

COMMENTARIUS

ART AND LITERARY MAGAZINE



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The Classroom
by Brooklynn Day

“Good morning students,”
August 21, the first day
Students poured in one after another
All of them rambling about the summer gossip
Jenny’s out with Brad
Brad got with Sarah
No one said hi to me

“There will be no school tomorrow,”
December 2, winter break is so close
It’s snowing outside, I think
It’s so much colder now
Everyone is excited for the break
I’m not

“The game is this Friday,”
March 13, springtime
The band students are showing off their new song
The sports students are being rowdy as always
There are ants in the classroom now
I’m not ready for it to be over

“Last day before summer break,”
May 26, the last day of school
Everyone is ready and excited
There are laughs, cries, joy, fear
They want to leave,
I want to leave with them

There are no announcements today
I don’t know what day it is anymore
It’s quiet and dark
No students come into class anymore
There are no more visitors
Besides a just as lonesome as me teacher
Visiting occasionally, never speaking to me

I am stuck
In the same spot
As I have been for thirty-two years
On the floor

Alone
Layers of history beneath me
Sealed in tiers of sealant
But no one there to listen

I am alone
Until

“Good morning students,”
August 21, the first day



"Framed"
by Macie Gibbs

Nights Like These
by Brooklynn Day

“So, have you decided?”

“On college?”

“Yes, have you decided on the college you plan to go to?”

“No, not yet.”

“Vesper, you’re halfway through your second semester of senior year of high school. You’re a bright kid, you don’t even have to apply to just one.”

“I know, I know.” Vesper sounded exasperated.

“You just need to decide on where you want to go.”

The counselor had been pressuring them since they had stepped foot into school about what college they wanted to attend after high school. Every time Vesper would get called into her office they would go over the same thing. Where do you want to go, I don't know, you know you need to make a decision, yes I know, I'll see you again soon. Vesper could feel the moist mid-March marsh-like air clinging to their verdant sweater every time they would go outside, but they would insist on wearing it if someone ever suggested they would get hot. It was always far too humid than they felt any person could handle. This constant humidity and unreasonable heat only fueled their disdain for the area they had lived in since as far back as they would have liked to remember.

When they got home, their parents had been sitting at the dinner table, waiting. Of course, they went through the same talk they always did whenever Vesper got home. How was school? It was fine. Did you learn anything new? Not really. Make any new friends? No. And that’s all they would say to each other until in a few hours when dinner would be ready and they would stay in their room just a little too long and miss the family time. However, today their mom had something else to say,

“So have you decided?”

“No, I haven’t.” Vesper’s voice hissed across the room as they walked in from school, slugging their stuff onto the floor.

“Why not?” Their father piped up.

“I just haven’t yet, okay?” They stomped up the first few steps leading to the upstairs of the house, intending to stomp up the rest and find sanctuary in their room until their mother called after them.

“Well, Ja-” There was a pause between them, it was quiet enough to hear a heartbeat. And Vesper braced themselves for what their parents would continue with. “Vesper,” There was a sigh of relief. “Whatever you decide, we'll support you.”

They stomped up the rest of the stairs. After burying their face in their pale light grey pillow that had lost its color from the wash and finding solace in their rundown-off white stuffed rabbit they had kept on their bedside table for as long as they could remember, their phone rang.

“Hey, Vesper,” It had been Blake. They had always had five out of seven classes every year since they had started middle school together. They had grown up together, and Vesper thought of him as their best friend. Blake was like a fox. He had the ability to be clever and cunning when he saw fit. Like when he convinced the counselor not to suspend him for skipping class by saying he was out studying in some study group she had probably never heard of. At the same time, he was such a chatterbox who could talk your ear off given the chance.

“I was just wondering-”

“I swear if you ask about college I’m jumping out my window.” They rolled on their side to face the window, just to look out of it.

“Well, I hope you’re on the first floor then. I just put in my application for-” Vesper pulled the phone away from their ear.

“Yeah, cool. I’ve got to go.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’ll call you later.”

* * *

Vesper found themselves awake at 3:45 that night, three hours before their alarm. The flaxen moon light creeping in and spreading itself across their black turning blue bed spread. They had several unread texts and a missed call from Blake. “I applied to the college right outside of town,” He had sent with a smiley face attached to it. Vesper set their phone down and placed their hands on their face to shield their eyes from the moonlight creeping in. The thought of living right outside of town with Blake and going to college sounded so scary. Going to college would mean change, and change meant they couldn’t recite what everyone would say to them everyday like they had been used to.

