



Weevil Pond 2022

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Weevil Pond is the annual publication of the English program at the University of Arkansas at Monticello. Our mission is to highlight the creativity of the UAM community. This volume features work from current UAM students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

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Fission - Hannah Hutson

Fission is the act that occurs in chemistry when a neutron slams into a larger atom, forcing it to excite and split into two smaller atoms. Our love was like that.

I'm no longer settling for
a half-life love
'cuz baby we were radioactive.

The chemistry in our souls: spontaneous,
exploding with laughter, fused
our lonely atoms together.

The fallout was falling
in love and you were my
disaster.

But when the smoke cleared,
the fission of you leaving
left us both in decay.

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Mantis Caress
Candace Cox



Paris in July - Terry Held

I had just walked from the Musee Rodin
and was in a pensive mood, contemplating
art and the summer's sun and how I
might afford a move to Paris when I
came upon Poilane's Bakery.

The window was filled with treasured
pastries, some that glistened like citrine
and some that were burnished bronze
from the wood fired oven, their subtle,
matte glow acting as a siren of the deep.

The famed Pain Poilane stood aloft on
the shelves towering over the proceedings,
looking down like a crowned king. But the
Pain Poilane like King Louis is destined to be
guillotined, as is the custom of the bakery.

People filtered in and out, all walking in the
French manner of head held high, brown bags
a crinkling, cradled like some precious child,
their faces lit in a fashionable affect that
stated the obvious, *C'est a moi, J'ai faim!*

I took a seat outside the door to marvel some
more and after a few cloudy and yellow hued
Pastis, four parts water, my head began to
nod in the rhythm of the crowd. Proving that
a trip to Poilane can be deliciously intoxicating.

Sounds at the Beach - Heather Watson

The roaring water getting closer,

Swishhhh.

I listen to the waves crash.

The water booms with force.

The pounding surf meets the sand.

The salt sizzles as it filters

Giving off the hissing sound-

From the water lapping the shore.

High above the seagulls' squawk,

Their shrieks are not alarming-

Behind in the distance the birds singing.

They are chirping a beautiful tune.

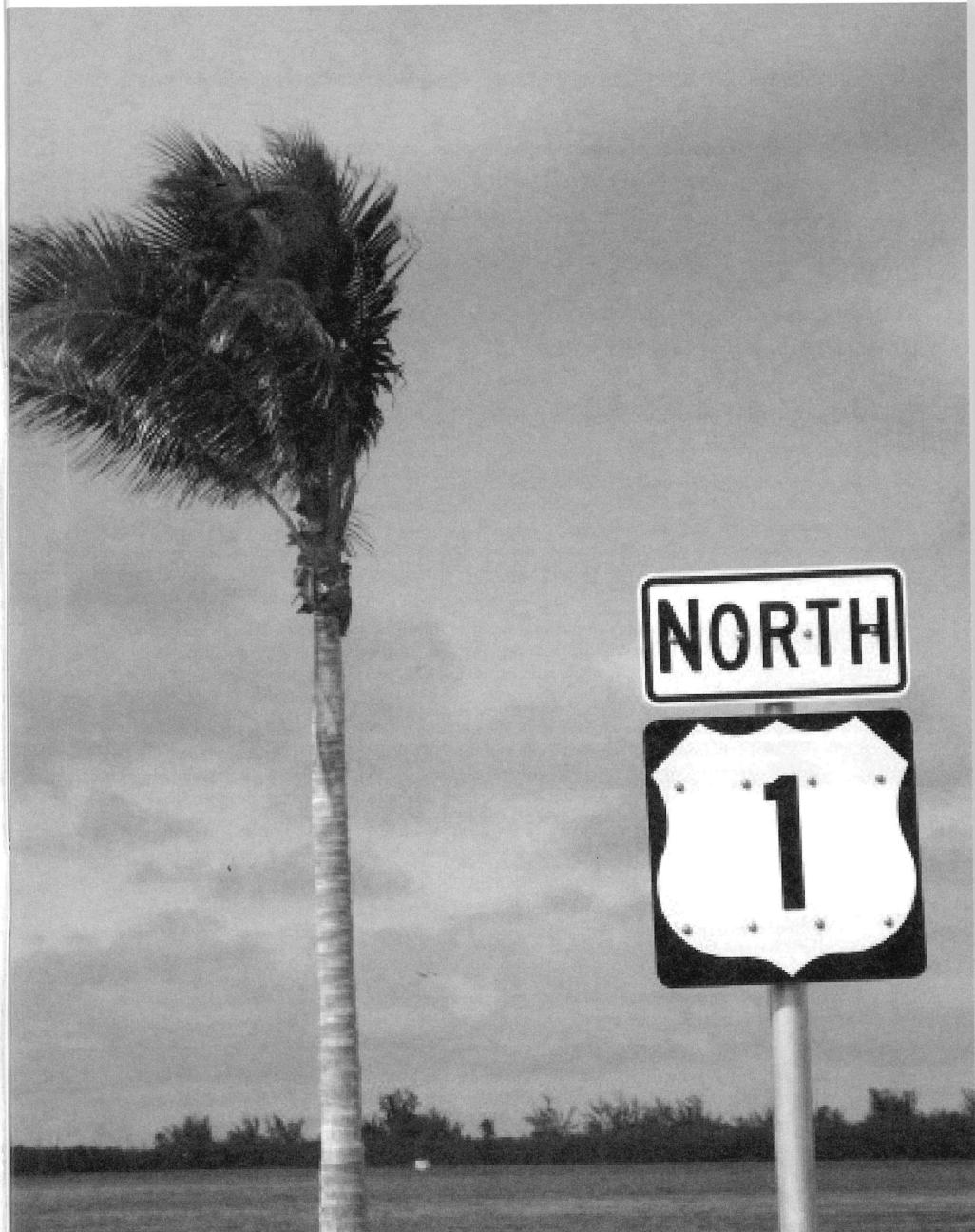
The wind groans with every crash,

Snarling against the forceful thrust.

Off the shore, I can hear the wind howling through the sails

Adding to the symphony of peace.

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The First Bold Step
Carol Strong



There are Always Two Sides to Every Story - Hannah Hutson

No one sings about being the one who ends the relationship.

Taylor Swift love songs mourn about love red gone lost—
how they broke her heart— leaving at the first blow of the wind,

but what of us who broke

it off to save ourselves?

Who tried to weather the storms?

I gave you my heart and you desired to steal my soul.

I settled slowly like winter frost in the south; you
always wanted me to bend like crops under hurricane winds.

You never wanted me

after we got engaged.

I had to bend to your job,
your role for me, your hand—
even when I was asleep.

So go, sing your songs, gain their approval,
showboat your heartbreak-pain like rainbow after the rain,
to those who don't know the truth.

I broke it off for my crop soul to survive.

My winter wheat heart survived the frost—

I survived you.

Just Dessert - Blake Anglin

"Who wants dessert?" Irene asked.

"Got more than enough room for dessert don't we, you barely served anything," Tom sneered.

"You better have made the chocolate cake I asked for," Kip added.

"Of course I did, sweetheart," Irene said.

"I'll have some, everything else was so good," Kaylee said softly.

"Must have been, you shoveled it down fast enough," Kip said to her, causing Tom to laugh so hard he spit food crumbs all over the table. Kaylee blushed deeply.

"You ate half my breakfast," Kaylee mumbled.

"You mean my breakfast, I paid for it," Kip said. "You said I could have it."

"You going to get dessert, or we going to sit here and starve?" Tom said to Irene.

"Of course, honey," Irene said, excusing herself to the kitchen.

She removed her homemade chocolate cake from the fridge, made with a recipe that had been passed down in her family for generations. Handmade butter cream coconut frosting topped the decadent, perfectly dense and oh so moist three-layer innards. It really was a magnificent confection; her husband and son would probably say it's the thing she does best. She cut four pieces from it, placed them on their individual saucers and added a fork to each.

Irene then opened the cabinet and removed the small syringe of highly lethal poison she had hidden there last week. It was a single dose, just enough to kill one human adult. She had acquired it rather easily (though not cheaply) on the internet, a fact that alarmed and rather dismayed her. Really, she feared for the state of the world today.

She injected the poison directly into one of the pieces of cake. It was supposed to be tasteless and odor free, she did not want it ruining the flavor after all. She did all this with a calm and methodical serenity; a kind of mundanity that surprised her. Perhaps it should not have. She had no qualms this, no second thoughts. This had been meticulously planned, there was no backing out now.

She brought the four pieces of cake out to the table, careful to put the tainted cake in front of its intended victim. It wouldn't do to give the wrong person that piece, after all. She smiled sweetly as she passed them out.

"About time. Best part of the night, trust me," Tom said to the table. "Her cooking ain't the best, but she can make some cake." Kip laughed, a high pitched shrill that Irene had never grown to love.

"I thought it was very good, Mrs. Duke," Kaylee said.

"Thank you, dear," Irene said. In the few short months Kaylee had been with Kip, Irene had watched her self-esteem plummet. Kip had confided he was going to ask her to marry him, and Irene feared she was emotionally beaten down enough to say yes.

Truth be told, she rather reminded Irene of herself. She had often wished that she had someone there before she decided to marry Tom, someone who could somehow warn her of what her life would be like. But young people who think they are in love rarely listen to reason.

She could not tell the future, of course. Perhaps Kip would get his act together, perhaps he could grow into a good man who would treat his wife with the dignity and respect she deserved. She could not entirely blame him, though. His father never taught him to do those things.

She played her role too, she knew that. It was the kind of devastating truth you only admit to yourself on your darkest days, knowing you failed as a parent. Kip would be no better, she feared. She saw it all so clearly, the bleakness of the life ahead of the poor girl. Surely it would be a mercy to set her off that path before it even began?

"This tastes a little different, have you done something new?" Tom asked, spewing bits of chocolate cake all over the table as he talked. "Tastes a bit funny."

"No dear, it's the same recipe I've used all my life," Irene said.

"Tastes fine to me," Kip said. "Sure you got your dentures on right, old man?"

Kip laughed loudly at this, Kaylee adding a nervous chuckle in support. Irene did not laugh, and the furious look on Tom's face was all the reason one needed to know why. Tom hated being mocked, and would punish all slights, real or perceived.

He stood angrily. "You don't talk to me that way boy. You understand me?" His voice boomed with rage, and something else. Embarrassment? Betrayal?

Kip was too long a victim of Tom's (and too long a coward) to do anything but hang his head and nod it slowly. "Sorry Dad," he mumbled under his breath. Kip had no problem bullying those smaller or weaker than himself, but always shrank in the face of a real threat.

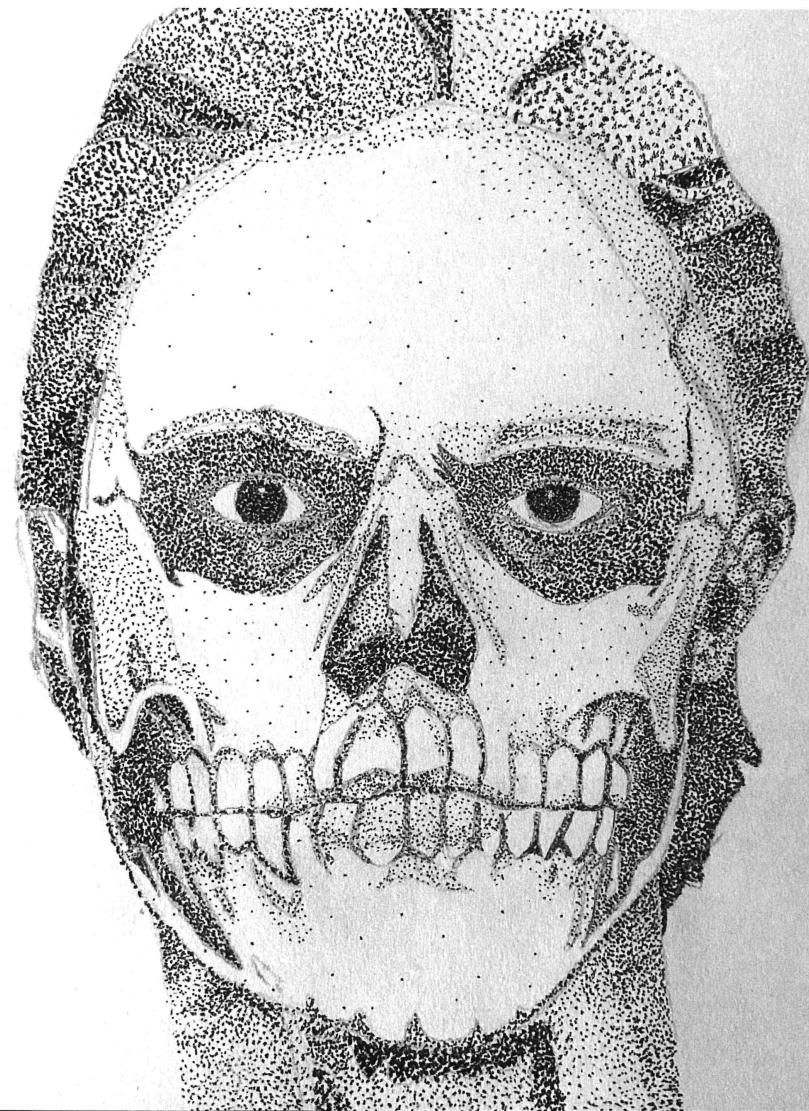
Tom was a hard man to love, though he had not always been that way. When Irene met him, he was everything she had always wanted in a man. Strong as an ox, handsome and chivalrous, he had swept her right off her feet. The signs started early, they always do, but she wrote them off as anomalies. There is always an excuse when you want there to be one, she knew that now.

Tom had turned out to be mean, ignorant, and aggressive when he did not get his way. His love and devotion turned into fear and control, whatever warmth he had fading into a cold sort of familiarity. It happened insidiously, right under her nose, this transformation from happy marriage to loveless prison.

Tom had always provided though, to the best of his ability. He made a modest salary, but his work as a union mechanic at one of the country's largest auto manufacturers afforded him excellent benefits. The company provided full care for any medical issues they had, and they were very generous with their vacation time as well.

