts of tears fall
I find myself asking
"how can I fix it?"
She smiles
"there's nothing else to do"

"To deny her a place in my home would be evil"

Content Warning:

The following piece of fiction explores the themes of assault, stalking, and violence, which some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

Dating 101

By Alexis Reece

The elderly woman let out small whimpers of discomfort every few seconds as Gillian meticulously stuck the IV catheter in the biggest vein in her arm. Gillian whispered comforts to her.

"You have done this so many times, I'm surprised you aren't more used to it," Gillian joked as she injected the dobutamine through the IV. She took note of the wrinkles in the elderly woman's arms and even more at the ones on her face before she looked up at the woman with a smile. Gillian hoped to never look like the women in her old age.

"You would think I would be," the elderly patient laughed in response.

Gillian finished her shift a few hours later. She left the pristine, brand-new nursing home. Gillian started her walk to the bus stop. The bus came after only ten or so minutes. She got on and took her seat five rows back. The bus ride felt longer than normal as she thought of what the rest of her night would look like. The bus got to her stop, and as she stood to get off, a man bumped into her while walking behind her. She turned to see who it was; she didn't know him, but she had seen him every day since she started her job. It had been nearly two years: same days, same time, every time. The man quickly apologized for bumping into her as he continued to get off the bus.

"He's cute," she thought while getting off the bus, "and polite." Gillian thought about him as she walked away. On her way home she stopped at a local coffee shop. It was quiet and simple, only a few blocks away from her apartment. She walked up to the counter and ordered a vanilla bean coffee; she turned around and started to walk away when she stopped. She saw him, the man from the bus. She decided then that there would be no better time to ask him the question she had thought about the entire walk home.

"Hey! I'm Gillian," she announced as she walked up to him.

"Hey, I'm Laurence. Sorry about bumping into you earlier," the man responded.

"Oh, don't worry about that. It's nice to meet you," she said.

"You as well," Laurence responded, quicker than Gillian would have liked.

"I hope you don't mind me being blunt, but could I get your number?" asked Gillian.

"Uh, yeah," he paused, "Yeah, for sure." He finished more certain than his first reaction. The two exchanged numbers and promised to see each other again before parting. Once home, Gillian got ready for the night, removing her makeup and taking a shower. She decided to use an expensive moisturizer that night; it made her feel like she was preventing the aging she saw every day working with those who had lost the youthful beauty that they once had. She went to sleep and woke the next morning feeling fresher than the day before. She decided to text Laurence, asking him if he would want to go out on a date that night for dinner. He responded quickly; he agreed that seven would work perfectly. Elated, she finished getting ready for work. While walking out the door, she noticed that her door mat

was out of place, it was almost halfway down the hall. Confused, she fixed it and made her way to work. Her workday at the geriatric center was mundane. Although helping those who no longer can help themselves is rewarding for Gillian, she cannot help but be bored, for she cannot help but feel what she is doing is irrelevant to her future. She feels it keeps her from seeing her future because all she can envision is what her life will be worth in her aged body; it is a daunting fear she cannot escape.

She finished up with her last task before going to the bus stop. The bus stopped and she got on, as she did every day. The only thing missing was him. Laurence wasn't on the bus; for the first time in close to two years, he was not present. Gillian let out a slight breath of disappointment that she would miss the chance to gawk at him, maybe even talk to him. She was curious as to why he wasn't there but knew she wouldn't ask out of fear of seeming rude. She finally got home feeling rather melancholy. Then she remembered the date she had planned. She started to get ready. She put on a light amount of makeup, used an expensive perfume that she only got out for special occasions, and put on a nice but casual outfit. She left her apartment and made her way to the restaurant. The name of it was something Gillian couldn't decipher.