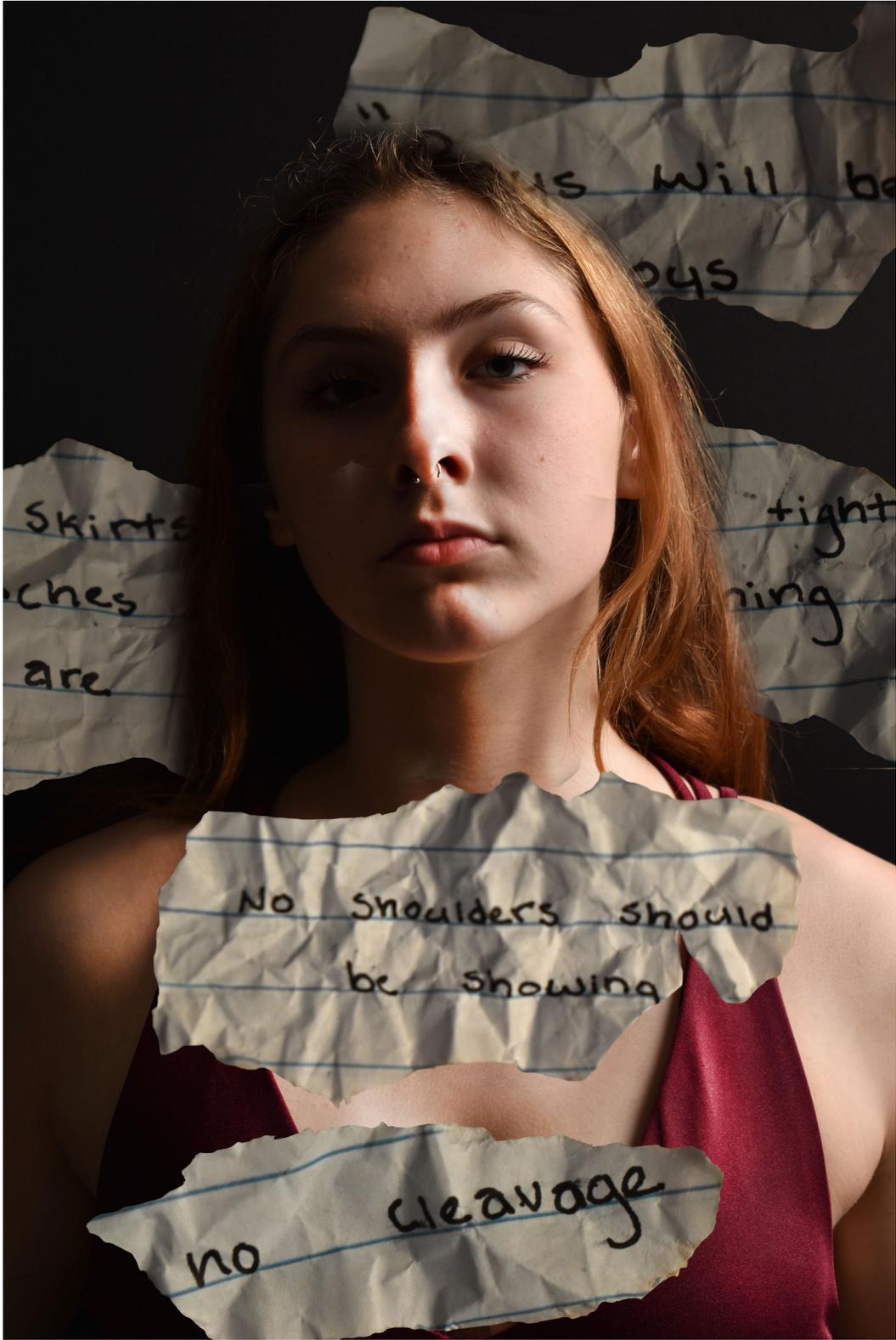
And yet Blake seemed to take what seemed to be this crazy life altering threat to them in stride, not only that but he seemed happier with himself. How someone could be content with changing everything they had ever known, being willingly thrust into a chaotic and unsure lifestyle made no sense to Vesper. They had already had to go through this. The introductions, the name, the “who are you”, the “who am I?”. It felt like the hardness of the world, or at least the fear of it, had not reached Blake. He still had this silly, optimistic hope about the future. He had always been like that, looking for the best in a stressful situation. It never seemed to affect him like it would have affected Vesper. But he was happy. He was happy not thinking about the what ifs and the could haves and what would happen. He was happy not laying in his bed at nearly four in the morning contemplating life decisions. Surely if Blake was so happy, then Vesper could be too, right?

“So, have you decided?” Vesper approached the counselor today, first thing in the morning as soon as her office door opened.

“Yes. Here,” They had finally found the perfect college for them.

“Really, here? That’s nice. Your friend Blake came in and applied for it the other day.”

“I know.” They were ready to finally let themselves live life, not just with themselves but with Blake as well. The application they filled out in the counselor’s office with the fluorescent light beaming down on them, and the hardly risen sun just barely peeking its head through the window was absolutely terrifying for Vesper. But in a way, it was beautifully freeing.*



"Dress Code"
by Morgan Kruse

Playset
by Chasady Dodson

I thought it would be there forever,
a permanent structure of my youth.
My refuge during spring and summer.
The founding of my imagination.

The chains of my swing
squeaked like mice.
My mother would push me,
I would swing my legs.
Back and forth and back and forth
She would say "Jump Chasady,
get as high as you can!"

The plastic of my slide
burned like a hot fire.
My cousin would go down headfirst,
I could never pull such a stunt.
My dog would climb to the top of the slide,
she never made it very far.

I can still hear the creak
the structure made at times of play.
My brother would toss me on his shoulders,
so I could reach the monkey bars.
I could never do them on my own.

Even though I know where it stands,
I'll never hear the creak again.
The squeak of chains,
will never sound quite the same.



"Soldier"
by Elizabeth Ford

Runa
By Morgan Kruse

I could feel the warm flickers of my blazing campfire dance around the cold and crisp air that filled the cabin. I felt comfortable under the thick layers of elk and bearskin that protected me from the harsh Nordic winters but found no comfort in the hunger in my body. Perhaps the company in my cabin would curb my hunger. I reached my hand out, trying to find the company of my beloved Runa, my hand meeting with the soft feeling of her thick coat. Her eyes, old and tired, darted open and turned her gaze towards me. I could feel her staring daggers through me from the discontent of me waking her up, but I could also sense a fondness coming from her.