They also provided a sizeable life insurance bonus, mandatory for him, but optional for the family. After weeks of nagging, Tom finally went through the process of adding Irene and Kip to the policy. It was finalized just last month. Tom's policy was a long-standing one, but if something were to happen to either of them, well, it would look suspicious indeed.

Finally, after the others were almost finished, Irene decided it was time to eat her own piece. She brought the cake up to her mouth, hesitated ever so slightly, and ate it. She let it dissolve in her mouth, savoring the flavor. Did it taste different? Probably a trick of the mind, but she thought it was the best cake she had ever eaten.



Tate

Kai Morphis

As I Gather Strength to Leave You - Hannah Hutson

I could relate my life's existence
as a sinkhole—
All collapsing around me, gravity
Pulling me, shattering bone,

Yet climbing out seems desolate.

I could describe this phase of life
As a chapter—
A page in the book of life
In the middle of a turn.

But who is turning the page when I am trapped?

As I gather strength to leave you,
I am in a state of refinement.
Like gold—flames lick my soul to purify,
Like metamorphosis.

I have fed myself enough leaves
of strength for this pupa life to survive.
My body life destroyed
So I will choose who I turn out to be.

Like butterfly, I will emerge a new form.

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Fluttering of Moths
Candace Cox



for the Sailor - Heather Watson

For the sailor who seeks me; I lie in the deepest parts of the ocean
Once I see your ship I take on the notion
I emerge from the sandy floor
As I catch a glimpse of you, you turn to see my beauty and more.

I begin my seduction to lure you to my home
I can tell my power of hypnosis is working on you alone
You lean on the side of your vessel so far you fall
I must enchant you once and for all.

I reach for your lifeless body; bringing your sun kissed face to mine
Just as I'm about to give you the gift from the divine
Somehow you pull away leaving me shattered
Taking away all that mattered.

Now I lay in my kelp and seaweed bed
Trying to get you out of my head
The pile of aquamarine gems are my tears
The pain in my heart shows my fears.

For the pain you've caused has hardened my heart
If I'm to see you again I'll rip you apart.
So, until that day you will feel my rage from the pounding of the ocean waves
Everyone will receive all that my revenge craves.

A Brief Relapse in Rage Over Broken Engagements - Hannah Hutson

My body is a pressure cooker compacted
with compressed rage. One more prick,
one more man telling me who I should be,
and I will burn the kitchen apron life,
the domesticated wife, like a meth lab gone wrong.

Who are you to tell me who I should be?
What I should wear?
Why is it those you trust most
who cram you into a shell like stuffed crab?

How dare you try to tame me?
My heart runs with wild horses—
pounding with desires to run free.
My soul dreams of ocean stars—
a love constellation sailors make fables for.

I loved you red like the comfort fire glow
of the fireplace on winters nights, yet
you gouged me open, unconscious, gutted
my intestines, and fried me in a pan
only to throw me to the raccoons.

There will be no gentle release.
The wild range woman is free.



Sunbird on a Pincushion

Carol Strong

Bucky's Third Second Chance - Greg Borse

First second chance was a thing with some girl in the county over. Bryan Schmidt suggested it had to do with sex. She was Bucky's cousin, so we never asked. It was common enough, but, well, decency.

BUCKY Deathridge was the kind of kid that everyone knew but who never quite made an impression. From the time we were all in kindergarten he was a little pasty, overweight, with reddish-brown hair, a doughy face with too many freckles, and slitty little black eyes that made him look at once as if he was up to something and as if he couldn't possibly be up to anything because he didn't really have a thought in his head. He came from the family that owned one of the "Grands," as we called them, on Highland Street. I was never sure where his family got their money—his dad worked a factory job at M&T Chemical and his mom, who seemed to be perpetually drunk or high and never quite dressed enough, seemed proprietor of their little mansion right next to the Texaco Station at the head of Highland and Lock Road, with a premium view of the Ohio River—just down from the property where that girl had put her parents in the barrels near a barn that seemed to straddle the cliff that fell to the shore of the Ohio River, the ultimate border of our town and our identity. His first name was Arthur, as it turned out, but nobody seemed to know that until we saw his picture in our yearbook at the end of senior year. He was the only one who wore a tuxedo—with a crooked bowtie and ruffles in the shirt and a vest. He was fat and smiling. About what, I could guess only from the two pranks he pulled off while we were in high school.

Bucky had worked on a movie—two movies, actually—with a bunch of other misfits from his class and a few others from the time he was a sophomore until graduation. The first was a history project for Coach Tate's history class. It was a re-enactment of the Battle of the Alamo mounted by Chris Hawthorne, whose father was mayor at the time. He lived out in one of the newish developments on Hwy 42 and his "Mayor's Mansion" was really just a box with some faux columns out front, mimicking the grand manors of the Antebellum South—except it was red brick instead of a stately white. They were good Democrats and not racists or anything—except for the lantern-holding Black servants dressed in Kentucky white short pants and red vests and painted an unbelievably black-black with unbelievably white-white eyes, right there on either side of their too short driveway. Like so bright, when you pulled in the driveway, they looked like they might be surprised you were visiting. But across the street was a house that mimicked the architecture of a ranch style one-story misplaced from somewhere south of San Antonio, Texas. It served as the perfectly wrong backdrop of a re-enactment film, using Super 8, of the battle of the Alamo. Chris got a bunch of elementary kids from our town to play the Mexicans and Bucky provided the pyrotechnics. I was three years younger and wasn't in Mr. Tate's junior level class, but I had two older sisters who were very pretty, so the older boys let me tag-along. Besides, I was on the cross-country team with them.

Where Bucky got the gunpowder, he never told us. But he seemed adept at setting charges and not blowing anyone up (until later), so it all worked out. The result was an eight-minute silent film and Mr. Tate gave them an "A" for being so creative.

This was probably the first time in Bucky's life that he'd experienced bringing anything to the table of any value to any peer group he'd ever known. After that, they decided to make a full-length kind of faux documentary of World War II (including both Pacific and European theaters). That took more than two years. But Bucky was up for the task and somehow sourced enough explosives to provide perfect O-ring puffs of smoke from fake cannons at the Maginot Line (which was a picnic pavilion at the top of one of the hills of Butler State Park); the explosives that would mimic the smoke needed for major tank offensives (which were accomplished by mounting carpet tubes on golf-carts which the older boys drove backwards); and the drowning of the American fleet at Pearl Harbor—which we re-enacted by throwing rocks at model battleships floating in the Ohio River while Bucky fanned smoke over the water. It was all quite cartoonish, of course, and Bucky actually blew his face off at one point (his skin and hair grew back, except for his eyebrows), but he recovered. A few people noticed that his freckles mostly disappeared and didn't ever come back, but we had the decency not to say anything. He actually looked marginally better. Nor did the

authority-types care to look too hard into Bucky's incendiary supply chain since his mom was sleeping with half the police force in Carroll County anyway.

But still, Bucky never did get a date and he still had a hard time feeling like he could make himself fit in. From his point of view, all the people he was friends with seemed to have an easy time in social situations where he just lacked the skills required to get people to accept him. He did these things and people really did slap him on the back--but they were over specialized. Too much the expertise of the geek. Nothing a girl would even notice and reciprocate. Like "Oh, you're the guy that blew all that stuff up for that little movie, right?" "Yeah," he'd say, sheepishly. "That's so cool." And, then, they would look at him for a moment and then drift into the music of whatever party we were attending and dance with a more slender, a better dressed, a "cooler" guy than Bucky could ever hope to be. I felt sorry for him. He tried so hard but didn't seem to fathom that telling people who you actually are is the last thing the superficial world to which he wanted to be admitted ever really wanted to know.

I wish I'd had enough integrity to tell him to stop trying. But I was going through puberty at the time and cared too much then about all the shit he seemed to care about so I didn't say anything. At the time, I was just glad that I was not Bucky. There were guys in our group—decidedly the dork squad—to whom we looked up. We kind of got indications some of them might even have had sex. We couldn't be sure, but we didn't want to screw things up with them. Bucky's enthusiasm for being useful even to the worst of losers was not an inspiration. Sure, we needed his peculiar talents and we relied on them, but no one was going to mimic them. He was going, as Jeff Devers said, "To die a virgin and there the Deathridge name will die with him!" Not a sentiment I thought ought to have been expressed in Bucky's presence but, there it was—and we were all too big a bunch of cowards to say anything against what he was made to suffer even by us.

So, maybe his first prank wasn't a surprise. But we admired him for the attempt. We just wished he'd consulted us before he'd tried to pull it off. Because, in design, it was a genius idea. Somehow, as we began high school, Bucky had purloined the master key to all the lockers that lined the halls and were assigned, hall by hall and floor by floor to Freshmen (first floor), Sophomore (second floor), Junior (tech wing), and Senior (third floor). The locks were built in and, of course, the Principal's Master Key opened every one of them. But, with that key, somehow Bucky had discovered, you could change the combinations. So, before the beginning of my sophomore year (Bucky and all my friends were Seniors by then) Bucky had gotten into the school and changed everyone's issued combination. There was chaos on the first morning of school as a result. Brilliant. We didn't know that he had done it and at first the joke worked. No one could get into their lockers that first day and so either left their books in a pile on the floor or had to tote them with them to each class. It ruined the bell-schedule and it was a week before the school officials could reset everyone's locker again. And that necessitated their re-configuring everyone's combination and re-issuing numbers. But, Bucky messed up.

His was the only combination that still worked.

Big mistake.

So, it was a blink until they figured out that Bucky was behind the joke. Of course, he collapsed in the Principal's office and accepted his punishment—a choice between working in the Cafeteria for a month or being suspended (it was his first offense). He chose the cafeteria. None of us in our group quite appreciated what he'd done till later, but, after our fashion, we let him know that we were proud of him for his attempt. After all, he did cause the chaos he'd intended that first week and he put the school calendar behind by at least a month.

We'd see him with his plastic hairnet helping Ms. Corinthea serving lunch and give him a nod. He didn't acknowledge us but we knew that, at bottom, he should be proud of what he'd accomplished. It was like he'd revealed to us that the whole system was a prison and, even if you knew you couldn't win, you had to do something. Leastways, that's what I thought. We didn't have Merit Badges or anything, but at the time, I wanted to give him one. "Greatest Failed Prank" or something. That was bravery in my book.

So, when the next thing happened, we all had to admit that maybe we were not as clever as Bucky and we'd never given Bucky his due.

We were surprised at the end of his punishment, because Bucky asked to continue volunteering in the Cafeteria. They didn't make any kind of announcement or anything, but he just kept helping Ms. Corinthea at the end of the line where they gave out desserts and took your number for subsidized lunch. Most of us were subsidized and the kids who weren't the ones who owned cars and could go to Tastee-Freez at the corner of 227 and 42 and then lord it over us when they brought their take-out back to school. I saw him one night in the parking lot of Dela Rosa Pizza and asked him why he was still working in the Cafeteria and all he said was, "Oh, it's all right. I like Ms. Corinthea."

I sensed that Bucky was a much deeper person than I was. I didn't say anything but, years later, I realized that he had a depth of sympathy and compassion that I was going to have to learn somehow without his help—or Ms. Corinthea's; a big boned black woman of a vaguely Caribbean distribution whose brown skin was touched with enough white to link her to three-hundred and fifty years of New Orleans. Course, I couldn't know that and never did find out. But if you looked at her for a minute, you could see how beautiful she was.

Teacher Appreciation Week rolled around, and the Administration announced a bunch of activities that would allow the students at Carroll County High School to express their love and admiration for the people who, besides their parents, had dedicated their lives to the betterment of their lives. You could buy flowers on Monday and have them sent to your favorite teacher—twenty-five cents and you could sign a card. Tuesday, you could pay a dime to skip your classes after lunch and wash the cars of the Faculty in the parking lot—so long as you belonged to a group of kids that raised at least \$2.00. Most everyone did this. Wednesday, you could simply sign a card and say that you were praying for your teacher or teachers at your regular Christian Church Service—this didn't cost any money, but you were supposed to actually show up to Church and actually say a prayer of some sort. I was Catholic and discovered that it didn't count at St. Joseph's. Mike on my cross-country team went to Church of Christ and he felt bad about that, so he offered to say my prayer for me. Thursday, you could bring a can of food for the local homeless shelter in the name of your favorite teacher. And that was funny, since the only homeless person in Carrollton was Michael Grand, whose mother was the secretary in the office, and she ran the drive. Friday was the Teacher Luncheon, and you could chip in a nickel to buy lunch for the teachers with the principal and members of the School Board who, in a show of support and solidarity would show up each year to sit at a big table set up in the Cafeteria on the stage.

My question: Why didn't they buy their own crappy lunch?

They always made some kind of big flat cake for the occasion, wrote some appreciative message on it and, once the teachers were all seated with the bigwigs, brought it out, to much fanfare, to the table, to be cut by the Superintendent and served to the teachers. I suppose we were supposed to be paying attention, but no one ever clapped or anything. After the Principal would make a speech at the beginning of lunch, the cafeteria would simply fall into the normal everyday chatter and we students would cease paying attention to those on stage.

Our group always went through the line together and sat at the same table—sort of in the middle of the room on the left if you were facing the stage. The lunch line was like the line in a prison, with a long silver shelf along which you slid your tray, pausing at each station as a cafeteria worker behind the sneeze-guard would wait for you to indicate which of the two meats you wanted, which vegetable, which starch, which bread, and so on. They had placards in front so you could know what you were choosing. That day, I noticed that the one that should have read "Salisbury Steak" simply read "Don't." Then, in front of the veggies, "Eat." In front of the starches (powdered mash potatoes or...something,) one read "the." There were no placards in front of the corn bread or rolls. But in front of the only dessert available that day, the placard seemed correct: "Cake." Plenty of cake was missing by the time I got to the end of the line. I looked at Bucky, who was passing out milk next to Ms. Corinthea. He acted like he didn't see me and when I said "chocolate" he gave me white. I took this as a sign.

So, the Administration and the School Board, seated at the most honorable places at the table on the stage, with the rest of our beloved faculty, arranged to the left and the right, took their places with their trays, and commenced to eating. Principal Stone said a few words of praise but his speech seemed mainly aimed at flattering the Superintendent. Students and teachers alike stopped listening well before he had finished and the din of lunchtime made things seem normal.