"Maybe German?" she thought as she looked at it. Laurence had decided where they would go and had only sent Gillian the address. She examined the restaurant from the outside. It wasn't anything luxurious, but it was nice. She walked in. It was tastefully decorated with different paintings and abstract artworks. It had a calm and quiet atmosphere that meant guests could overhear the light conversations of those around them and the soft clanking of utensils. Gillian told the hostesses that she was meeting someone, and the hostess directed her to a table where Gillian was greeted with one of the brightest smiles she had seen in a long time.

"Hey, Gillian!" Laurence said confidently in greeting.

"Hey," Gillian responded much more meekly than her dinner partner. She took her seat across from him and put in an order for water. Once the waitress had walked away, they spoke again. Laurence had a joyful, affectionate smile plastered across his face. Gillian attempted to stifle a chuckle at the sight.

"What?" Laurence questioned, noticing her attempt.

"Nothing, nothing." Gillian said with a laugh.

Laurence, although suspicious, decided to move on from the topic, so he awkwardly asked, even though it seemed like more of a statement than a question, "How was your day?"

"It was decent. Same as any other day. Yours?" Gillian replied.

"That's good. Mine has been good, especially now." There was a pause as both parties thought of what to say next. The tension between the two was obvious. Gillian wanted to see what he would say before she made any moves.

"Do you believe in aliens?" Laurence asked suddenly. Gillian burst into laughter; Laurence gave way for a slight smile but refused to laugh.

"I'm sorry for laughing." She paused to breathe and control her laughter, "I just was not expecting you to say that."

"Well, I think it is an incredibly serious question," he said with a smile.

"Well, I," she started with emphasis. "I think anything is possible, but I have never seen an alien, so I can't say I believe or that I don't," Gillian finished. Laurence leaned forward in his chair a little. Gillian wondered if he was expecting a genuine response or not.

"I bet they are real."

"Maybe if you get abducted, they will let you come back to tell the story," Gillian joked teasingly. They continued the back-and-forth banter for a while, switching topics now and again. The waitress came back and took their orders. They talked and talked for only an hour, but to Gillian, it felt like several. Despite the awkward start, she felt the date was going incredibly well. The topic of work came up and Laurence seemed much more closed off; he didn't give her a direct answer. Gillian, feeling the tension, decided to talk about her work. She talked about her patients, and what she did for them, and even told a few of the stories she had gathered over the years.

"Cleaning up after them is the worst part," she said while laughing.

"There's no way I could ever do that, way too gross," Laurence responded.

"I think that's the one part of my job I will never get used to."

"You have done it so many times, I'm surprised you aren't more used to it," Laurence said before chuckling.

"You would think I would be," she said with a smile. They continue their conversation. As they finish their meal, the two realize just how much time has passed. The restaurant is supposed to close in a few minutes. They decide to finish up. They go to say their goodbyes when Gillian invites him over to her apartment the next day. Laurence accepts, and they set a time before parting ways. Gillian makes her way home thinking of the day to come. The following day Gillian doesn't have work, so she spends much of her day lazing around her apartment. Nothing of real interest takes place during the day. Once the sun had set and the sky was a dark shade of blue, Gillian messaged Laurence her address and, much quicker than she thought, he was there only a few minutes after she sent the address. Gillian welcomed him in.

"You got here fast," she said with a smile.

"Oh yeah, I hadn't noticed," he responded. Gillian noticed how much more on edge he was tonight than the previous one. She tried her best to ignore it, but she could not shake the feeling that something was not right with him. They talked about their day and got comfortable quickly; they took a seat on the couch placed in the center of the living room. Gillian started browsing for a movie for them to watch.

"I am going to use the bathroom; I'll be just a minute," Laurence told her as he stood up before turning down the hallway to use the bathroom.