I reached down to pet her head. While Runa wasn't able to speak, I could read her like runes; she hadn't been feeling like herself for a while now. I remember when I had first met her. It was at the top of a hill, with a glade overlooking the clear sapphire lake and trees so tall you swore they touched Asgard. I remember that the wind was calm, with the faint scent of lemmikki flowers and that ravens were singing their twisted songs. In that field stood Runa, a feisty and lean gray wolf. She was growling and threatening, but she was walking with an agonizing limp and was clearly in no state to hunt or fight. She couldn't have been much older than a year, so she must have had a pack, but despite my efforts, none could be found. I reluctantly took her back to my tribe, much to their dismay, because I couldn't stand to see such a young life wither away, and I fed her, tended to the wound on her leg, and over time we became close. She didn't snarl at me anymore, and let me share the food I bought for her. Sometimes, she'd even let me pet her. She would help me and my tribemates hunt, and was always eager to chase after any moving thing, even if it was bigger and stronger than her. She was always playing around and wrestling with me when we weren't hunting. We were once a strong duo: a young man entering adulthood and his best friend. But now she was frail, and never seemed to arise from the bedding I had set aside for her next to the fire. Despite how my tribemates once encouraged me to let her go, she was still my other half.

I reached down to pet her soft head. She closed her eyes as my hand glided over the soft fur of her head. After I finished petting Runa, I rose from the bed of fur and slowly walked towards the entrance to the cabin. The blizzard hadn't yet stopped but had only in fact become stronger. I put on my large fur boots and took a sharp breath to prepare myself for the bitter cold that would soon replace the warmth of the fire. I stepped outside and watched as my leg disappeared under the blanket of white snow.

The journey to the gravesite was about as difficult as trying to run in water. It was worth it though if I was able to pay my respects to my fallen comrades. It had been almost two years since my tribe was obliterated by a pernicious sickness. Anybody that had survived the illness had been seriously weakened and thus, was unable to practically live. Everyone else had wasted away, but I was the sole survivor. Me and Runa. I haven't stopped visiting my family since then, not in the rain, not in the heat, and especially not in the snow. I bent down to read the runes on their graves. Erik. Arne. Bjorne, I remember that he was smart. Astrid, my older sister. She was motherly. In the midst of my mourning, I heard the soft sound of snow packing together. Startled, I jolted my head towards the source of the noise.

There stood Runa, her tail barely wagging. She was looking at me with grumpy eyes, and I soon understood why when my stomach let out a low growl. It had been a few days since we had caught any food, and Runa wasn't about to let me forget that. I guess I would have to cut my visit short, otherwise, Runa and I would go hungry.

I stumbled up from my squatting position, and after stabilizing myself, started making my way to our cabin. I beckoned the elder wolf to follow me, and for once in the last few moons, she sprinted towards me. A smile

formed on my lips; I was happy to see my best friend energetically romp around the winter snow again, even for a few minutes. We headed back to our cabin, and I grabbed my yew bow, arrows, and iron dagger, and we set off into the forest.

During the warmer season, hunts wouldn't take more than a couple of hours, minutes even, as the animals in the woodland were bountiful and no matter how hard you tried, you would always end up running into a few rabbits, grouse, deer, and if you were lucky possibly a moose. However, winters were hard for everyone, including the animals, and hunts could take days, sometimes weeks to find so much as a bony malnourished rabbit, which even then, was considered a decent meal during the cold season. While both I and Runa are starving and desperate for food as anyone else is, I'm not worried about going hungry, because me and Runa are survivors, and we know how to find food in these times, even if we have to search the entire land from mountain to sea. Onwards Runa and I marched to find our next meal, leaving nothing but tracks in the snow.

* * *

It had been maybe less than a couple of hours since Runa and I had set out. So far, nothing. I will admit, the hunger is starting to take whatever sanity I have left in me. I can practically feel my own muscles starting to waste away from the lack of sustenance. Runa is getting tired too. She isn't prancing along like she was earlier, but instead, dragging her paws through the snow, keeping her head down low, and stopping to catch her raspy breath every so minute. Whatever optimism I had earlier has since vanished.

Or at least, I thought it had. I'm suddenly caught off guard by a tawny shape moving around in the wall of trees surrounding me. It's not a skinny shape too, it's round, well-fed, and quickly moving through the trees. This wasn't just a skinny rabbit that would keep us alive, no, it was a deer, fattened and lively; a deer that would keep me and Runa fed for weeks. I aimed my bow towards the deer, and as soon as I found my target, I let go and let fate take its course.

Silence.

Then, the air filled with the deer's shocked cry. The arrow had managed to pierce the deer's leg. It wasn't where I was aiming for, but I still had one more chance, Runa.

"Go, Runa!" The deer had finally worn off its shock and had begun to flee, but Juno had begun her pursuit as well. We were finally going to eat. I started my chase as well, as I wasn't going to miss this. Excitement filled the air as I got closer to my next meal. For once in these past few years, I felt hope. I could practically feel the warmth of a good meal, the freedom of running through the forested undergrowth, and the sadness of loneliness and loss fall from my shoulders.

A plume of snow rose from the ground. I felt my excitement peak like I was on top of the highest mountain. I looked up and froze.

Why was the deer still running...?

I then turned my attention to the source of the fall. There lay Runa, panting and exhausted.

"What are you doing? GO!" I yelled. Runa responded with a tired whimper. I watched as the deer began to run behind the trees, leaving nothing but footprints and blood behind. I threw my bow on the ground in frustration. I took out my dagger and began pursuit of the deer. I can't give up now. I still had a chance.