But I felt keenly that Something. Was. Going. To. Happen.

A special cake was produced about ten minutes into lunch that Ms. Corinthea and Bucky carried onto the stage and set on the end of the table. The Great Cake of Appreciation. It was a chocolate sheet cake with white frosting and piped letters over in black and yellow (our school colors) that said, "We APPRECIATE YOU Students of Carroll County HS Thank You for Letting Us Our Future!" (someone forgot a word). Maybe "See"? My friend Jeff, who is tons smarter than me opined, "Realize." No way that cake had room for "Realize."

The Superintendent, when the cake was brought forth, stood. He took his eyeglasses from his pocket and put them on his face as the cake was placed at the end of the table. Besides those at the head table, no one seemed to be paying attention. Pieces of cake began to be distributed.

After a few moments, there was a disturbance near the Superintendent's chair. His secretary, Ms. Beverly Schumer, shifted in her chair. She looked at Mr. Peevey, the football coach, in a quiet panic. He didn't seem to understand what was happening. Then she shit her pants. Swear to God. I think I heard it. Coach Peevey instinctively moved to his left, scooting his chair loudly against the floor. His scoot—and not the shit—hushed the room. Everyone looked up at the stage.

Then there was movement all over. Some teachers leapt straight up from their chairs and then froze, pressing their legs tightly together. The Superintendent rose and then quickly sat down again. Mademoiselle Claire, the French teacher, looked left and right, and then stood and turned and exited the stage—a long brown stain spreading steadily down the back of her too tight white skirt. Coach Peevey actually started laughing and just kept eating. Chairs were knocked over as several faculty members dropped onto all fours and simply slipped under the stage-curtains behind.

And then, with a kind of slow-motion rippling effect, the contagion began to move through the student population. Girls squealed and bolted. Boys leapt away from their table partners. Students began to run all at once for the exits. The smell began to overpower the room and leakage began to cause students to slip and fall. For a moment, it was pure terror and chaos. The school's only security guard appeared near the front of the stage, his hand on his radio, looking around with that face you make when you are about to say, "What the f---?"

Suddenly, from the middle of the stage, a thunderous voice bellowed:

"EVEREEEEEE ONE STOOOOOOOPPPPPP!"

And like a minor miracle, everyone did.

It was Mr. Parker, the Superintendent. He looked down at the security guard and in a voice only slightly less loud said, "Cole Edgar Spivey! Secure these premises!" Cole kind of started to go to his right and then turned left and darted to the closest doors and shut them. Mr. Parker pointed at the other exit at the far end of the room: "YOU! STOP GOING THROUGH THAT DOOR!" The gaggle of students there stopped fighting each other and turned to face him. Once he had the room, he said:

"Now. I want you students who are...in need...to make an orderly line along the back wall and file out to the nearest restrooms. Please. Watch your step!"

Students quietly gathered themselves and began to form the line, though it didn't move as no instruction had been given. The room was quiet now, though it was hard not to laugh when Jimmy Ardmore slipped from someone's shit and did a perfect pratfall near where Bucky was looking out from the second service-line door. No one at my table had yet even stood up. I looked at all our trays. No one had touched his cake.

"Now! Mr. Spivey! Move to the nether (which I thought was a singularly bad word choice) exit and pull anyone from the line who has not...who does not show evidence...who...Oh, for Pete's sake, grab anyone who hasn't shit their pants yet!"

And this is what loyalty and honor look like:

At that moment, we all realized that Bucky might have repeated his mistake with the locker-combination gag. So, for a minute, every single one of us looked at each other, then at our trays, and then back at each other. The silence seemed fraught with a kind of danger. Then, Harry flipped his tray and started running toward the service line doors. We all instantly took his cue and did the same. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mr. Parker open his mouth and point at us—as we slipped and grabbed and fell and got up and as a kind of multi-limbed mindless mob clamored our way to where Bucky seemed to be barring the door back into the kitchen.

But we overwhelmed him—and, following Harry's lead (he was always the quickest in mind and body among us) we dove across the cafeteria line and knocked the rest of the chocolate sheet cake off its perch and onto the floor. Ms. Corinthea didn't even fight us. She swept a hand elegantly and stood aside, allowing us to slide within range of our goal—in what the United States Marine Corps would call a "Gaggle."

And then we all started shoving cake into our mouths as fast as we could.

I looked up and saw Bucky just staring at us in disbelief. Harry saw him too and jumped up and grabbed him by two fists and pulled him into our confectionary scrum. "Eat!" he said, "You IDIOT! EAT!" Bucky paused for a second and then just dove face first into the chocolate mess.

After a moment, we could hear the sound of a commotion at the other end of the service line and I looked up and saw Mr. Parker coming through the door. "Go! Go! Go!" I shouted. We leapt up and made for the door.

Harry hit the fire alarm as we exited.

What a genius.

Pandemonium ensued and students, faculty, staff, and administrators all made for the exits. Cole Spivey put up his hands weakly in protest, but quickly turned and lead the way out of the cafeteria, across the hall and outside. He actually stopped and held open one of the doors. The sprinklers went off and about half of us were soaked by the time we reached the parking lot.

I started to try to get into Harry's car and he said, "Hold on there, bub! You shit yourself out here, not in my car!"

In the end, just about everyone in the school (except the cafeteria workers themselves, who never ate the school food they served) fouled themselves in one way or another that day—Harry and I just dropped our drawers in the parking lot and relieved ourselves before leaving campus. We drove home naked from the waist down, having left our dirtied socks, pants, and underwear along with our dignities in the parking space #304. Of course, the Administration forbade any mention of what happened in any way in that year's Yearbook. They didn't seem to notice that the cover of the 1980 Carroll County High School Yearbook was the yellow track of a tiger's claw ripping through what might have been a chocolate cake...The Senior Class Motto, "Dignity through Adversity," didn't seem to raise any eyebrows.

The School Board wanted to charge *someone* for the weeklong cleaning and disinfecting that was required of much of the school. Not a pathway to any toilet in the building was unaffected. And the bathrooms...well. Some of the shit stains resisted the power-washing administered to the outside sidewalks and parking lots. For the rest of the year, whether it was our imaginations or not, the school emanated a kind of olfactory memory of what some clever student labeled the *Shitcendent*. Cole Spivey put in a workers' compensation claim and the Administration was too embarrassed to fight it. Though there wasn't a name for it yet, later, we'd credit him for the invention of PTSD.

Bucky was raised up in our estimation after that. It didn't get him any dates—even after he went to Beula's *Beauty Emporium* over on 2nd street to get a perm and started wearing those fake-silk shirts that had just gone out of style. And while we pressed him about how he'd pulled off this caper—and gave him no end of trouble for not realizing that he'd almost implicated us all, he would never tell us a thing. I liked that. A magician never reveals his secrets. We were proud to have helped him after the fact pull off the best school joke anyone had ever heard of.

After they all graduated, it was a little lonely for me. I had always been something of a loner. My junior year, I kept running cross-country, even though I was never any good at it really and tried to keep up with Harry and Jeff and even Bucky. Harry went to a polytechnic institute in Illinois where he studied physics. Jeff went to Kenyon College in Ohio. Bucky went to chiropractic school in Lexington and supplemented his perm with hair plugs and married a former Ms. Junior Kentucky and opened a practice somewhere in the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia. There he also specialized in writing bogus prescriptions for opioids and was arrested at some point. If he did jail time, I don't know. But recently, I saw his wife and daughter on a reality show about beauty pageants. He wasn't in the episode I watched and his daughter came in third. She didn't look too happy.

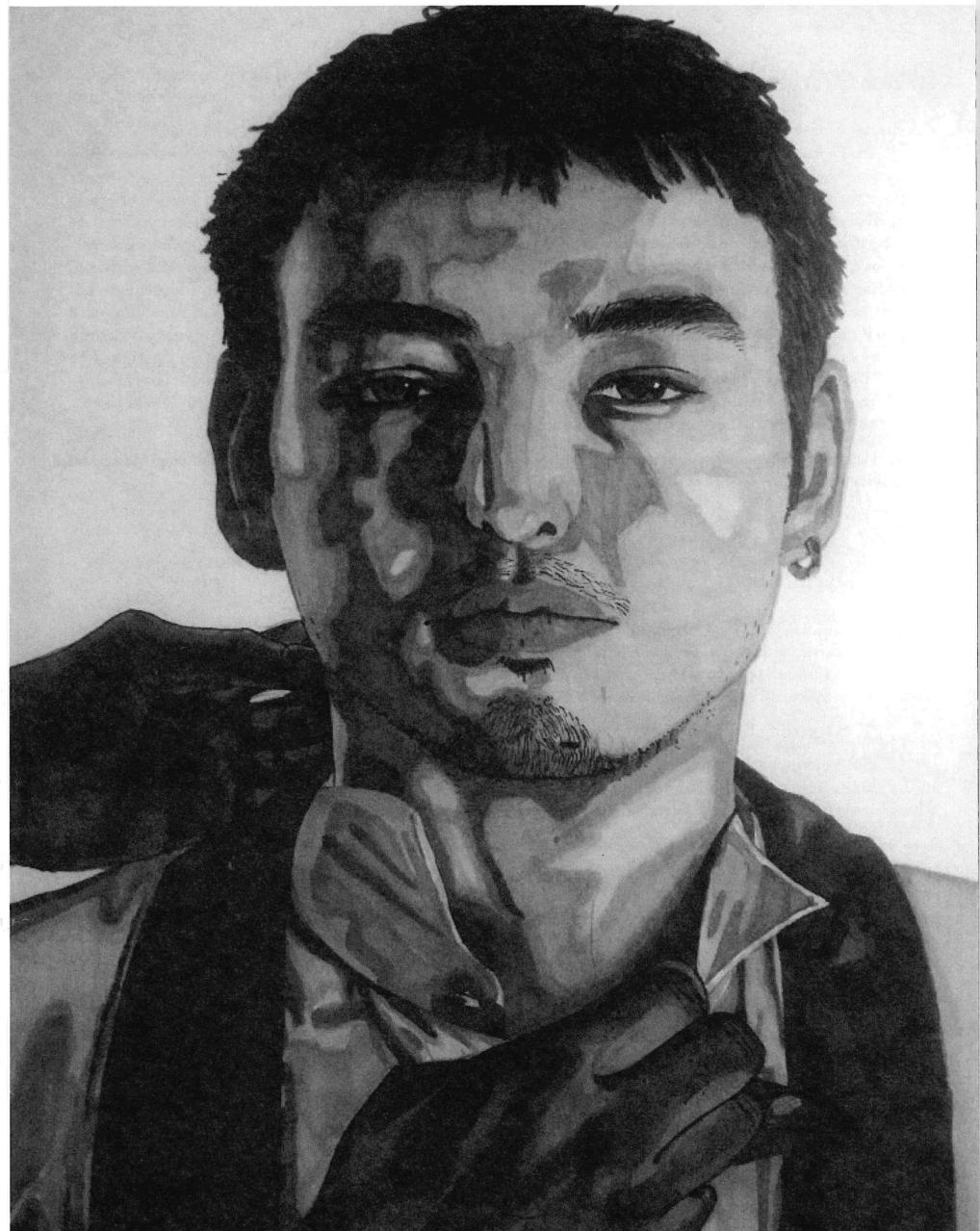
Course, what you think is true is never really entirely true. Turns out Bucky didn't say much about how he pulled things off that day because, well, there was another side to the story. Every Teacher Appreciation from then on, of course, most on purposely avoided cake. And, though it seemed like overkill, every celebration going forward offered students the same cafeteria fare but featured a catered lunch up on stage for the Administration and the Teachers. So, a repeat of the disaster was calculated to be avoided.

My last Teacher Appreciation week, I came through the serving line pushing my tray and remembering fondly what I thought of as "Bucky's Second Chance." When I got to the end of the line, looked at Ms. Corinthea, who was assisted then by some new Bucky—maybe a kid who had gotten himself in trouble too—and looking at the cake for dessert, I said, "Say...?"

Before I could ask, Ms. Corinthea said loudly, almost as if to no one in particular, throwing her head up and to the side, "You kidding me? You think a high school student could smuggle in a gallon of Lax-A-Trol and put it in a cake without anyone being the wiser!???"

Every worker on the cafeteria line erupted in laughter.

On the Next Page
Joji Portrait
Alexis Rodriguez



Common Strangers - Kimberly Mathis

On February 19, 2022, American Airlines Flight 884 from Dallas to Houston was filled with more than rowdy passengers failing to comply with Federal Aviation Regulations requiring a mask or trying to sneak on more than one piece of luggage—but with a mix of humor, irritation, shared ideals and murder. Feeling cramped and the breath of a short stubby man wearing an orange hat on the nape of my neck from obviously standing too close, I made my way down the approximately 15-inch-wide aisle in search of seat 22B. The aroma of a burrito loaded with pico de gallo was penetrating the cabin and bullying my nose—elaborate and heavy like the foul stench that plagues the Trinity River. The seated female passenger to my immediate left was entranced by the glaring music from her AirPods, bobbing her head up and down and smacking each bite loudly without the slightest concern. After glancing at her and being careful not to let my face be a dead giveaway of my annoyance of the smell, my eyes met the intense blue ones from the man on the right in a brown “Built Ford Tough” t-shirt whose anger seemed to be permanently planted on his face. His eyebrows were furrowed, and his torso was stiff and flexed. His demeanor was intimidating and lucid. It had to be a lifestyle and nothing a stinky burrito could alone inspire.

Holding a cup of coffee in one hand, I placed my small carry-on in the overhead bin and squeezed past the lady sitting in the aisle seat of row 22.

“Excuse me, mam, I’m so sorry.”

“You’re fine. They don’t make it very easy, do they?”

“Not at all.”

We shared a smile and a light chuckle.

I sat down and started to retrieve my Writing Creative Nonfiction book from my backpack, preparing to indulge in some required reading for the next hour and a half. Her cellphone conversation intruded on the miniature and already uncomfortable seating arrangement.

“I’m traveling light with only a purse and a jacket. I just want to love on her.”