How does he know where it's at? Gillian wondered for a second, but only a second. Trying to clear the thought from her head, she continued looking for a movie, but she could not help thinking of the oddity of it all: the quickness of his arrival, him knowing where things were without ever being told, him always being near her. She thought back to her door mat being out of place. The thoughts started to consume her. She finally looked down and noticed his phone was on the couch. Out of curiosity and suspicion, she picked up the phone. It was unlocked. She went into his camera roll and started to

scroll. She stopped. She dropped the phone back on the couch in horror, not bothering to close out the hundreds of pictures of her that were on screen. She got up from the couch and almost ran down the hallway. She turned to the bathroom. It was empty; the door was wide open. She then turned to the right and took a step, entering her bedroom, and took a step in. Before she could take any action, Laurence lunged from the obscure shadow of the bedroom door and grabbed her by the hair, throwing her to the ground. She cried out in pain before wrenching herself away from him.

She got up and ran as fast as she could to the kitchen. She ripped open a drawer and pulled out the biggest knife she saw. She then ran to the front door trying to open it, but it was locked. Laurence came behind her and grabbed her again. This time he started dragging her to the sliding glass door, which opened onto the balcony. Gillian was shouting now, begging him to let her go. When he did not respond, she moved her hand that held the knife up as swiftly as she could and lacerated his calf. He yelled out in pain before kicking Gillian in the head. The action caused her to drop the knife, but she got up, opened the glass door, and ran onto the balcony.

She looked back at Laurence once she was outside and watched as he picked the knife up and looked at her with nothing but pure evil in his eyes. She had cornered herself and had nowhere to run. Laurence charged at her again. Gillian, tired and seeing not much escape, did not do much to prevent the knife from plunging deep into her gut. She screamed out in pain as Laurence whispered sympathies to her while the knife was still inside her. Something about the way he taunted her lit a fire in her. While he was distracted comforting her, she ripped the knife out of her body and his hand. She impaled his arm with it, and he let out a cry of pain. She then mustered all the strength she had left in her to ram into him, sending him off the balcony in one quick movement. She did not see his body land, but she heard the low yell as he fell and the thud of his body hitting the hard concrete four stories below. She listened as a woman on the street let out a shrill scream. Gillian assumed it was because she had just watched a body fall off a building. Gillian was now weak and bleeding from the lethal wound she had sustained from the battle she had just fought against a man she thought would be a start to, at the very least, a decent friendship. She collapsed onto the floor. She could no longer move.

Her vision was blurred, and she could only hear the faint sound of cars passing below. Then she heard them: sirens. She smiled as she thought the EMTs might find her in time before succumbing to her injuries. Then the thought of how she would never be able to grow old and grey with an abundance of wrinkles across every inch of her skin consumed her. Tears were rolling down her face. She let the thought carry her away as she closed her eyes, inhaled what life she had left, and exhaled into the night.

"She had cornered herself and had nowhere to run."

Content Warning:

The following poem explores the themes of military combat and violence, which some readers may find potentially disturbing or distressing.

But There She Stood Tempting Fate

By Rachel M. Cordero

Death lingered in the air as the battlefield raged on.
Fate would not let up.
Only the strong shall survive
But there she stood
Brown hair, dark eyes filled with regret, and pale skin covered in scars

Who was she to tempt Fate but then again weren't we all
Weren't we all trying to define the infinities
Only to prolog our inescapable deaths
I judge not, for I am only the ghost of all my past lives.
Tempted fate and I did so when my soul was younger in years.
Now I drifted through the world, which I could not save.
And there she stood
Brown hair, dark eyes filled with regret, and pale skin covered in scars

A fog of soundless screams rose across the valley.
Blades of blood clashed against bone and flesh.
In the murky darkness, a curtain of sleep fell upon the soldiers.
There was nothing but an eerie noise as fragments of a lost reality came together.
My reality, the reality I ended, was the story of a lost time, and not even the stars knew my tale.
Nevertheless, this was not my story to tell, it was never my story, to begin with...
For there she stood
Brown hair, dark eyes filled with regret, and pale skin covered in scars

*"Who was she to tempt Fate but then again
weren't we all"*



“Cosmo”

By Kirstyn Brownley

Lucky Break

By Zachary Harbison

Nabarniz couldn't believe his luck. When he found the Case in the alley next to three dead goons, he immediately knew what it was and grabbed it without a second thought. You don't survive hustling on Station C-13 by second guessing yourself after all. After cuffing it to his arm and asking a few pointed questions in the Dark Star, he got the channel handle for the "rightful owner" of the thing, who turned out to be quite reasonable –and generous to boot. They arranged the handoff in one of Nabarniz's favorite spots, and each gave the proper assurances for the other's security before cutting the link.