The deer leapt through the undergrowth and snow with grace, but I'm fast too. If I could just run a little more...

Snap.

I was face down in the frozen snow. My ankle felt like it was on fire. I looked down towards my ankle. I guess I had tried to hold my ankle with my armed hand because along with redness and swelling, there was now a giant gash running up my leg.

I looked back at the treeline. They were gone. Despite being injured, the deer had managed to outrun me. Maybe it was the frustration of losing my best chance of eating all winter, or how Juno just let the deer go, but I couldn't help but scream out into the frozen emptiness.

* * *

The forest was quiet and dead. Nothing but the sound of the everlasting blizzard and rustling of the leaves could be heard. No trees or stones could be seen, as the woods were enveloped in midnight's shadow. A bitter cold had filled the forest, with any nightly dangers hiding away in their dens or nests to escape the winter wind.

I laid in my warm blanket, with the fire's warmth beside me. My leg still felt like I had been stung by the deadliest wasps hundreds of times over. This winter was going to be hard. I turned my attention to Juno. She was laying on the cold ground, tired and famished. Just as famished as I was. I guess she must have felt my stare from across the room, because she had opened her yellow eyes and turned towards me. She got up from her resting place, and limped towards me, and fell down beside me. She had put her head next to my hand. I turned away from her, and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

We had left our overnight campsite in the midst of the red sunrise. While the forest was now filled with the morning light, no creatures could still be found. I would collapse from hunger at any given moment now. We needed food. At this point, Runa followed far behind me, barely a ghost behind the blizzard wind that carried through the forest.

Runa let out an alarming bark. I turned towards her. Her ears were perked and tall, her fur on end, and her back hunched, looking ready to attack. She was looking directly at my wound. Despite how hard I tried to fix my cut, it was still bleeding. I clenched my fists and gritted my teeth in frustration. I barked back at her, "Maybe if you hadn't destroyed our only chance of food this winter, I wouldn't be angry at you!" I turned away and stormed off in the other direction. Runa's barking grew louder and then faded as I left her behind in the woods.

* * *

I had reached a familiar meadow, once green and lush, but now overtaken by snow. I was out on my own on the search for food. I was desperate. It had been almost three days since I had set off on my journey, and I hadn't found a single morsel. No herbs. No berries. No meat. I was going mad.

Step.

I could feel myself stop in my tracks. A noise came from the left of me.

Step.

I turned towards the source of the noise with optimism. It had to be food!

Step.

Then, a brown monster appeared before me, its large black eyes filled with the intent to kill, and its claws towering above my face. This bear was as hungry as I was, and it clearly wasn't going to pass up on an opportunity to hunt down weakened prey.

I stood there in shock. This is where I was going to die. I was going to die alone, in the cold icy meadow between the fearsome jaws of a hungry bear. I closed my eyes, ready to feel the sharp claws of death, but

instead, I heard the roar of a bear and the familiar bark of her.

I opened my eyes, surprised I was still alive. In front of me was Runa and the bear, with its claws digging into her skin. It was the ultimate battle between life and death, and Juno was losing. A pool of blood had painted the snow beneath them. I searched around me frantically for the closest weapon I had, anything that could save Runa. My hands reached the familiar curve of my bow, and I quickly snatched it from my pack. I aimed the flint arrow towards the brown beast and released it as soon as I found its heart. The sharp arrow pierced its thick skin, and it let go of Runa and staggered on the ground. It was stunned, but it wasn't backing down yet. I pulled out my dagger from my pack and began running towards the bear, mustering up all of my anger and courage. I had to rip him away from my Runa. Letting out a scream so loud it could be heard throughout the land, I raised my dagger and delivered the final blow. The bear decided that perhaps, I wasn't weak enough to be prey. Perhaps me and Juno were too much trouble. Defeated and injured, it ran away, disappearing behind the edge of the forest.

I didn't have time to catch my breath before I found myself running towards my friend. She was bleeding heavily, but she was still breathing. I picked her up and held her in my arms, and she turned her friendly golden gaze towards me. Despite how relaxed she felt being held in my strong arms, she let out whimpers of pain. The wounds, deep and plentiful, covered her body. No matter how much I wanted to lie to myself, she was losing blood fast. She was going to die. I held her tighter and began to rub her soft fur. Choked cries escaped my lips, remembering how I had last treated her.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

Despite how I had treated her, I could feel that she wasn't angry at me. At least not anymore. I picked her up and began walking.

* * *

We had reached the glade where we had first met. While covered in white snow, it was still peaceful and beautiful. Runa laid in my arms comfortably. I set her down beneath the roots of a tree, covered with pine needles to shelter her from the snow. It was just Runa and me in this empty meadow. I laid my hand on her head, and she stared back at me. We were far too tired to care about the hunger that had pained us for days on end. We didn't have enough time to care.

Maybe it was the purple sunset that lit up the frozen lake or the quiet sound of the wind, but it felt comforting being here. Somehow, some of the lemmikki flowers that had been here from when Runa and I had first met had by some miracle survived this dreadful winter. I sat next to Runa, wrapping my arms around her, and stayed silent as we watched the night sky rise.*

Deadlines

By Morgan Kruse

Due tomorrow.

Due in two hours.