Her voice was soft and intensely southern, and she had an average and simple appearance—smooth milky skin, pearl studs, a short brown pixie haircut that was straight and lifeless, manicured beige nails, and a long-sleeved maroon t-shirt, jeans, and black running shoes. A knockoff version of Ann Hathaway.

“Mom, did I tell you there was a murder in our neighborhood?”

No longer interested in anything my book had to offer, I tuned in intensively with wide ears.

“You remember Gina from down the street? Well, she’s the chairman of the silent auction committee. She never showed up to our meeting a few weeks back. I texted her to see if she was coming, she never answered. Her niece, also a member of our committee, got worried and went to her house. She found her dead. There’s no way that 20-year-old she was seeing was mentally stable.”

This gossip fest was revealing a real-life drama, one that was well-suited for the Lifetime channel. Through my intent ear hustling, I learned that Gina was a 42-year-old mother of two, divorced about a year, and dating a guy she was old enough to mother.

“And guess what? I hit the mailbox yesterday. We were running late to soccer practice, and I backed right into it. I’ll call Brian next week to fix it. You know him and Candice are still not living together?”

The stranger beside me was jumping from hot topic to hot topic faster than the like segment of The Wendy Williams Show. There seemed to be an inherent need to get it all in before the flight took off. Almost like she was trying to beat an invisible clock.

“We got an email that they were going to test Ella for the Talented and Gifted program at school. I know she’s only ten, but I think it’ll be good for her.”

The next few moments presented Ella as the perfect student who was easily bored, who got all A’s with little effort, and recently started a nail painting business. She’s had eight clients so far.

“Ok, mom. I gotta go now. I’ll talk to you when I get there. I love you.”

She tucked her cellphone into the black purse that sat at her feet and fastened the seatbelt. Though they lived in my head, in the ten minutes that she chatted with her mom, I had more “oh my God” moments than any time in recent memory.

“So, what takes you to Houston?” I asked.

“I’m going to see my Nana. She’s 93, and she fell last week. They put her in a nursing home temporarily.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. I hope she’s ok.”

“She’s fine. But she hates that place. She just wants to go home.”

She volunteered that Nana lived on the outskirts of Houston with her youngest son. She was an incredible knitter and went to the beauty shop every Saturday morning as she had been for the last 47 years.

“You going home?” she asked.

“No. I’m headed to my boys’ 7 on 7 football tournament.”

“Sounds fun. I’m Jamie, by the way.”

“I’m Kim. Nice to meet you.”

After exchanging pleasantries, the burning curiosity to know what city and neighborhood the murder took place in was a blazing inferno.

“You guys live close by?” I asked.

“Yes. Just a few miles away from the airport in Coppell.”

“I have several friends that live there. How do you guys like it?”

“It’s quiet. The schools are awesome, and our community is tight-knit.”

She was right. I loved Coppell. The population is somewhere around 38K. And it was home to the famous Stubb’s Sandwich at Coppell Deli. A gooey monstrosity of scrambled eggs, bacon, ham, sausage, and cheddar cheese. The neighborhoods and houses were a manicured mix of quaint and grand. And though the murder that I overheard her talking about indeed wasn’t the first, it just wasn’t something you heard about from the small, semi-affluent suburb.

Jamie and I spent the next ninety minutes talking like best girlfriends, frantically trying to catch up on lost time. Yet, I didn’t know this stranger from any place.

The pink and green mask covering my face was halfway down as I was enjoying slow sips of an extra-hot caramel macchiato from Starbucks.

“Don’t worry about the mask. I’m fully vaccinated and boosted,” she said.

“Nice. Me too.”

“You know, my mom is a scientist. She had so many mixed emotions about the vaccine. But as smart as she is, she kept denying all of her medical training and spewing unproven talking points from people who aren’t doctors. I blew the topic off for months, but I finally had to tell her that me, Scott, and the kids all had the shot.”

"Wow! I'm sure that was tough."

"It was, but I had to do what I felt was best for us. She got over it."

"That's good. Everything is such a sensitive subject these days, especially politics. We've even politicized personal medical decisions. I honestly liked it better when I didn't know what everyone was thinking."

If we had had microphones, the conversation we were having would have been the best airplane podcast ever. I could envision it. Both of us on opposite ends of the cabin where the flight attendants usually are, each of us with their handheld devices and our voices coming over the loudspeaker of the cabin—"Thanks for tuning in to *Air Adventures with Kim and Jamie*" with passengers laughing hysterically at our randomness. Because everything about this encounter was extremely random.

We laughed about how the day before she got dressed in the dark and discovered while standing in line at the pharmacy that she was wearing two different shoes. And the reason why she traveled light with "only a purse and a jacket" was because she wasn't going to be in Houston for more than 24 hours. She had plans to sleep on the sofa in Nana's room and take an Uber to the airport the next morning for her 7 am flight. And because everyone in the nursing home had dentures, she refused to brush her teeth there, so she didn't even bother to pack a toothbrush. She had some superstition about the water.

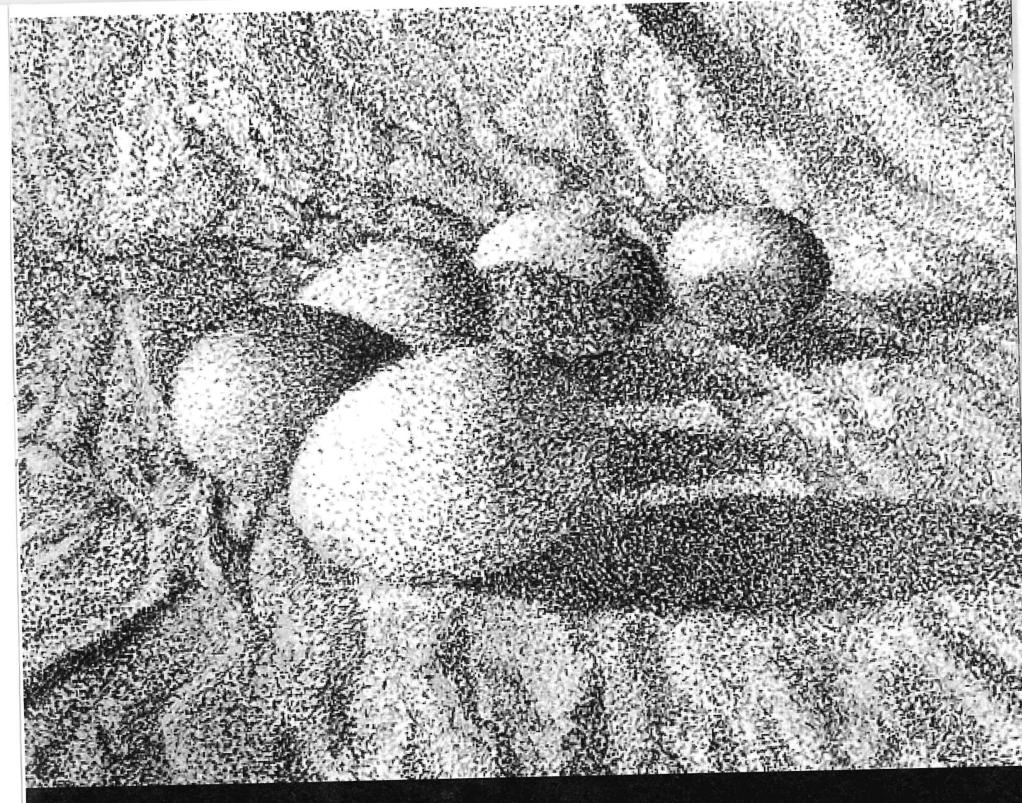
"When my Aunt Mary Jo went to a nursing home, she only had dentures on the top. Two months later, she needed them for the bottom."

I laughed until my belly hurt. Water had nothing to do with Aunt Mary Jo, but my goodness, that would have been a great segway into a podcast topic. The airplane loudspeaker ringing with,

"And next on *Air Adventures with Kim and Jamie*, we discuss how nursing home water gives you dentures." Just the thought of it made me giggle inside.

I didn't realize how much I needed this stranger. I shared that my husband was a football coach and that his teaching philosophy is "All you can control is your attitude, effort, and energy." She celebrated that approach and said she was taking it back to her son Dylan. He was nothing like Ella. I spoke of my grad school studies, my 20-year-old daughter in college, and the recent journey of renovating and selling my house. For ninety minutes, nothing mattered but being present. The pure joy, unfiltered laughter, and happiness were a great reward. Leave it to the universe, I will probably never see Jamie again, but I took from her many lessons.

Time is the one thing we can't get more of. It eludes us. And it doesn't matter what you talk to your mom about. Who cares if all you do is gossip? The genuine human connection and the ability to do so outweigh any topic. Gossiping with mom means she's still here. I wish I could call my mom and laugh about hitting the mailbox. I wish that every stranger was kind and talked too much. I wish that I had a Nana to visit. And sometimes, I wish that my daughter was still ten. My time with Jamie was transformative. We were strangers with common issues and shared ideas. The connection was genuine, the stories were funny, and the energy was positive. But it was a particular moment in time that brought two strangers together. Jamie will be the friend that lives in my head. The one who reminded me to enjoy the time. To take the time. Cherish the time. The one who has given me an endless laugh about nursing home water causing a need for dentures—a claim more interesting than a recent murder. The one who made a little of my time brighter.



Eggs

Alexia Lams

The Mystery of the Mural - A. Blake Denton

As UAM's Special Collections Librarian, I spend much of my time curating our archival collections. These collections contain materials of historic value about UAM and southeastern Arkansas. Types of archival materials held in the Special Collections department include unpublished papers and correspondence, records, photographs, recordings, and artifacts, to name a few. In essence, archival materials are remnants of the past. We examine them to understand our history so that we may understand the present.

Yet these materials are only pieces from larger puzzles. Often, you may only have one or two surviving items while the rest have been lost to history. Moreover, an artifact or document divorced from its context often raise more questions than answers which further complicates our attempt to reconstruct the past. Despite our best efforts, sometimes we simply can't find enough information to solve the mysteries we're after. Such is the nature of archival research!

Let's consider what I've dubbed the "Mystery of the Mural." This one continues to elude me and spark my imagination. Several months ago, I came across a file with various photographs of the old armory that once stood on campus. This building was demolished in 1979 due to its poor condition. Among these photographs, I found this striking image of a mural:



I eventually discovered this mural made a subtle appearance in the December 13, 1979, issue of the *Advance Monticellonian* that reported the facility's destruction. The paper did not discuss the mural when it waxed nostalgic about the history that was made in the armory—it was merely captured in the featured photograph of the building. I have so many questions about the origins and meaning of this creation! Was this mural the work of one student or several? When was it painted? Why in the armory? The mural was strategically placed above a door frame. Was this positioning symbolic or did the creator(s) simply choose this as a favorable location? I've only begun to ask questions...

What did the artwork mean? Was the raised fist a symbol or endorsement of the Black Power movement? Were some of UAM's early African American students celebrating a victory for racial equality on campus or in society? Or were these students simply bored one night and painted this mural as a prank

or dare? This last possibility isn't as appealing to my intellectual curiosity as the others, but this *is* college students we're talking about. It's in the realm of possibilities...

And what about that frustratingly cryptic message?!? "In the beginning we were not...now we are one." What event or development was the artist or group referring to? Is this line from a song, a speech, or a literary work? Or is this an original expression by the creator? What message was this artwork supposed to convey? What response was this mural intended to stir in the viewer? Perhaps this mural was meant to remain a mystery to all but a small audience with esoteric knowledge about its origins...

They say an image is worth a thousand words. In this case, it's worth as many questions. I have tried to find out more about this mural, but my efforts have failed to bear fruit thus far. I've posted the image on the Special Collections Facebook page requesting anyone with information to contact me. I've consulted former long-time employees and local alums and poked around in some other archival collections that I thought might contain additional information. So far, no luck. I'm hopeful that new information will eventually come to light that dispels the shroud of mystery surrounding the mural.

Hey, it could happen! When I least expect it, I could stumble on a revelation somewhere in the department or in a new archival donation. Or perhaps someone with knowledge about this mural might read this piece, take pity on this poor librarian, and reach out to me! On the other hand, this mystery may remain unsolved indefinitely. In this worst-case scenario, we at least have this photograph. The old armory was demolished decades ago. When those walls came crashing down, a fascinating work of art and thought-provoking piece of institutional history was tragically lost. But if it weren't for this photograph, I wouldn't even be aware that this mural once existed on campus. As this snapshot proves, archival materials bear witness to times passed, things lost, and events long forgotten...

On the Next Page

Self Portrait
Candace Cox



Is This Communication? - Bryan Clark

Jacob, a sixteen year old high school student, was interested in all things space travel. He kept up with SpaceX, NASA, and Blue Origin like they were a religion, and he had dreams of someday being an astronaut. He hoped to be part of the first Mars Mission crew with humans instead of just robots. In fact, he had already laid out college classes planning out his future in studying robotics and engineering when he graduated High School and hoped to move on from there to find a way to get a leg in the door with any large tech company that would take him. Indeed, Jacob had a bright future ahead of him.

He always arrived home before his family. Both of his parents were university professors and his younger sister was heavily involved with the Junior High band (multiple University orchestras were already looking at her remarkable musical skills). He always enjoyed that first forty five minutes to an hour alone in the house right after Chess Club, his final M-W-F engagement, because he could always sneak an extra snack and play some Xbox One without interruption (he was only allowed an hour on weekdays). His sister had nightly band practices, so she was usually away until at least 6, and both of his parents taught class right up till 5. Wednesday's were the best, however, because both of his parents attended university meetings with other professors, which always gave him extra time to do whatever he wanted.

Jacob grabbed a bear claw from the snack drawer, walked upstairs to his room, and plopped his back down on his bed. He stared at the ceiling while trying to decide what game he wanted to start with. 'Maybe Mass Effect? No, Halo. Definitely Halo,' he thought. The Discovery NASA shuttle model he had hanging from his ceiling revolved slowly, probably from the impact of him laying on the bed. He knew when his father got home he would watch the news for a bit, so he could wait before watching CNN discuss the details from the first unmanned return Mars mission. There was plenty of time to game.