As Nabarniz made his way through the grimy steel corridors and the crowded streets of C-13, he started to dream of the possibilities. He had highballed at first, and while the price did get haggled down (it would have been suspicious if it hadn't), he was still getting more out of this deal than he had anticipated. A lot more. He paused under the overhang of a Fantasy Android shop and looked around at the main thoroughfare. Artificial rain came down in sheets seeded from the drones above, and behind the water was the perpetual night of space and the rest of the asteroid belt. A troupe of miners walked by him laughing and cursing, and Nabarniz almost jumped when he felt someone touch his shoulder. He turned around quickly and saw the someone was actually something; one of the androids had come out of the shop and was staring at him quizzically. "You want a go baby? We're on sale today."

Nabarniz stared at the glassy eyes of the android and replied, "No, thanks. I prefer the real thing."

Nabarniz quickly moved away and continued making his way to the starport where he agreed to make the handoff. As Nabarniz walked, he began to pick up the pace and reflected that he had never found C-13 to be as disgusting as he had today. He had never had the luxury of considering an alternative, and now that he had this opportunity, he felt thoroughly repulsed by the trajectory of his life. What was he really doing on this station anyways? He had grown up in a corporate sponsored foster home-school but ran away as soon as the truancy statutes didn't apply to him. Since then, it was just...what? Survival? A shitty apartment and grift after grift. Running synthcoke for street gangs and conning miners. There was a whole solar system out there supposedly, but when Nabarniz thought about it, he was disturbed to realize that neither he nor anyone he knew had ever left C-13.

He arrived at the starport and found the Guy. The Guy shook his hand and handed him another case, this one filled with credit chips. Nabarniz validated the chips and uncuffed the Case from his arm. The Guy took it, checked it, and thanked Nabarniz on behalf of the Organization for returning their lost property. As they shook hands the Guy asked him, "Thinking of heading off station? Where ya tryna go?"

Nabarniz paused for a second. "Earth, I think."

The Guy smiled and said, "Good choice brotherman. When you land there, buy a real steak from a steakhouse. Shit will blow your mind."

"As Nabarniz made his way through the grimy steel corridors and the crowded streets of C-13, he started to dream of the possibilities."

Knight Lies, Hard Truths

By Olivia Voorhees

As a mysterious knight traversed through the dangerous lands outside of Kith, the forest buzzed with alertness at the outsider's audacity. George, with his sword and satchel, shielded his eyes from the large branches of a tree that jutted out onto the path as he walked. The ground that crunched beneath his feet was worn, but not frequently traveled. His brown eyes flicked from place to place, only rarely pausing to inspect an inch of movement. Birds chirped and sang in the distance. The man knew that his journey was dangerous—fairies, goblins, and satyrs were known to dwell deep within the forest and to hunt when given the opportunity. Here, comfort couldn't be afforded, despite the lush mosses, the gorgeous blue waters, and the pale sunlight that peaked through the leaves of tall standing trees.

The tattered path before him widened and led to a shining meadow with a small creek running along its edge. An abundant number of vibrant flowers covered the landscape, glowing in brilliant hues of purple and pink, and they moved softly with the breeze. A large tree sat comfortably in the distance, with sturdy branches the width of George's leg, and hummed a low melody of a lullaby that the knight faintly remembered from his childhood. His steps came to a stop, and he found himself mesmerized as he gazed toward the sun that set behind the tree line. Moments like these were rare—the wind rustled in his blond hair, and he could smell the sweet scent of afternoon on his skin. His mouth felt drier than it had before, the heels of his feet suddenly ached, and his shoulders were sore.