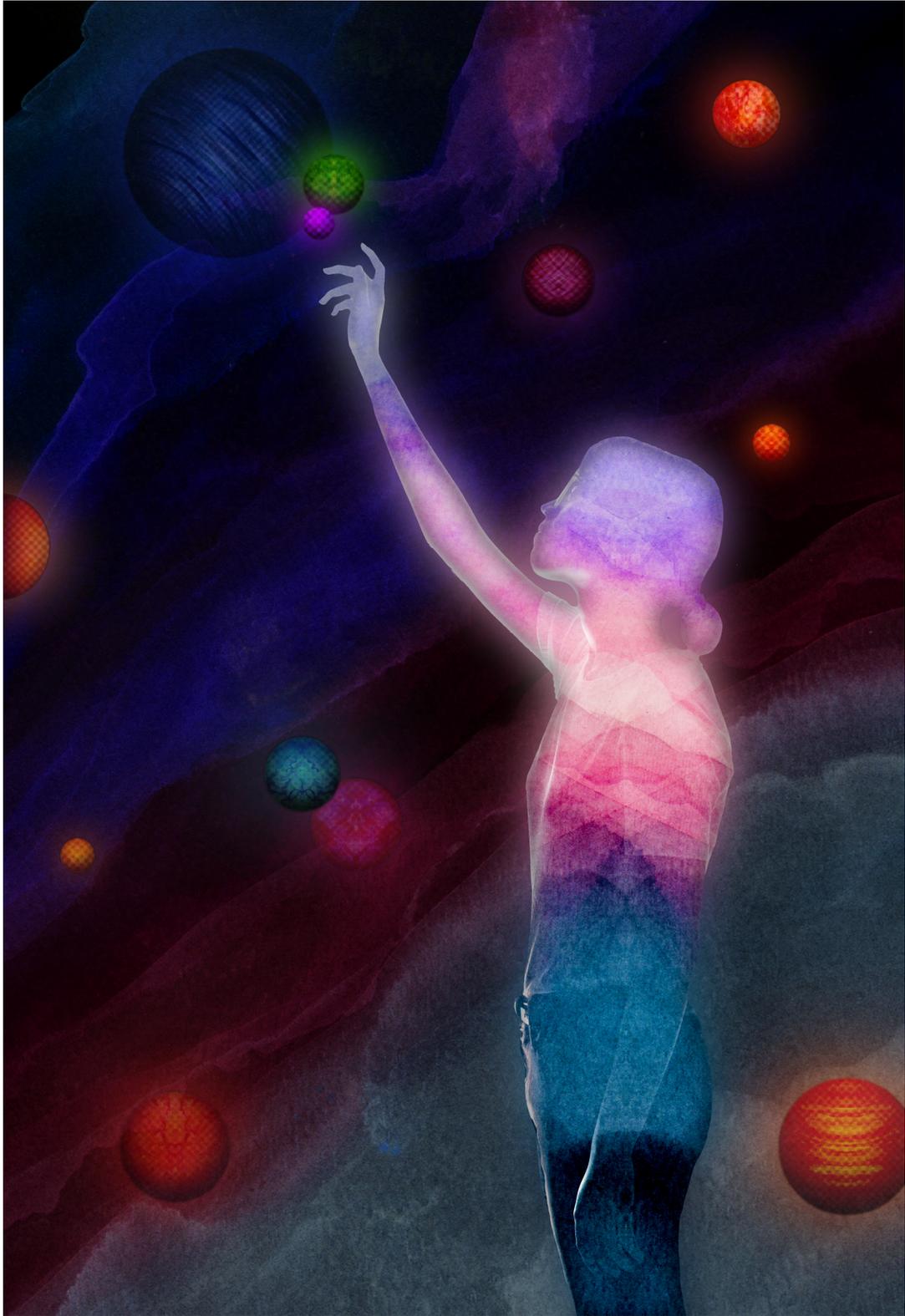
Due yesterday.

There is never one night
where I find myself peacefully
under soft blankets
or good dreams.
Nightmares about disappointment
and failure
Of making below a 90,
that won't be good
for my GPA.

Long hours into the night
hold me close
as I write a research paper at 3 AM
for AP English.
After that,
an uncompleted project
in AP Art.

I have a life outside
of school,
but nobody seems to
care.
The only thing that
matters
if I finish my Pre-Cal
review for a test
I'm bound to fail.

What's the point of
Sleep?
I have all these
assignments due,
so I guess I'll pull
my third all-nighter
this week.



"Release"
by Mackenzie Wasson

Fish

by Jaelyn Ousley

The short, wrinkly man squinted at the bright orange sun floating in the sky, pondering the amount of time he had left until it turned dark. The boat he stood on swayed gently as he turned away from the sun and hobbled over to his worn-down fishing poles. He scratched his greying beard. *How much longer do I have?* The fisherman, Bert, questioned once again and turned back to the sun, his orange crocheted bucket hat shielding his eyes from the burning glare. It was a miracle his dementia hadn't gotten him lost - or worse, killed. But Bert knew Lake Fishie like the back of his hand. His fishing trips with his father on late summer nights helped him familiarize himself with the vast lake. After determining the amount of time left until nightfall for the second time, the man grabbed his gear. He hooked his bait onto his pole with trembling hands and cast out his line, the action making his biceps ache with old age and pain. *One more catch and I can go home*, he thought and grinned as he watched his bobber bounce up and down.

His pole yanked violently as the bobber disappeared and the line uncoiled. Bert nearly fell off his boat, but regained his balance from the sudden surprise and reeled the line in as quickly as his old arms could manage. His heart raced as he continued reeling in the fish for what felt like an eternity, or so he thought. It was as if he and the fish were playing a game of tug-a-war, the nylon line going back and forth between the two. Just as he thought he was victorious, the line snapped, and the metal fishing rod was ripped from his hands.