Yes, today is actually quite the historic day. The first rock samples brought directly back from Mars by none other than SpaceX were due to arrive at some point today. He could not wait to see the details! The exciting moment prompted tons of discussion for weeks now by the likes of Elon Musk, Neil Degrasse Tyson, Joe Scott, Isaac Arthur, and all the other scientists and science communicators. Jacob had been hanging on to every word, but his family all agreed to watch the national broadcast when everyone was home.

Jacob had a smile of satisfaction on his face. Today was going to be excellent. He sat up, turned on his Xbox One with the push of a button on his controller, and ripped the top part of the plastic off of his bear claw. The bear claw would be finished before he got the game booted up and he passed the loading screens. By chance he glanced at the floor.

There was a small grayish black pulsing dot with a small ring around it jarringly moving around the floor. It looked kind of like a gray target, and moved like a frightened mouse.

Jacob set his partially unwrapped bear claw down on the bed, mouth slightly agape, and hopped down on his hands and knees to get a closer look. He set the controller down to his right just next to his dresser. The "Target" went around him and shot under the bed. Jacob glanced up at the ceiling for any kind of projector, like a laser pen, that might be making this thing. There was nothing. He looked back under the bed. Though it was dark, the thing still glowed faintly and continued its erratic movements just at the back left corner.

The Target suddenly moved its way back out and into the light, and stopped shakily in front of Jacob. The object seemed to be made out of gray light and to have no vertical dimension whatsoever. It pulsed and vibrated, emitting no kind of sound. Jacob cautiously reached out and tapped it with his right index finger.

The thing suddenly began spasmodically changing shape. First, it burst into wildly shifting geometric figures. Then, it grew about ten times its own size and burst into swirling static lines. Finally, it formed together into a 2 dimensional static oblong shape, and then startlingly formed itself into the shape of a face.

Jacob's face.

His own projected face spun around and around like a top while its eyes rolled around in random directions, its mouth opened and closed, its jaw jerked left and right violently. Then, it started making noises like static on the radio, which freakishly morphed into Jacob's own screeching voice. And then it stopped everything altogether and stared into the real Jacob's eyes.

"Is this communication?"

Jacob's jaw had been wide open the entire time. He swallowed, closed his eyes, opened them back up (Oh God, it's still there), and said, "...what?"

Again, it said, "Is this communication?" in Jacob's voice, though it was far more monotone.

"This...yes. This i-is is c-c-communication," answered Jacob, voice shaking and trying not to cry or scream or run.

"I am Jacob," said the projection of Jacob's face.

"I-I am Jacob, actually," he said back to it.

"I am not Jacob," it said back.

Jacob stood to his feet. He looked toward the door, but the face followed along his visual path and positioned itself in front of the door.

"What brings you pleasure, Jacob?"

Jacob looked back toward the window. The thing quickly slid across the room, up onto the wall, and right onto the closed window curtains. It looked blankly back at him without blinking.

"Is this communication?"

"Yes! This is communication! What do you want?"

"What brings you pleasure, Jacob?"

"I...I like hanging out with my friends. I dunno, ummm..."

"I will bring you friends," it said.

From beneath the bed burst forth some sixty or so more of the gray "Targets" right at Jacob's feet. He half jumped, half collapsed, and mostly succeeded in breaking a rib in his efforts to get away. They all crowded around him, touched anywhere skin was exposed, and performed the same action the first one did. After about a minute of warping and static screeching there were at least sixty "Jacob Faces" floating around his room. They were on the floor, ceiling, door, bed, and windows, all moving around and staring at him.

The one on the window then asked, "What else brings you pleasure, Jacob?"

Jacob, trying not to panic, walked slowly and carefully backward. They were everywhere, and he was doing his best not to step on one. He felt his back bump against his bed. He shot out a hand to balance himself, and it landed on something sticky. He screamed and jerked away from the sticky object quickly, and let out a nervous sound akin to a laugh when he saw the bear claw he had completely forgotten about.

He picked it up and took a nervous bite he knew he would never be able to swallow. This gave him a moment to focus.

'If I can just get to the door,' he thought, 'I could make a run for it, call the police station, and get the hell away from here.'

"What else brings you pleasure, Jacob?" the face asked again.

Jacob looked at all of the faces. He forced down the piece of bear claw in his mouth, took one slow step toward the door, and tried to think of something he enjoyed.

"Well," he began, "I like to eat and play video games. That's always fun."

He took another slow step.

Simultaneously, the faces all looked toward the television. The Xbox One menu screen was up with Halo at the ready. They then looked back toward Jacob.

Jacob, now desperate, kicked the nearby controller across the floor toward the closest face.

"Here. Give it a try. It's great."

The controller, button side down on a face, moved left, then right. The menu on the screen suddenly changed as the actual game started; the face had somehow mashed a button.

The faces all looked at the screen as if to confirm the act of playing a video game had been fulfilled before looking back at Jacob.

"I have played a video game. I am entertained and have found pleasure."

Jacob, throughout all of this, had been stretching his arm toward the doorknob. He was almost close enough to lay a finger on it.

"Now, I will eat," said the face.

Jacob's finger touched the doorknob before a sudden, horrifying realization came to him.

"Wait, whAAAAAHHH."

The heads all swarmed around him on the floor, eating their way through shoes, feet, ankles, and onto the rest of his body. He was gone in less than three seconds.



Bellezza Oscuras - Lachelle Lewis

i: A Foreigner Approaches

The sun was nearing its peak when Melantha finally heard her follower take a misstep and send a rock skittering down the hillside. She smiled under her wide-brimmed yellow hat, paused in her trek, but then chose to continue her climb, wishing to confront him on level ground. The paper bags in her hand swayed with each step. Behind her and her follower, so many feet below them, the little seaside town continued its day, the horns of multiple arriving airships drowning out the rest of their steps.

By the time her follower made his way to the top of the hill, Melantha was at the far end, her bags on the ground beside, the scattered peach trees leaving sweet shade on the ground.

"Alright, state your business!" she shouted at him. "But not a step farther!"

Her follower was a foreigner, his pale skin turning pink under the sun, his blond hair in a loose ponytail. The blue overcoat he wore billowed epically in the breeze but Melantha was positive he was sweltering in it. She herself wore simple brown shoes, loose sand-colored trousers, and a sleeveless ash gray halter top plus her hat.

"Me name's Cormac Byrne and I'm looking for the Belloscu sisters," he called back in his northern accent. "The people tell me you might take me to them."

"What is your intentions towards them?" Melantha fired back.

"Well, I was hoping they might help me end the war. It's been waging for almost half a year now, and my homeland's a bit worried."

"What business is it of your country if mine has a civil war? Go away, we'll handle our own problems."

"Yeah, see, here's the thing. My people need your airspace and with your war going on, they aren't letting foreign ships through. That's bad for business."

Melantha put her hands on her hips. "Okay. And the Belloscu sisters can help you how?"

"Someone said they were sent here because they contested the right to rule the Belloscu Clan. Some people say they should be the matriarchs instead of their uncle."

She frowned. "Some people shouldn't repeat what they don't know. None of that is true."

Cormac Byrne took a step closer. "So what really happened?"

"I said no farther, Byrne!" She reached for the spear strapped to her back.

"Why are you and sister really hiding out here for?" he asked, holding his ground.

"None of your foreigner business!" She drew her spear. "Now get lost!"

"Can't do that," he replied, drawing a shortsword from his belt. "I came to settle things here. Can't leave 'till it's done."

She rushed at him, parrying his blade, forcing him back two steps before he began his offense. While her spearhead and his blade tangled, her foot lashed out, kicking his shin.

He cursed, jumping back, giving her a reproachful glare. That wasn't fair, that look said then he came, harder than before. She spent more time dodging than parrying, spinning to dodge before delivering a kick to his stomach. He grunted but it did little damage as he had the foresight to stiffen his ab muscles. Faster than

she could react, he grabbed her ankle and jerked it up, yanking her off-balance. Wildly, she swung her spear, deflecting his thrusting blade then hitting him sharply with the flat of hers on his left arm.

He let go with another curse and, crouching low, she swung her spear again and again in fast, wide arcs, forcing him to slide back as she crab-walked forward, her face half in shadow, her mouth a flat line.

"Shite! Shite! Shite!" he cursed, easily dodging the spearhead but unable to reach her with his sword. Fed up, he blocked her spear only to receive a sternum punch from her free hand then have that same hand twist his wrist. She kicked his foot out from under him and he stumbled back to the ground.

Disarmed, winded, and with sweat rolling into his eyes, his world was a partial blur as Melantha Belloscu raised her spear for the fatal thrust.

"MELANTHA!"

On the far side of the hill, standing behind her groceries, was her sister.

2: Introductions All Around

The dark-skinned woman turned to her sister, not at all bothered. "Yes?" she asked pleasantly. Her sister wore a pale green sundress and yellow sandals that complimented her soft ebony skin, her hair in a series of braids that fell past her shoulders. A strange braided belt wrapped twice around her waist, showing a slim figure. If Cormac had run into this sister first, he would've been delighted.

"What in the world are you doing?" the elder sister Duana angrily demanded. "I heard you a mile away beating down on this poor pale man. I bet you didn't even give him a fair fight either."

"Well, duh, he's taller and stronger than me. I was being practical." She rolled her eyes.

"Duana?" Cormac asked, deeming it safe to get to his feet. "Duana Belloscu?"

"Yes, I am she. What do you want?"

"He thinks to come here and tell us how to live," spat Melantha. "Probably an agent of espionage or political sabotage."

"True, I'm an agent," he admitted, dusting himself, "but I want to help."

"You want to help yourself," the younger snapped.

"By helping you," he insisted. He walked around Melantha to address her older sister directly. "Please, I-"

"Hush. Humble yourself and we will let you have supper with us. But don't presume you're the superior in this situation," Duana warned. "My sister and I are more than capable of handling you, sir." She picked up the groceries then led the way down the hill, her sister glaring at his back the whole time. Amused, he sheathed his sword and followed.

The Belloscu sisters lived in a little white farmhouse which was thrice the size of the red goat shed beside it. Chickens and their chicks scattered before their feet as a goat bleated at them from where it stood under a scrawny pomegranate tree. A brace of ducks came waddling out from behind the house, their quacks almost sounding like complaints to him.

"So the servants live in the house?" he asked.

"We have no servants," replied Duana, opening the front door. "My sister guards and cooks while I handle the animals and the garden."

"A lotta dirty work for princesses."

Melantha sniggered behind him. "There are no princesses here, pale man. Just ladies wishing to be left alone."

"But why? I thought you noble types retired to country palaces." Duana gestured for him to take a seat at the dinner table and he did despite how small the chair was. It was obviously built for someone thinner and not so bulky.

"We're protesting," Duana replied, putting the groceries in the cabinets and little fridge. "The Belloscu have entered this war for the ego of our Uncle Adrian. Many will die for his vanity."

"And protesting all the way out here will do something about it?"

The sisters exchanged a glance across the room, Melantha gripping her spear still, Duana adjusting her black belt.

"You got something planned?" he asked.

"It doesn't concern you, stranger," Melantha said dismissively, sliding her spear back onto her back. "So why don't you go back home-"

"Again, I can't go back home," he said, turning towards her, a little fed up with her hostility. "I won't. Your civil war is disrupting trade. Your airspace-"

"We'll open up our airspace sometime later," Duana said, going about the business of making chamomile tea. "Mind you, only Belloscu airspace."

"What about the other two families, Ebon and Lumis?" he asked then he addressed Melantha. "And can you sit down? You're ruining the ambiance."

Melantha frowned and Duana smiled over her steaming cup. "The other families can pauper themselves until they need to rebuild for the next spat. It happens at least once every few years, it seems, this whole political unrest thing. It's utterly pointless and wasteful. Nothing for you to worry about... or your merchant employers." She stared at him as she sipped her tea.

He shrugged. "So I've been found out. But hey, at least I don't want to destabilize your country." He winked at Melantha who rolled her eyes. The girl sat down just as the ground shook outside. Quick as a blink, Duana and Melantha ran to the kitchen window, Duana setting her cup down with a loud clink! They shouldered each other aside trying to look out while the taller Cormac peered over their heads.

"Who is that?" Melantha asked about the little black airship descending outside. It scattered the ducks and chickens and sent the goat running into the brush.

"Don't know. We're not expecting company." Duana narrowed her eyes as the airship's ramp lowered and four men in austere military uniforms came out, the three stars on each of their suits sparkling in the sun. Pristine Four pristine red cloaks blew in the wind. "Butchers," she hissed.

"Butchers?" Cormac asked, pushing back his chair to stand.

"They're the ones who control our uncle's military forces," Melantha explained. "They razed three villages without orders just to force our uncle's hand. They're murderers of the innocent."

"Stay here," Duana ordered Cormac, stepping back from the window. "My sister and I will handle this."

3: More Than What They Seem

The Oscura Sisters sashayed outside, Melantha twirling her spear while Duana twirled a braid around her finger.

"Oboro, Bidi, Maleki, Jona!" Duana called out in greeting with a smile. "How unprecedented your visit is."

Oboro, more than two heads taller than the girls, stepped forward, his bald brown head shining in the sun. "Your Graces, King Adrian requires your presence back in court."

"And then at the altar," added Bidiah, scratching at his long cornrows. "A match has been set."

Melantha burst out laughing, Duana pressing her lips together to keep from laughing. The three general glowered at the display of disrespect but waited it out for several seconds.

"WOW!" gasped Melantha, wiping away fake tears. "Y'all must've got took notes from the court jester because YOU'RE A DAMN JOKE RIGHT NOW!" She raised the brim of her hat with a finger, her spear no longer pointed at the ground. "He's barely reigned two months and he violates on of the laws set down by our forebears? Utterly shameless." With a leap forward, she sprinted at Oboro with intent to impale.

Clang! A curved saber pulled from Oboro's robe met her spear before it could drive into his stomach. She sprang back turning- Clang! Clang!- to deflect the daggers of Maleki and the shortsword of narrow-faced Jona.

"Shite! That's close!" Cormac commented from inside the house as Melantha danced away from a slash from Oboro, deflecting Maleki's thrust then kicking back at a circling Jona. All the grace she lacked in talking came out in her movements, fast, lither, effortless- though Cormac wasn't so mesmerized that he missed the fourth butcher, Bidi, slide a crossbow from off his back.