George paused before he took a daunting step into the meadow and gave in to his mindless temptation. He knew that soon, his canteen would be full of creek waters that glistened, his body would no longer ache after proper rest, and he would have a better chance to fulfill his tasks when his mind was clear. The song that floated freely from the tree in the meadow grew louder in his ears as the plants reacted to his presence—their leaves and petals reached toward his legs and left a sparkling residue on the bottom of his boots.

When George reached the tree, he put his satchel and canteen safely within the thick branches and leaves above his head. The tree accepted his belongings willingly and hid them from view. He sighed and sat down on the meadow floor, putting his sword at his side as his back rested against the tree's sturdy exterior. He soon started to rest, and his thoughts fuzzed. As his breath slowed, George's body became heavy. When he tried to get up, he fell back down in defeat. In a last attempt to resist, he closed his eyes, and let the magic and music of the forest float freely over his body and into his mind.

Under the safety of the tree with his body coated in dim moonlight, George dreamt. He woke as the sun rose and felt a gentle hand that trailed his face, which started from the tips of his short hair and ended at the edge of his chin. For a moment, he relished the comfort and warmth he felt before his eyelids fluttered open.

The trailing warmth was gone.

"Hi," a feminine voice said to him softly. As his vision cleared, he saw a beautiful fairy who sat in front of him with her legs crossed. Her nimble fingers were wrapped around his canteen, and the fairy took a sip of water from it.

His sword, once safely by his side, was gone.

The man scrambled backward against the tree and reached for the knife that had been tucked safely into his boot. The fairy dropped his canteen and grabbed his weapon before George's hand ever touched the handle. The canteen tumbled on the flowers, the water within spilling out onto the ground. With a look of pure excitement and curiosity in her foxlike features, the white-haired fairy inspected the knife and tucked it into the pocket of her dress.

George held up his calloused hands defensively, his brown eyes wide and frightened. "My name is George," he sputtered. "I live in Kith, I have—"

The fairy laughed suddenly and looked at George in confusion. "I'm not going to hurt you," she assured him as she shook her head. As she spoke, a large pair of blue wings that rested on her back flapped in a jovial manner.

George stared at her, his heart thumping wildly against his chest. He recalled all his training from the past, yet no one had ever prepared him for an encounter like this. His muscles were tense, and he felt his hands start to shake.

She rolled her yellow eyes. "I'm Alees."

The knight continued to stare. His hands were beginning to perspire, and he ran his palms down the cloth of his pants. He tried to relax and lifted his chin up to appear less fearful. George knew little about fairies, but he did know that if Alees was a threat, she would take advantage of his fear at any given moment. The fairy, despite her ethereal aura, seemed capable of decimating men like him. He was sure it exhilarated her, and it vexed him greatly.

"Are you a hunter?" Alees inquired, breaking the silence. She tucked a lock of curly hair behind her pointed ear and leaned in toward the knight with interest.

"No... I—I cook," he lied. George wanted to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat, and he shifted his body further away from Alees. "I work in the castle," George finished with a gulp.

Alees raised an eyebrow. "For Queen Siobhan, no?"

The knight nodded his head vigorously in response. "Of course."

The fairy nodded slowly in consideration. "And what is the Queen's cook doing in these forests so early in the morning?"

"Prince Reginald wandered away from the castle yesterday morning," George answered truthfully. The morning before, a rough faced messenger mounted on a horse had come to George with the news, a formal announcement from the Queen clutched in his hand. "I was tasked with finding him."

"That is no job for a cook," Alees responded with a small smile, revealing her sharp canines. The fairy flipped her fanciful hair femininely. "Certainly not for a cook that wields a sword and keeps a knife in his boot."

He sucked in a breath shakily. "Will you help me?"