Bert stopped and braced his hands on his bony knees, catching his breath and waiting for his heart to slow. Never had he been unable to reel in a fish in his entire life, even with his muscles as weak as they were.

This, he realized, wasn't just an ordinary fish. It was much bigger than he had anticipated. Just then, the waters darkened and a giant shadow passed under his boat. He watched the ancient-looking fish pass by under his boat. *I've got to get away from this lake now*, he thought, the monster still swimming nearby. Bert ran - as best as he could manage - over to his steering wheel while trying not to fall over. He turned the key into the ignition. Nothing. He tried one more time, but no response came from the vehicle. The old fisherman tried to calm his nerves as he vaguely remembered a bright red gas canister that he set in his boat not that many months ago. Or maybe it was blue? Bert searched the boat, opening seats and throwing old gear that had been lying around. He swore violently, an action unlike him, and wiped the dirty sweat from his brow.

Bert sat for a moment, trying to recollect his thoughts, but it was too late. He walked over to the ignition, his mind blanks and forgetful of the previous events that had just occurred, and turned the key. After repeating the same process all over again, Bert glared at the shadow that passed underneath his boat again. He definitely hadn't forgotten the freaky-looking fish he had encountered earlier. But he wasn't going to let the fish ruin his trip again, he thought as he snapped one of his older, wooden fishing poles and sharpened the end of it into a makeshift spear.

Bert marched over to the side of his boat and stared into the still green water. He waited, like a predator sitting in silence for its prey. The water darkened as the fish, nearly the size of his boat, passed underneath him. Not taking any chances, Bert plunged his sad attempt at a spear towards the fish as hard as he could. The wooden spear splashed in the water and in the direction of the shadow but disappeared in the murkiness of the lake. *Ha. Nice try fish. Nobody beats me.* Bert smiled and turned away from the water.

He heard the splash come from behind him, and before he could turn around to investigate the noise, a sharp pain shot through his lower back. Bert screamed in agony and staggered back.

The fish, now out of water, looking almost like a pile of bones with its skin nearly falling off, had its claws clamped tight around Bert's lower torso. Bert took the other end of his wooden fishing rod and whacked the ugly-looking fish off of him. It fell to the ground with a thump and Bert kicked it back into the water before it could do anything else. *I'm going to die here*, Bert realized as he put pressure on his gushing wound with his

hands.

A motor sounded not too far behind him, and Bert took the opportunity to call for help. This would most likely be his only chance to escape before dark. A pontoon boat neared closer to him and a voice called over.

“Everything OK over there?” The stranger yelled, looking blurry and small from where Bert stood.

Bert felt faint but managed to reply. “I just got attacked by some monster out here and my boat is out of gas!” The pontoon boat neared closer and Bert could make out the details of the stranger. Maybe about the age of 20, the stranger had bright blonde hair, his tight curls pulled up into a messy bun. His tan skin contrasted against his hair and a bright t-shirt with pineapples printed on it. The stranger’s blue eyes widened as he looked at Bert’s blood-covered side.

“Hang on one second,” the man called, “I’m going to get closer so you can hop on.

The sides of their boats were nearly touching, and the man helped Bert climb over onto his boat. He pulled out a first aid kit and bandaged Bert’s wound as best as he could.

“Thank you.” Bert rasped and drank from a water bottle the man handed him. The curly-haired stranger nodded, looking more shaken up than Bert.

“My name is Daniel.” He spoke. “What did you say happened again?”

Bert told him everything, trailing off a bit, and talked about his father as well as his struggles with dementia. Daniel had to remind him what he was talking about a few times before Bert finished.

Daniel still looked skeptical before replying, “And you’re sure that you didn’t just fall over? Maybe it’s just your dementia.” He slowly added, staring at Bert like he was a madman.

No. This can’t be. Nobody is going to believe me, and I’m going to forget all of this. Bert realized as the boat headed back towards the docks. *

Polaroid
by Jaelyn Ousley

White frame and black background,
a woman stared from within the polaroid.
Her short, autumn red hair
framed her slim, pale face.
Eyes, bright and blue
from the flash of the camera,
crinkled with happiness.
Love.

What the camera couldn't capture
was the hideousness
that lurked within the woman.
How wonderful would it be
if her beauty hadn't just been on the outside?
If those days, where my head was filled
with her loud,
viscous screams,
never existed.

The camera never captured
that dark night I woke up to
a small, dark figure looming over me,
knife tightly clutched in hand.
Her short hair, red,
as if covered in blood.
And those blue eyes, dark, and full of
so
much
hatred.

I'll never know
how I escaped from such a monster.
Adrenaline,
strong and heavy,
caused my vision to become filled
with darkness.

The camera never captured that.
No, the camera only displayed
those false, luring features
of the woman I once loved.

If only a camera
could capture so much more.



"Ghostly Reflection"
by Chasady Dodson

Bus Incident
by Taylor Schang

“Dear Cecily,

Today was an unusual day. I didn't hear my alarm so I woke up about fifteen minutes before the bus arrived. I had to hurry and miss breakfast, don't scold me. I know that it isn't good to miss meals. The bus was almost completely full. The last time it was like that was when you still took the bus. The ride was quiet and finally had that autumn-morning chill that we used to dread. The school was also cold, even the gym which (we both know) always has that suffocating warmth from the bodies and action.