Bidi screamed and blood spattered as he clutched his torn-open cheek, the crossbow dropped. Duana had unwrapped the belt she wore revealing it to be a whip. With a couple jerks of her arm, she left Bidi bleeding from several wound before aiding her sister; Oboro tripped and Melantha dropped to a crouch to let Maleki drive a dagger into the man's neck. Shocked at the fatal mistake, Maleki stood still long enough for Duana to get her whip around his neck. Melantha, sliding behind him, drove her spear up through his back and out his ribcage, leaving it there to spin on her toes to grab Jona's wrist, his shortsword merely scratching her hip and not disemboweling her. She kneed the man in the crotch.

"Well, that was refreshing," Duana said, walking up to stand beside her sister who cleaned her spearhead with Oboro's cloak. "Now then, will you flee back to your master or die?"

Bidi had left when he saw her advancing so Jona was left to hear her ultimatum. Melantha's spear was trained on his right eye as he struggled to his feet.

"Go on!" Melantha panted. "Fight or flee?"

Wisely, he retreated, hobbling back into the airship that took off with the door still closing.

"Right." Duana rewrapped the whip and called breezily back to the house. "Oh Mr. Byrne! You may come out now." She smiled sweetly like she did at the four butchers. "Don't worry. We're still friendly. For now. Might you make yourself useful to us?"

Cormac palmed his sword casually, very aware that keeping his distance meant next to nothing with Duana now. "What'd you have in mind?"

"I assume you came in an airship, correct?"

"Biplane."

She clapped her hands together. "Wonderful! You'll be taking us to the capital. You'll know where that is from your briefing. Melantha, get on the radio and take it with us. Things have been moved up slightly."

When Melantha passed him the radio set, he took it as he led the Oscura Sisters around the little seaside town her followed her through, the grass smelling sweet as they crushed it underfoot. Duana strolled

beside him, a light pack over her shoulder while Melantha bizarrely enough picked flowers, her spear once more in its back holster. Her hair was in a cottony afro brushed back from her face and combined with her flower picking, she had an untamed beauty to her like a mountain cat Cormac saw once.

"So um, you were waiting for those men to show up?" he asked Duana. She had picked up her sister's yellow hat and now wore it tilted to the side.

"Not really. We've been planning something for some time and were waiting for our uncle to move to the summer palace. Ah well, the plan's still the same." She ducked her head so her sister could crown her with a wreath of buttercups. "Oh thank you."

"And what is this plan?" he prompted, stepping over a rock.

"To take back what should be our Aunt's. Aunt Nisha trained for this for years and Adrian took it because he's older by eleven months. You see, sometimes its primogeniture but not always among us. Adrian was passed over because the man is foolish, vain, and impulsive. On top of that, everything is a competition to him, something to prove himself in. The Oscura Clan were determined to stay out of the fighting this time but one wrong sentence and now 'it's a threat to our reputation to stay down like old dogs'." She rolled her eyes.

"So break into the palace, dethrone your uncle, and install your aunt?" summarized Cormac. "I like it. It's simple. And this will settle the country?"

"Our part of the country, yes. Our airspace should be adequate, right?"

"Yeah but-"

She took him by the shoulders and spun him so they were face to face. "Listen well and good, Cormac Byrne. After we dethrone my uncle, you will leave for your homeland. This isn't up for discussion. We've heard what agents like you can do and while our governing system is not perfect, I will not tolerate you purposefully ruining it so your government can take advantage. There is a reason people in your field do not come back from Neralan and if you play your cards right, you may be the first. Understood?" Duana bat her pretty little lashes.

"Sure," he agreed too quickly.

Melantha shook her head, putting on her own flower crown.

"Good." She shaded her eyes with a hand. "Oh, a new model."

Cormac's biplane was painted dark blue with no distinct markings. Without asking, Melantha climbed in the back with the radio.

"How fortunate. Enough room for all three of us." Duana looked impassively at Cormac who hurriedly climbed in. Daintily, Duna lifted the hem of her skirt and stepped in like she rode in biplanes all the time. Melantha handed her a pair of goggles having put on her own. She whispered to her sister who passed her a strange clunky harness.

"We've got an hour. Everyone's in place," Melantha said. "Don't, as your people put it, 'cock it up' for us, eh Byrne?"

He turned around to grin at her, adjusting his ponytail. "Wouldn't dream of it, dear."

Melantha could've sworn he raised his middle finger as he fiddled with his hair.

4: The Coup

On account of the wind, they flew in silence to the capital of the Oscura's land, Teka Ornu, arriving more than an hour later.

Teka Ornu was beautiful, its tall multicolored minarets and domes shining copper and bronze and jade

in the light. The palace gates were shut to the people with carts and barrels and other yard supplies barricading the two entrances. A sunken green airship draped itself over the roof of the nearby courthouse but it was not on fire. Another airship, striped yellow and pink, circled slowly high overhead.

"Is that a circus?" Cormac peered up at it, trying to understand how why a circus would be in Teka Ornu. Maybe a premature celebration of Adrian's?

"I'm missing it all!" shouted Melantha.

"Not all, sister! Look! The main hall balcony!" She pointed down where a melee was occurring, the blue-and-gold uniform of the palace guard mixed with some people in civilian clothes wearing dark violet armbands on each upper arm.

Duana opened the top of her pack, unfurling a dark purple fabric that trailer below the biplane.

The fighting below slowed as people noticed the biplane. Cormac watched as a palace guard turned their glaive on a fellow comrade with more guards following suit until the remaining guards were herded together in a defensive huddle, largely defeated.

"There, now they know it's us. Most of the guards are still loyal to Nisha and her sect," Duana explained. "There shouldn't be too many casualties. Take us-"

A javelin pierced the tail of the biplane, throwing them into a slow spiral.

"Son of a cunt," growled Cormac, wrestling the plane into a straight flight.

"DAVEEEEEENNI!" Melantha shouted furiously then she was falling out the plane to Cormac's disbelief. As she fell, the harness she put on earlier shot out, brown cloth stretching between the metal rungs until she was gliding towards the roof where a light brown young man wielding a short blade on a chain waited.

"Who is that?!" Cormac shouted, knuckles white from gripping the yoke.

"My ex-boyfriend!" She unclipped her seatbelt, whip in hand. "I have to help her!" Again, an Oscura sister threw herself out his plane- except she didn't have a glider harness.

Her whip lashed out, wrapping around a metal light post and she swung up through a tower window far from Melantha and her ex-boyfriend. Cormac had to look away and land his biplane.

Melantha and Daveen fought viciously, the flat roof a nice arena with sheer drops on two sides and slanted tile on the other two. Being a head taller and having a long thin rapier, he thought to push her off but she kept dancing to the side, meeting his blows or pushing them to the side. He had seen her fight before and wouldn't allow her to use any of her tricks so their battle would have to be based on endurance.

Impatient, Daveen made a bad move with his rapier and she disarmed him, going for his throat.

Grinning hard, he produced a wide sharp blade like a cleaver from a hidden sheath, cutting smoothly through the shaft on a beeline to her neck.

Crack! Melantha pitched to the side, the blade whistling past her chin and almost taking her ear off as she fell hard on one knee, Duana's whip around her ankle. Daveen was just as surprised as she was but her life was on the line so she got over it quickly.

Melantha butted him in the lower stomach with her head, grabbing the arm with the blade and his left thigh to tackle him. His blade went clattering away and she drove her fist into his nose before rolling away with her spear blade.

"Good show, Daveen," she panted, rising to her feet, "but like I said, you'll never be a part of this family." She ran to the edge of the roof, sliding down to swing herself through a window, Duana following behind.

5: New Regime

The Oscura Sisters found their uncle barricaded in the council room. The jumped down from the hidden alcove in the rafters, startling the portly man.

"This can go one of two ways—" Duana was saying when Melantha walked up and snatched the gaudy golden crown off his head, causing him to flinch. "Damn it, Mel, I had a one-liner."

"We don't have time for that." She addressed her uncle. "It's over. Over half the palace staff are on our side and your sister's on her way. Will you call off your people or do we have to kill them all?"

Surprisingly, he had no last minute bribe or plea. He sighed and drew himself to his full height, dipping his head to look her in the eye. "Alright, alright. Just don't throw away the key when you're done with me."

By the time Cormac landed his plane in an empty playing field and ran back to the palace. The barricades were cleared away and dissidents were being put in the back of a gray automobile, one of the few he'd seen in Neralan. Immediately, guards surrounded him.

"Easy, easy." He put up his hands. "Duana and Melantha are expecting me," he lied, "and Duchess Nisha I expect."

The majority of the guards dispersed, leaving him with a single guide to the council room.

Like a cat, he slipped into the room, standing in the shadow of a bookshelf while Duana, Melantha, two older men, and a pretty woman in her later years sat around an oval table, papers piled on the table. He recognized the pretty woman as Nisha, a member of the ruling family.

"...with the broadcast sent, our forces should be clearing out of Ebon and Lumis lands by nightfall," one of the men was saying, his dreadlocks pulled back in a high bun. "What about Daveen Lumis?"

"My ex will be imprisoned until Larseno agrees to pull back his highwaymen," announced Duana. "He's not clever, we all know those are his hired thieves, so he can't deny it with is son's life on the line."

"Good and what about the weapons factories near the Segan Range?" asked Nisha.

"I have an idea for that but I'm going to need some engineers," said Melantha.

"Can't wait to hear it."

All heads whipped around to Cormac, Melantha lifting her upper lip in a snarl.

"What the hell are you doing in here? Duana, why is he in here?" she demanded. "Did you send for him? Did anyone?"

Duana tapped her chin, the corner of her mouth turning up slightly. "To be perfectly honest, I forgot about him. Aunt Nisha, this is Cormac Byrne, the latest agent of Ombrion."

Cormac tipped his head in assent.

Aunt Nisha laced her fingers together. "I see. I suppose he'll have to wait outside. Melantha, you almost killed him once. Follow through if he puts up a fight."

"Yes, ma'am." Somewhere she had found a halberd, the blood still drying on it.

She nudged him down the hall to a small balcony with two metal chairs. Outside, the yard below was being restored to order as the few bodies there were given the last rites, rammed in doors were being replaced, and a couple of men struck up a lively tune of revolution on a banjo and harmonica.

"So you're not mad? At missing all the important talk?" he asked her, turning his back to her to lean against the stone rail.

"Not really. They'll call me back in if they need to run something by me."

"Because you're important like that." He posed it as a question.

"I am," she said with confidence. "Unlike you, Mr. Byrne." She smiled, showing all her teeth. "Want to know something?"

He looked back at her. "Sure."

"We found your other two colleagues months ago. True, we were too late to stop them from doing what they came to do but we're getting better. Much faster reaction than last time. The fighting didn't even spill into our lands."

"So what do you have planned?"

"Me? I want to kill you. But Duana, merciful girl that she is, will probably convince Aunt Nisha to send you home with a slap on the wrist- and the embalmed bodies of your coworkers as a gesture of goodwill. No unmarked graves like six years ago." She gave a dangerous smile.

"How generous." He stopped slouching against the rail.

"Now, now, no need to run. I sent some people to confiscate your biplane as soon as I saw you running up the street. Guess one of our airships will have to get you back home." She shrugged with a smirk. "Can't be helped."

"You know, I should have seen this coming by now."

"True, but you people love underestimating us Neralanese. It's sooo much fun to see your faces when we surprise you." She giggled.

"Melantha," a guard said, standing in the hall. "Duchess Nisha would like to go over something with you. I'll watch this one."

"Alright." She gave another knowing smile to Cormac and left him with his new keeper.

The day after the coup, Cormac Byrne was sent off first thing in the morning on an official Beloscu airship, white flags of peace adorning the prow, stern, and top of the purple balloon. The Duchess, dressed in a simple violet dress, wearing a skirt and tunic of the same hue, watched him go from the roof, presenting a stern but beautiful front.

Cormac nodded to Melantha from his window seat. *Until next time, dark sister.*



Chibi Xiao

Candace Cox

Plastic - Bryan Clark

"Did you hear about the solar flare scheduled to happen sometime today?"

Dr. Charlette "Charlie" Phillips turned her head to the left. The older gentlemen by the window seat of the plane hadn't spoken at all during the three-hour flight except to request a water bottle from the stewardess. Now, since he had glanced over, she was able to see his features: white comb over, clean white beard, and kind eyes. He held the small, nearly depleted Dasani bottle in his right hand and his newspaper, which he had been reading since she sat down next to him, sat folded in his lap. His glasses were in his button up Polo pocket.

"It's actually supposed to hit the earth sometime during this flight. I'm thankful I got the window seat. I know I won't see anything, but it's interesting to be able to look out at the sky and wonder about what all kinds of fascinating events take place in the atmosphere."

Charlie had never given too much thought into cosmic events, planets, or the atmosphere. In fact, her obsession since childhood was on the human body. She always knew she would someday be a surgeon. After she successfully obtained her MD, she promised herself she would go spend some time with her parents up north to make up for the years of battling vehemently to gain the title of 'Doctor.' Charlie politely nodded, took a perfunctory glance out the window, and then looked back at the kind, elderly man.

"Can solar flares be dangerous?" she asked, not completely uninterested if truth be told.

"Maybe. I'm sure an astronaut would have more trouble than us Earthbound-folk. A powerful enough flare could potentially knock out the power grid, but I think those are rare. There're also different types of solar flares with different effects! I was just reading about them."

The old man looked back out of the small window again and appeared to have lost himself in thought. Charlie looked down at her hands for a moment. She was unsure of any response she should make. Maybe I'll look around for a book on solar flares when I land. Try to pick up a new hobby. Just an idea.

Charlie extended her hand slightly toward the old man. "I'm Charlie," she said. "I'm heading to visit my parents. I graduated recently. Haven't seen them in a while."

The old man smiled. "I'm Roger." He switched the water bottle to his left hand and awkwardly bent his right hand to grasp hers.

"I'm going to visit my grandso..."

The water bottle in his left hand suddenly expanded with a puff sound. Where a water bottle had been cradled in his hand now sat what looked like a giant piece of translucent popcorn.