"No," the fairy said simply. She reached toward him and poked his nose with the tip of her long fingernail. George scrunched his nose. "You," she emphasized, "are a liar."

With a sudden flash of blinding light, Alees was gone. George blinked, his head suddenly thrumming with pain. He held his hand against his forehead—his skin was warm to the touch and had left sweat on his fingertips. His sword laid back at his side, and he felt the weight of his knife in his boot. For a moment, George paused to ask himself if anything he had just experienced was real.

The knight pushed himself up from the ground and walked toward the creek with shaking legs. George kneeled once he reached the edge of the creek and dunked his head in with a splash to cool his fever. The instant relief that he felt from the beautiful flowing waters nearly brought tears to his eyes. He surfaced for air and started to gather the water in his hands to drink it by the handful. The water was cool in his mouth and tasted like sweet apples that were freshly picked. When he was finished drinking, the blond-haired man laid back on the flowers and looked up toward the blue sky.

The clouds, wispy and white, suddenly twisted, turned, and changed shape—they began to depict a story and showed George a small boy walking through an open field. He would know the boy anywhere. His face had been known throughout the kingdom since the day of his birth. It was Prince Reginald, who was scared, alone, and defenseless.

"Do you recognize him?" a voice from the sky asked. George could not see who the voice belonged to.

"Prince Reginald," George croaked. He tried to reach toward the sky, but the flowers gripped his body tightly and held him in place. The sweet scent of their pollen floated in the air and filled his nose.

In the story that the sky displayed, Prince Reginald began to seize, and he scratched his throat as he tried to breathe. George screamed and writhed against the flowers that held him.

"Are you afraid?" the voice asked with a sardonic laugh. "You know exactly what you have done."

George gasped for air. "I don't understand," he cried. "Where is the prince?"

"Don't you remember?"

The clouds transformed into his memories. It showed the messenger who had appeared at the knight's door the morning before, holding a crumpled piece of parchment from the Queen that announced the disappearance of Prince Reginald. George watched as the messenger begged on his knees for the knight above him to venture after the price and complete his wish for a large sum. The messenger promised riches, medals, awards, and a higher rank for the blond-haired man. George, tempted by the money and circumstance, shook his hand and took a drawing of Prince Reginald with him in this pocket.

"What did he ask of you, George?"

"Is that the truth?"

"Yes," he shouted. "Of course, it is, I—"

"But that is not all. Did you accept the messenger's offer to ensure that Prince Reginald stayed in the forest and did not return to Kith?"

"My loyalty is to Kith," the knight screamed at the sky. "I would never hurt the prince, I would never—"

"Did you plan the demise of the prince for the promise of wealth and rank?"

The flowers released him. George sat up forcefully and caught his breath. A sudden realization hit his mind like a hammer and fear shot through his body—the forest knew.

"You are no knight," a familiar voice said from beside him. "You are a murderer."

A hand with long fingernails and an air of grace reached out and pulled George into the creek. The pain that consumed him was unbearable—his lungs ached, his muscles seized, and he could feel thousands of needles poking at his body, creating wounds that bubbled and bled. When he ran out of air, the knight struggled to swim back to the surface and swallowed the burning creek water that he had once found healing.

He regretted all that he had done with a sudden passion. The knight wished to return to the safety of Kith and to visit his mother with the smell of her cooking thick in the air of her home. He no longer wanted the wealth and rank that the messenger had promised him. He wanted to be happy. The lullaby that the tree in the meadow had once sung for him played softly in his ear.

George gave in, and the darkness consumed him.

"The clouds, wispy and white, suddenly twisted, turned, and changed shape—they began to depict a story and showed George a small boy walking through an open field. He would know the boy anywhere."

Contributors

Joslyn Bakion

Joslyn Bakion is a dual enrolled student at Jacksonville High school and not originally from North Carolina, but she considers it to be her home and a critical source of her inspiration.