Another odd thing was the teachers all had forgotten about the homework assignments. What a coincidence! Good thing I didn't do it (like normal). I never got how you had the time to do assignments after spending all day already learning. I don't think I ever thanked you enough for letting me leech off of your brain. Lunch was actually normal too, just the boring flavorless chicken sandwiches you pick on me about for actually enjoying. The rest of my school day was just filled with little differences in the normal routine. Pencil sharpeners were moved to different tables, desks were in new formations, there were no couples standing in the hallways. It felt like I was on the wrong page of a 'Spot The Difference!' game. It really started to get weird when I got home though. I kicked off my shoes like normal and threw my backpack on the couch. I searched in the pantry for something to snack on. I turned on the tv and then I looked at my phone. Unlike my usual self, I hadn't been on my phone a lot during the day. No notifications prompted my attention and I was too focused on the odd things around me that I didn't need any external entertainment. I saw the date and a small notification from 'Calendar' on my screen. And it was your name. The date was the same as it always is. And the most unusual thing of the entire day had hit me. I had forgotten that today was the anniversary. 'Cecily's day' as my phone reminds me. How could I forget when I watched it with my own eyes? My palms sweat every time I see other students cross in front of that stupid bus.

Is this really how it all ends? My grieving and love? Is this the beginning of the end? Will it be a quick or slow burn? For the past five years, I've remembered and dedicated this whole day to you. I used to walk to school the whole week surrounding today. I would only eat those horrible healthy chips and I'd drink that horrible healthy kale smoothie. I would cry and ask mom if she would come home early so we could have your favorite dinner. And I forgot. I don't know how it happened, maybe it was school or driving lessons. How ironic.

I promise that I didn't mean to, I promise that I didn't plan on making you sit up there all day knowing that life had taken me away from you. I promise it won't happen again. I hope you know how angry I am. How disappointed I am in myself for riding that bus today and eating my snacks and not looking at my phone. Please forgive me; I can't.

*You were always so forgiving,
Dani.”*

He sits at his desk with the waterlogged paper. A knock on his door doesn't disrupt the atmosphere as his mother walks in and wraps her arms around his shoulders. The room is dark except for the spotlight of the desk lamp on the two people and the letter.



"Out of Reach"
by Jaime Herrera

Eleon Gadner
By: Taylor Schang

Somewhere in the world, there is a family with very involved parents and a well-behaved and antisocial child living in their boring cul de sac home. Where all of the mailboxes and gardens look the same, and every home is one of three natural colors. Somewhere, but not here. Instead, you will find a green-fenced, dark-roofed home with a bizarre twist at any and every corner. In the yard, you will come across the loving comfort of an old apple tree with two peaceful rocking chairs and a garden. But not any garden, a giant mushroom garden! They are the height of a toddler but can be the width of a full-grown man if given enough darkness. and behind this garden to the right of this house protrudes a crude brick room in the shape of a bubble. This is the new loving home of Eloan Gadner.

It has been a few years of bouncing between families and states for Eloan, each time she got comfortable there was always an incident with schools or siblings. The Wrights, The Lynchs, the Espinozas and now the Gadners. A simple family, wife and husband, and their overweight cat Dobble. Once they heard of a 15-year-old girl with frizzy auburn hair and a knack for getting into odd situations they felt practically obligated to take her in as one of their own. The Gadners had no other children because of their career-oriented life so far. Nature has not helped their pursuits anyways.

Eloan is sitting in the car taking her to her new home watching as the new town passes by. A city not as bustling as when she lived in California or Washington but definitely a busy and spread out town. They pass two shopping malls, a big library, multiple sports fields and clusters of businesses and food establishments. About ten minutes from their destination Eloan sees her new school, Halloway High school. This is the first family in 3 years to put her into a normal public school instead of trying homeschooling and special schools for delinquents. As far as marks on her behavior papers there were only the detentions for talking too much in class or spending too much time lazily wandering around campus and hallways, resulting in tardies. There were no fights or scuffles with students or teachers. Truly no reason to be so harsh...right? *This year I'll do better. New school, new family, new grade.* Eloan thinks victoriously. All of the negative attention towards her habits haven't brought her down or made her think twice about the things she does naturally. It isn't her fault they are too stiff to understand her joys. Driving up the road she recognizes the strange house she had seen pictures of and there was no photoshop involved. The green fences, the odd brick room, the mushrooms. *What on earth would they need those for? Witchcraft?*

"Welcome home!" a bright voice exclaims as Eloan steps out of the car grabbing her bags. "Oh here let us help!" Mr. and Mrs. Gadner tumble over and help gather the suitcases and boxes out of the trunk and back seat of the car.

"Thank you im-" Eloan reaches her hand out and is abruptly cut off.

"Eloan! Sherry, Mrs.Gadner, or mom, whatever is fine!" she embraces Eloan's hands

"Tim." a broad and towering man says holding his hand out and giving a firm shake.

"This is most definitely the strangest house I've seen! What are the uh,"

"Oh, the mushrooms! The silly thing really, Dobble can't stand to eat anything else. We've tried about every bag on the shelves and yet he can't hold anything down but these."

"How did you figure that out?"

"I had a small shelf garden inside, I enjoy fresh basil and things, and when we would come home the mushroom heads would be missing! After a while, we put two and two together and started this garden! They were the normal color and size until we put them here but for some reason, they have evolved into.... these!" she says gesturing to the red, green, purple, and orange-tinted mushrooms that go up to her hips.