Roger and Charlie stared at the chunk of plastic which was now nearly taking up the entire front of the seat. They were completely incapable of processing what just happened. Roger looked over to Charlie with a worried expression. Less than a second later Roger convulsed once as all the plastic in his body expanded, streaming like spaghetti strings and cauliflower out of his pores, eyeballs, and every orifice of his body.

Charlie felt a sudden bloating feeling burst from her stomach and skin before everything went blank.

Fin.



Cassie S2 E4

Grace Todd

Porcelain Doll - Hannah Hutson

Porcelain doll on the marionette
Who's going to take up the strings today?

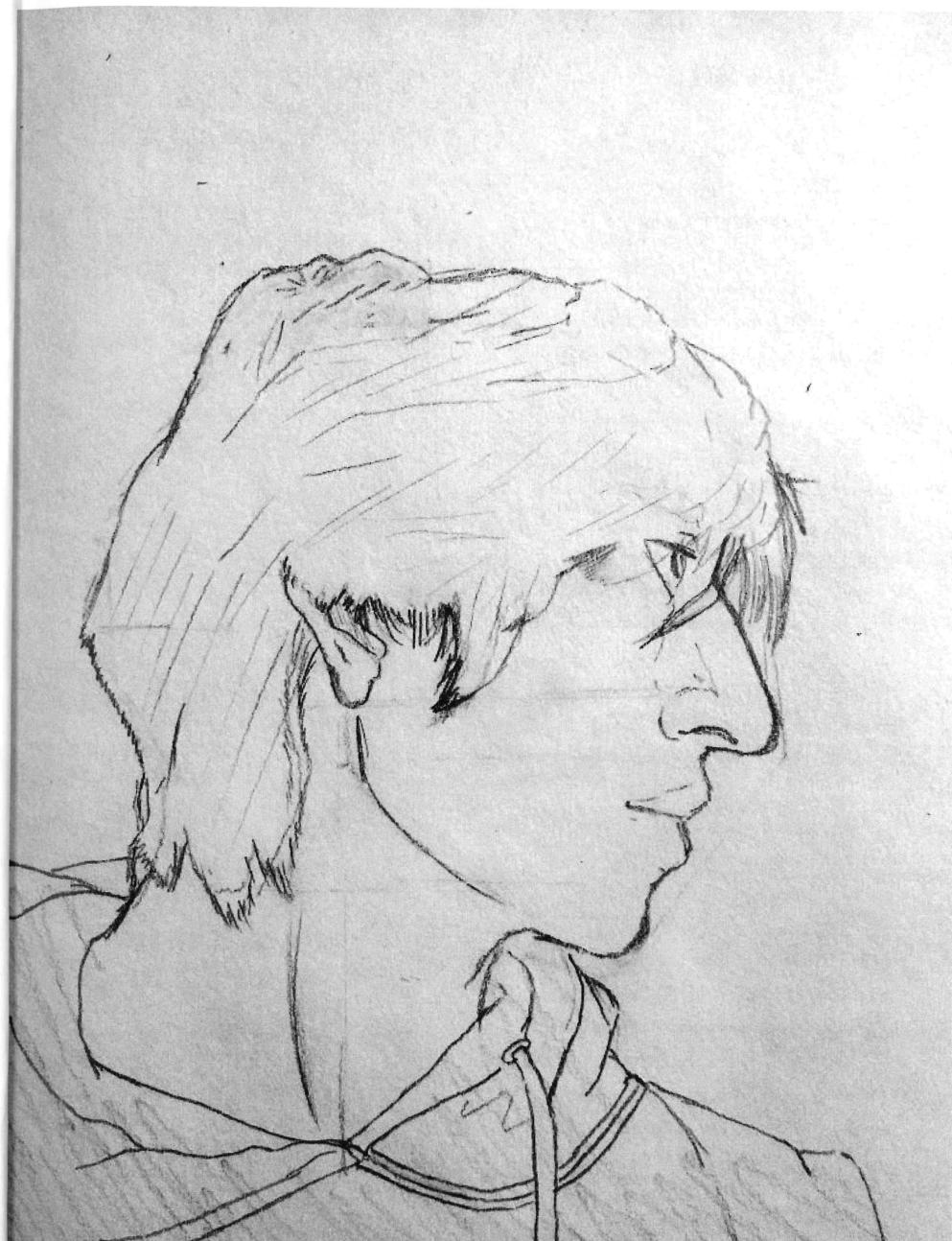
Will it be the man you want to love,
The friends you want to like you,
The coach you're trying to please?

Like plants that wither
in the hot sun, you cower
to hope for acceptance.

You dance on glass—shatter dancer
Why do you dance with strings?

Slice the ropes— expectation thread—
break open to find
who you want yourself to be.

On the Next Page
Self Portrait
Alexis Rodriguez



Le Nomad - Terry Held

It is twilight in the Marais.

Sitting on the balcony of my apartment,
I bask in the day's remaining breath.

I look down into the ruelle, it is quiet,
Save for the occasional passers by, whispering
Shaded words, almost heard in the other tongue.

A bedroll unfurled, the flag of homelessness.
One lone nomad, stealing a hidden space,
Gathering sleep to his soul, he begs for nothing.

I pause, ponder his state, his personage.
Who are you and why are you here this night?
Do you have peace, do troubles keep you awake?

I am hungry, unwrap my belated dinner.
Baguette, of course, very American, non?
The bread is torn, it tastes of dreams sated.

Saucisson sec, beadlets of fat seek a home,
As the knife slices its way through it.
Once, twice, thrice, dense slices satisfy me.

Now the cheese seeks some attention.
A blue veined treasure from the caves of Larzac.
Gabriel Coulet they say crafts the best, agreed.

Drunken shouting below halts my hunger.
I lean over the railing, dim lights show the man
Awake, looking about, crouching in the shadows.

Three singing oafs, now staggering like clowns
Trundle past. The parade now gone, the nomad looks
In the sky, searching for sleep, searching for peace.

My appetite now gone, I neatly wrap the meal,
Maybe the nomad is hungry, I make my way down,
But he has left, moved on to somewhere else.

It is nightfall in the Marais.
Sitting on the balcony of my apartment,
I turn my gaze to the moonlit breeze.

The Bum - Jacob Spencer

A silver train screeched into the State and Lake station. The train was covered in graffiti and brown ice formed a thin sheet over the cars. It shook when it braked, and sparks burst from the tracks. When it stopped, Mac alone entered a car in which just one other man—a bum—sat.

The bum wore a brown tattered winter coat and torn blue jeans. His arms and legs were crossed, and his greasy long hair hung over raw pink knuckles. Mac took a seat next to the door across from him.

It was sleepy and dark out and snowing. The windows on the train were foggy and the lights outside were warped and muted. The dirty passenger looked up at Mac. "Hey," he croaked.

"Hi," said Mac.

"Pretty fucking cold out there, isn't it?"

"Would you like my scarf?"

The bum parted his greasy hair. "Really?"

The calm voice over the intercom came on. "Doors closing." Then the train went squealing down the tracks again.

"Yeah, of course," said Mac. He unwrapped the scarf around his neck and extended it.

The bum leaned forward, snatched it, and threw it around his neck. He laughed cheerily. "Thanks! You're a real friend."

"Of course. I'm always happy to help those in need."

Then a wide, open smile slowly formed on the bum's face. He flashed a few yellow pirate teeth. "Are you really?"

Mac smiled. "Yes."

The bum got up and waddled towards Mac; the train started to shake, and he grasped the overhead holding bar. His hand twisted and tightened as though he were strangling it. "Do you think you could help me with something else too?" he whispered.

"What is it?"

"I need a few bucks. Just a few. I want to get some hot chocolate tonight."

Mac had always heard not to give beggars money. That as soon as you give them one cent, they demand another. Greedy little fuckers, that was what Mac heard a cop call them. But this man was frail and had purple blots underneath his eyes; his cheeks were pale as a Canadian's. The L was probably his only shelter. Besides, a dollar or two would surely be no problem. Mac smiled again and pulled a pair of bills from his wallet.

"What's that?" The bum leaned forward and squinted his eyes. "Come on, man, you can do better than that." He shook his head and frowned.

Mac froze, his hand still outstretched. His smile faded. "What do you mean?"

The bum reached into his jean pocket. The intercom announced they were approaching the next station. "You can do better than that, friend. You're a good and charitable guy."

"But I really don't have any more than this."

The bum shook his head and pulled a box cutter from his pocket. "A charitable guy like you has more than that." He held his weapon with a firm and steady grip.

Mac nodded. He grabbed a five-dollar bill. The robber shook his head. "You're gonna have to do better than that, friend."

Mac hesitated. The next station was approaching. Someone else would come onboard and he could get help. He pulled another five, and still the robber shook his head.

"Doors opening," the peaceful man on the intercom said. The robber watched the doors. They squeaked loud and slow like an engine that needed lube. One man with a black ball cap pulled low over his face and his eyes fixed on his phone stepped on and slumped into a seat on the opposite end of the car. Mac and the robber watched. He never lifted his craned head.

"Doors closing." The robber turned his hawkish gaze back to Mac.

"Come on, friend. I'm getting out at the next stop." He tightened his grip on the box cutter.

Mac sighed and tossed his wallet to the robber. The dirty bum stuffed the wallet into his pocket. "You're a good man," said the robber. He flashed his pirate teeth again. "You're a real good man."

"Can I at least keep my ID?"

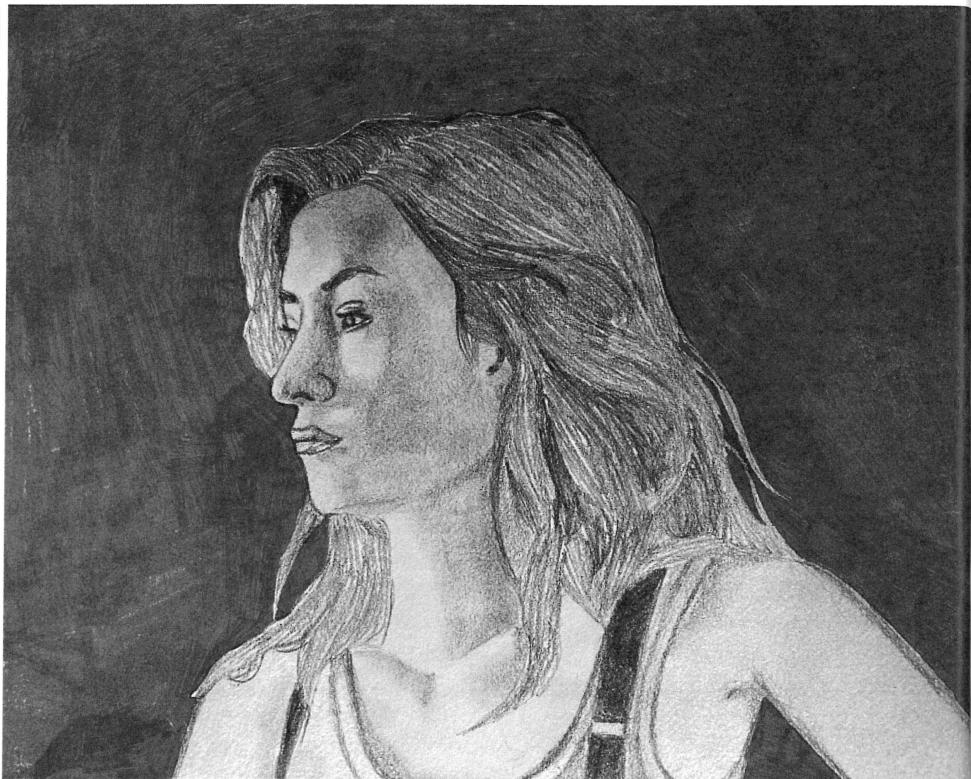
"I kind of want to keep a picture of you. To remind myself of the nicest guy I ever met. That's what you are, you know: the nicest guy I ever met."

Mac clasped his hands in his lap. He leaned forward and bowed his head.

"Hey," the robber rasped. "Cheer up. Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Yes," Mac whispered.

The train soon screamed to a stop and the robber stepped off, patting Mac on the shoulder as he went.



The Girl Who Sees Red

Kai Morphis

Lone Wolf - Mel Hartman

He walked quickly, unsure if he was being followed. It was past time for the streetlights to have come on, but the road he walked down had none. His shoes made an audible tapping sound on the sidewalk with each step, and he silently cursed himself. If only he had accepted that ride, he wouldn't be walking home by himself.

He lifted his arm and his Apple watch lit up. 1:37am, far past his usual bedtime. He had just had way too much fun to leave any earlier. It was a Friday night, the bars in town had been lively, and the alcohol was flowing. But that's not why he stayed out so late. He thought back on the previous hours and smiled to himself.

He wasn't much of a drinker, that's not why he was at the bar. He spent most of the night nursing a jack and coke and just enjoying the atmosphere. He was new to the area, though not new to the town. He used to live about twenty minutes south of the city, but he had recently moved into an apartment in the 'old town' district, and this was his first time going to a bar nearby. He had invited a couple of friends out with him and so far they were all having a great time.

"Hey, bartender!" his friend, Ted, called. The bartender, a pretty girl who looked to be in her 30s, walked over. "Let me get another shot of Jager."

"If you don't slow down, you're going to puke," the man told his friend. His friend shrugged and laughed.

"Wouldn't be the first time, Jacob. I'll drink water after this, I promise."

Jacob shook his head and sipped his drink. It burned as it went down his throat. How anyone drank alcohol regularly was beyond him.

His other friend, Catharine, was on the other side of him, sipping on some mixed drink. He wasn't sure what it was, but it smelled fruity and kind of sour.

"Don't look now, but I think that guy is checking you out," she said, nodding her head in the direction of the pool tables that sat across the room.

Jacob slyly looked over his shoulder and spotted the guy. He was a taller, somewhat chubby guy, and looked to be close to Jacob's age or at least not far off. He caught Jacob looking and looked away quickly, focusing on the pool game happening near him.

"You think he's really checking me out?" Jacob asked Catharine. Ted overheard the conversation and looked over at the guy too.

"He's looking again, so probably," Ted slurred. He had already taken his shot of Jager and was now slowly sipping on a cup of water.

"Should I go say hi?" Jacob asked.