Rachel Brewer

Rachel Brewer is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College transferring to East Carolina University in the Fall of 2023 to pursue K-12 Art Education. Some of her favorite things to do in her free time are thrifting and spending time with friends and family.

Kirstyn Brownley

Kirstyn Brownley's hometown is Jacksonville, North Carolina. She is 17 years old and a military child to an amazing father. She would like to be a Sports Physical Therapist.

Rachel M. Cordero

Poetry has been an outlet for Rachel M. Cordero to truly express herself and not feel judgement from her own words. Her words have a mind of their own and are constantly evolving. Her poems hold dark meanings and show a vulnerable side of her that most don't get to see. Her pictorial pieces hold a special place in her heart, for it is the little things that are always overlooked.

Noah Curran

Noah Curran attends Onslow Early College High School. He occasionally draws and writes as a side hobby. He tends to write when he has "bursts" of inspiration since he's way too much of a perfectionist (which tends to be an obstacle). As for drawing, he likes to practice figure drawing.

Zachary Harbison

Zachary Harbison is pursuing an MD-PhD and intends to concentrate on genetics and regenerative medicine. For the undergraduate portion of his academic career, he is double majoring in Biology and Mathematics. Outside of formal academia, he studies philosophy, music, and martial arts. He is also an avid reader and athlete.

Myron Kimble

Myron Kimble is a Fine Art's student at Coastal Carolina Community College. His desired profession is comic illustrator. His pieces are oil paintings of two people he admired from film and music: Chadwick Boseman and Takeoff. The first was completed using an underpainting and was a 2-day process. The second one was completed alla-prima in a 1-day sitting.

Hazel McClendon

Hazel McClendon is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

Haley Morrow

Haley Morrow is an Early College student who plans to study Psychology when she transfers to ECU. She wrote this poem initially as an assignment, though the themes of being liberated through literacy and humanization really hit home with her. As a tutor, she is a huge advocate for literacy and accessibility.

Casey Murphy

Casey Murphy is a husband, a father, and a retired Explosive Ordnance Disposal Marine. He served for almost fifteen years, and his goal now is to earn his BSW and eventually become a social worker in North Carolina. He loves to write his wife a short story every year for their anniversary, and this is the latest chapter.

Julie Pabon

Julie Pabon is a student at Coastal Carolina Community College.

Alexis Reece

Alexis Reece is currently enrolled at Dixon High School and in several Coastal Carolina Community College classes. She has a passion for writing but has never had much opportunity to share it, and she is grateful to have a chance to.

Nicholas Shisler

Nicholas Shisler was born and raised in Maui, HI and now lives in Jacksonville, NC with his wife and their two amazing children.

Olivia Voorhees

Olivia Voorhees is a junior at Dixon High School and is also taking classes at Coastal Carolina Community College. She plans to graduate high school with an Associate of Arts degree and to get a Bachelor's Degree in Education from UNC Chapel Hill.

Crystal Whaley

Crystal Sky Whaley is 25 years old. She lives and breathes here in North Carolina with her husband and dog. She currently attends CCCC. She loves food, music, art, animals, and gardening. Her artistic achievements are few and far between. The poems presented are her first; she hopes you enjoy them.

New River Anthology

Coastal's Student Literary Magazine



COASTAL CAROLINA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

SUBMISSIONS FOR 2024

Submission period ends March 31, 2024.

Submissions made after end date will be considered for the 2025 volume.



<https://www.coastalcarolina.edu/campus-life/student-showcase/>

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Poetry — up to 5 poems

Fiction/Nonfiction — up to 5 pieces of fiction or nonfiction, up to 15 pages per submission

Artwork — up to 5 scanned files of artwork or photographs

newriveranthology@coastalcarolina.edu

If you have any questions or concerns about submissions, please contact:

Holly Adcock (CA119, (910) 938-6134, adcockh@coastalcarolina.edu)