"You could always send him a drink," Catharine suggested.

"Good idea." Jacob called over the bartender and asked if she knew what the guy had ordered. She said she was pretty sure he was just drinking the house beer, so Jacob sent him another glass of it.

Within a few minutes of him getting the beer, the guy made his way over and sat on the empty stool next to Catharine and looked over at Jacob. "Thanks for the drink."

"You're welcome," Jacob replied, smiling. "Are you here with anyone?"

"Nope, I'm alone tonight. I assume these are your friends?" the man said, nodding at Catharine and Ted. Everyone introduced themselves to each other and soon they were chatting it up about sports, work, and

whatever else they could think of. Turned out, the new guy, Timothy, had a lot in common with Jacob. They were both new to the area, worked in finance, and were both originally from much smaller cities. It seemed like the match gods had smiled down on the two of them.

Catharine and Ted decided to head home around midnight, so they said their goodbyes and parted ways, with Jacob deciding to stay longer and hang out with his new friend.

By the end of the night, the two of them were already planning their next outing together. This time, without Catharine and Ted.

"I had a good night," Timothy said as they left the bar. It was getting close to closing time and they were both exhausted anyway.

"Yeah, me too," Jacob replied, smiling. They had walked outside and up to what Jacob assumed to be Timothy's car. They exchanged phone numbers, then Timothy took a step closer.

"Can I give you a kiss?"

"Yeah," Jacob agreed, more than happy to accept. They kissed, and Jacob felt sparks. They then hugged and said their goodbyes.

"You sure you don't want a ride home?" Timothy asked for the second time. Jacob shook his head.

"I'm just down the road, and I could use the fresh air. Thanks though."

Timothy said goodnight, then got in his car and drove out of the parking lot. Jacob started walking past all the rest of the cars in the parking lot but stopped quickly as a truck pulled out way too fast and nearly ran him over. He jumped out of the way just in time and the truck halted. The guy in the driver seat rolled his window down and looked over at Jacob.

"Get out of my way," he yelled, ending the statement by calling Jacob the all too well-known F-slur. He then sped out of the parking lot, slinging gravel behind him.

Jacob sighed in frustration and continued walking. Maybe next time he and Timothy would meet up at a gay bar instead of a regular one. He left the parking lot and headed towards the street, where he soon swore he heard footsteps following him.

Jacob's thoughts were back in the present as he heard a twig break behind him. He had just walked by an area of the sidewalk that was covered with small branches blown down by a recent storm, so the person couldn't be too far behind him. He was only about a block from his apartment, surely he could make it if he ran.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys, then, without looking behind him, he broke into a run.

He couldn't hear anything chasing him, but he was also breathing hard and his heart was pounding so it was probably blocking out any other noises. He could see his apartment just up the road, so he picked up the pace. By the time he reached the front door, he was out of breath and his legs were on fire. He wasn't much into exercise, other than the occasional visit to his apartment's gym, so the impromptu sprint had taken it all out of him.

Just as he was about to put the key in the keyhole, he was suddenly struck near the waist and knocked down. He panicked, thinking someone from the bar had followed him and now he'd be beaten and left for dead. He was right there! Right at his apartment, he had almost made it!

He closed his eyes and waited for another blow, for the pain to erupt in his body and for his life to flash before his eyes. He waited and waited... but nothing happened.

Before he could open his eyes to look around him, however, a warm, wet, fleshy tongue streaked across his face. His eyes shot open, and he looked up, completely bewildered. A very large, very fluffy white dog stood over him, mouth open, tongue hanging out and looking happy as could be that he had caught his prey.

Jacob was dumbfounded. It was a dog. A large dog, but a dog. He had been followed, chased, and knocked down by a dog. And it seemed friendly.

"Hey buddy," he said, reaching up to scratch the dog's head. He slowly sat up, still petting the dog, and sat cross-legged on the ground. "Where did you come from?"

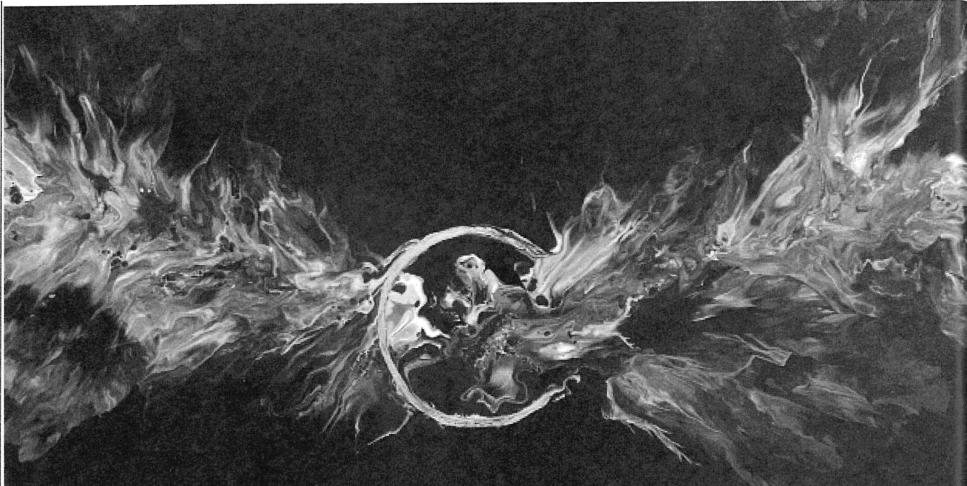
The dog said nothing and went for another slobbery kiss.

"Thanks, friend." Jacob said, wiping the slobber off his face. He thought for a few minutes. He wasn't supposed to have pets in his apartment above forty pounds and this dog was definitely over that. But he couldn't just leave him out here.

"Wanna come inside, buddy?" The dog barked in approval and Jacob shushed him. "You can't let anyone else know you're here or I'll get in trouble."

Jacob got up off the ground, brushed himself off, and slipped his key into the lock, this time without being knocked down. It clicked and he swung open the door. The dog followed him inside and into the elevator. When they reached the third floor, they headed to Jacob's apartment. He once again put the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door. The dog strode right in, like he owned the place, and climbed up on the couch. Jacob laughed and shook his head, then closed and locked the door behind him and pulled out his cell phone.

He dialed a number and held the phone to his ear. A voice picked up on the other line and Jacob smiled. "Hey, Timothy? You'll never guess what just happened to me."



New Beginnings

Deena Jarrett

Paper Doll - Heather Terry

"I have to move two of my radios in here," Father had said as we sat around the dining room table. He scratched his lower lip like he does when he's about to say something important and told us we mustn't touch them. That they are grown-up things and little people mustn't touch what isn't ours.

We swore we would mind him. And that we'd leave them alone. After he left, we sat at the table and cut out the dresses and clothes for our paper dolls. The radio watched us, peeking out through the closed cabinet doors caging them in.

We always got us in trouble because she wouldn't listen. Once, he told us to stay clear of the garage and not go playing with the things out there and she'd snuck in as soon as he'd gone. I know she didn't mean for things to break, but they did, and when Father came home and saw what had happened, his work all in pieces on the ground, he was so angry at us.

Now he'd locked them in the cabinet so we couldn't get at them. He wouldn't even let us look at them while he was there. Not even though I'd sworn we'd be careful. Even though I promised that I didn't break his things. Not ever.

Father didn't trust me because of her.

Our doll dropped, floating and flipping down to the table. I stared at it where it lay sprawled on the table, face down. Unmoving. "No," I said. "Don't."

She ignored me. The doll crumpled under foot, its paper dress wrinkling.

A tight knot coiled in my stomach. "Please don't." I stood, my hand clenching and unclenching around the scissor handles.

She poked at the brass keyhole, the same thoughtful look on her face that she'd had last time she'd gotten us in trouble.

"Father said we mustn't."

She grinned. Her hand stretched out, revealing the paperclip that had held our cutouts together. She straightened it and put the paperclip into the keyhole. She never leaves me a choice. She was not a good girl like me. I listened to Father. I didn't break his things like she did. It was her, always her that got us in trouble.

The scissors bit into our hand. I had to. I had to make her stop, even though stopping her hurt us both.

After, we lay on the floor, face down. Unmoving. Red flowers bloomed prettily across our dress. Like the one we'd been cutting out. The one that'd gotten wrinkled.

I left the paperclip in the cabinet. Father would understand. I'd show him. He'll see what she did and know how I'm his good girl. He'd know that I stopped her.

Contributors' Page

Blake Anglin is a 2010 graduate of UAM with a Bachelors of Arts. To who is reading this now, we do not have much connection, you and I. I hope you won't mind if I think of you as a friend.

Gregory Borse is an Associate Professor at a small campus in a large university system in the Yeoman's South, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate level courses in Literary Theory, American Literature, British Literature, Philosophy, World Literature, Film, and, occasionally, Medieval Literature, Russian Literature, Modern Poetry, and (coming soon!) Faulkner, Shakespeare, and Non-Shakespearean Renaissance Literature. He is the author of "Other Canons: A Selection of Non-Western Masterpieces" (revised edition forthcoming, Kendall Hunt Publishing, Summer 2022) as well as the short stories "Joyellen" (Westrade Review, Summer Exclusive, June 2021) and "Dumb Dick Daley" (PrometheusDreaming, November 2021), whose plotlines intersect with that of "Bucky's Third Second Chance." His first novel, "The Incorruptibles" is in search of a publisher.

Bryan "B.L." Clark is a 2015 UAM alumnus, science fiction author, amateur philosopher, and proud member of the #Wolfpackauthors. In his spare time he enjoys spending time with his wife, cats, friends and family, playing violin badly and exploring Virtual Reality. He primarily writes comedy, weird fiction, and science fiction, and is the author of "The Man in the Hall," "The Untold One," and a number of other short stories.

Candace Cox is a newly graduated artist with a BFA. She focuses on drawing and painting as her main forms of expression. If you would like to see more of her work, her Instagram is candyapple370.

Blake Denton, a native of Alabama, holds a BA in History, an MA in History, and a Master of Library & Information Studies. In 2019, he joined the faculty at UAM as the Special Collections Librarian. In his free time, Blake enjoys exploring the historic places and natural beauty of Arkansas.

Mel Hartman graduated from UAM in 2015 with a degree in creative writing and they are currently pursuing their MFA in the same field from SNHU. In their spare time they run a local cat rescue and read a lot of books. They are currently writing their first novel as well.

Terry Held is an MFA student at the University of Arkansas-Monticello focused on poetry. He also is an adjunct instructor at Northwest Arkansas Community College in Bentonville, Arkansas. Terry has self-published a poetry chapbook, *Salt Pig* and has several gastronomy related non-fiction stories published in magazines in the United States.

Hannah Hutson is a recent UAM Alumni who graduated in 2021 with and English-Creative Writing degree. She particularly enjoys coffee, crawfish, and cuddling with her recent rescue mutt Maxx.

Deena Jarrett, raised in small town Gillett, Arkansas, is currently a local high school library media specialist with 16 years' experience in education. In the three years since she discovered the technique, she has found creating abstract fluid art to be a fun yet challenging hobby.

Alexia Lams is currently a sophomore at the University of Arkansas at Monticello getting their Bachelor's in Art.

Lachelle Lewis is an aspiring writer from southeast Arkansas. She has several grand-kittens, and her hobbies include reading, procrastinating, and daydreaming.

Kimberly Mathis is a native of Dallas, Texas, and holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Texas A&M University-Commerce. She is a published author, of a memoir entitled *Dope Girl* which debuted in the summer of 2019. She is currently working on a second book, *A Liar in Stilettos*. Kim is in her final year of the MFA program at The University of Arkansas-Monticello, with an emphasis on creative non-fiction. She loves spending time with her husband and three children and enjoys interior design, traveling, writing, and a good book.

Kai Morphis is from Monticello, Arkansas and is currently a student at the University of Arkansas at Monticello. Their mediums consist of digital drawings or pencil work. The Work they create is inspired by people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community and people who are going through struggles, regardless if it is a mental or physical struggle.

Alexis Rodriguez is a self-taught artist who loves working with colors and making dramatic pieces of art. His favorite art styles are Japanese, black and white, anime, and portraits.

Jacob Spencer is a recent UAM graduate with a bachelor's degree in History. In addition to his writing, Jacob plays piano, is currently learning Russian, and intends to pursue graduate education in History and/or creative writing.

Carol Strong is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Arkansas-Monticello. After completing her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, she completed her Masters of Arts from Monash University (Melbourne, Australia) and her Doctorate in Political Science from the University of Melbourne (Melbourne, Australia). She is a member of the Council of Undergraduate Research and has taken over 100 students to present their work at conferences in cities ranging from Chicago (Illinois) and New Orleans (Louisiana) domestically, to Berlin (Germany), and Doha (Qatar) internationally. She has published with Edwin Mellon Press, has a forthcoming book with Lexington Press and has presented her work in San Juan, Puerto Rico; Berlin, Germany; Patras, Greece; Melbourne, Australia; Doha, Qatar and Washington D.C, USA. She is further an amateur photographer who passionately chronicles her world travels through the lens of a camera.

Heather Terry is a 2019 MFA graduate from UAM. She writes short fiction from her home in Ohio, where she enjoys long walks in the snow pretending summer will be more than a blip.

Grace Todd is a 2017 UAM graduate with a bachelor's degree in art, currently living in North Carolina building clientele as a commission artist.

Heather Watson is a 2021 graduate of UAM, as well as a single mother of three girls and Gammie to two grandchildren with one on the way. She spends her days reading and ready to start writing again.

Editors

Jacey Wallace is a junior here at UAM. She is majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She goes by the nickname "Gremlin" and plans on getting a minor in Anxiety.

Adam Naiser is graduating this semester with a degree in Business Administration and a minor in English-Creative Writing. He enjoys writing, listening to music, and debating.

Joanna Poole, a sophomore, is majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. When she isn't spending countless hours doing homework and cramming for exams, she enjoys listening to true crime podcasts, and working as a professional photographer.

Dr. Jess Hylton, the Bleeding Heart who, after deciding her life wasn't challenging enough, added more challenges by picking up a stray dog who gave birth to 8 puppies. Aside from caring for 4 additional dogs in her home, she decided to take on the task of being a guiding light for the current editors.