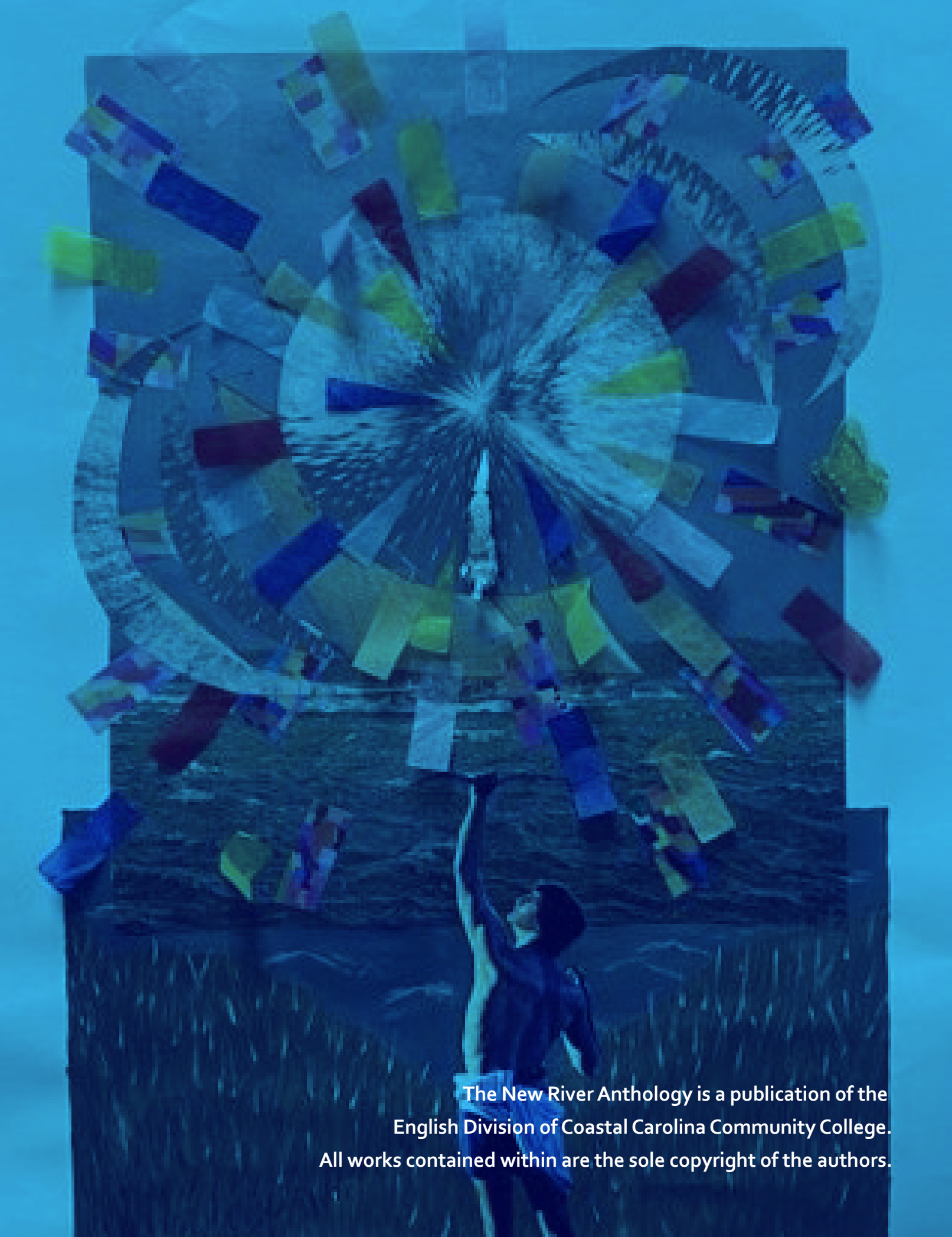
Breanna Lowe (CA119, (910) 938-6173, loweb@coastalcarolina.edu)

The New River Anthology

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All work to be judged by the *New River Anthology* Faculty and Student Editors.

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