“The soil,” he says, pointing his index finger up. Eloen turns to face Mrs. Gardner and she shakes her head and smiles back at Eloen. A smile creeps up to her own face. *Charming family.*

They gather all of their things and go inside. Walking in they enter the living room first, the open floor plan leads to the kitchen and a hallway with three doors.

“That first door is the bathroom, next is our room and at the end of the hall is your new room!” bumping into walls and fumbling with the door handle they all finally end up getting all the boxes and suitcases into the room.

Inside you are greeted with a large cat tree with three platforms and a base with a two-foot wide and one and a half foot-high entrance to a little place for Dobble to rest. To the left and on the farthest wall there is a large bookcase. Made out of dark wood it follows the curve of the wall creating a half-moon shape, there is a cream-colored rug and dark wood floors and the rest of the room is empty.

“This is where the cat stays and where my old office was! Tim put in the bookcase after the wall started warping outwards as it does. We had so many people come in and look at it and no one can come up with what happened and how to fix it without it costing an arm and a leg. I think it's charming on the inside.” Mrs. Gardner explains while they stack boxes and things up in the corners of the room.

“When did it start doing that?” Eloen questions as she feels Dobble graze against her leg.

“Oh, I'm not sure when I think it was right after we got Dobble wasn't it? That Christmas? Right, Tim?” Tim nods once in response.

“The Soil,” he says, pointing his index finger up again. This time when Mrs. Gardner turns away, he gives Eloen a wink and smile. She giggles a little.

“Him and his conspiracies.” she rolls her eyes. “Anyways, you can start unpacking and we will start dinner! If you need any help putting this away don't be shy to call for us, we are thinking about putting decorations and things up this weekend though so just put them in a safe place until then. The bed in here is brand new.” Mrs. Gardner explains. They leave Eloen to her unpacking.

Going through her suitcase and a few boxes labeled ‘clothes’ and ‘bathroom’ Eloen puts all of her clothes in her closet and sets up her toiletries in the bathroom. She is finished with this by the time dinner is ready and they eat. They talk about their excitement to have Eloen around and about the town, schools, and neighborhood.

“I think you'll fit in quite nicely here! We get along well with the neighbors so you should fit right in!” Mrs. Gardner says while passing out mashed potatoes.

“Well, that makes me feel better.” Eloen chuckles quietly, her hands in her lap.

“And I've heard the schools here encourage socializing! There should be no more detentions or anything.” Mrs. Gardner winks at her. Another one of those small smiles crept on Eloen's face before she even realized it. *Finally, they know it's not my fault. It's just the way I am! Why should I be punished?*

“Actually we are quite a close-knit town. Big enough for the variety but small enough for the community! Right, Tim?” She looks up at him. He sits at the end of the table holding his spoon up with his fist down on the table. A grin curls up with his beard.

“Yes.” His deep cheerful voice replies.

“He's silly! Oh dear we are such a social town you'll find friends soon!” she says as she sits down and begins their meal. “I know you've been in many different settings with different beliefs but we do pray before meals if you'd like to join us.” Mrs. Gardner says softly reaching out to Tim's hand and then across the table to Eloen.

“I'd love to.” Eloen smiles and takes her hand. Mrs. Gardner recites a very basic and sweet message. “Keep us close and keep us stable. We do not know your plans for us and for dear Eloen here. but if I must be

so big to ask you to keep those paths intertwined I apologize.” *Dear whoever or whatever you are, I think these people deserve this happiness as much as I do and I believe we are the missing piece to each other's puzzle. “Amen.”*

After dinner they all go to bed. Eloen wakes up the next morning and finds all of her new school supplies laying out on the dinner table.

“We got the basics if we need specific things we can go shopping tonight.” Mrs. Gardner says excitedly packing a water bottle and a bag of chips into the backpack.

“Thank you, you really didn't need to do all of this,” Eloen says softly, staring at all of the effort and care put into this small display. *I've had plenty of kind gestures like this from past families, I really hope this lasts longer.*

“Oh nonsense of course we did, I made breakfast burritos so you could eat it on the bus.” Mrs. Gardner says. Thank you again.

Putting all of her things together Eloen gets dressed, grabs her breakfast, and heads off to the bus stop her new parents described to her. Everyone at the bus stop was secluded and didn't speak while waiting. And when they got on the bus. *It's just early, it is probably normal.* But still, the little voice in the back of her head can't help but repeat Mrs. Gardner's words from the previous night. “Oh, we are such a social town you'll find friends soon!” *Am I the problem?*

The ride was long and boring but eventually, it arrived at the new school. The process of getting her schedule and finding her classes wasn't too hard until the third period. Bumping into a pretty girl with bubble gum pink hair she watches as the girl turns around sharply.

“Watch it!” she scoffs, pulling away in disgust.

“I'm sorry I totally didn't mean to do that! I didn't see you at all” Eloen tries to spit out before the girl simply turns around and walks away. Well, isn't that lovely?

After a little while of searching and taking wrong turns, Eloen finds herself in Ms. Barton's classroom. Algebra I reads across the top of the door frame and the door is left slightly ajar. Walking in she is bombarded with a colorful classroom full of a variety of characters. A boy with shoulder-length hair and baggy ripped jeans opens the door for her, a peppy teacher assists her to her seat, a group of students pull their bags closer to their seats to provide a pathway, and dreadfully waiting for her at the back of the classroom is her new seat buddy. The girl from the hallways. She sits there looking through her phone's camera to check on her hair curls, completely ignoring the assignment in front of her. And unlike the equations on the paper, she spots Eloen almost immediately as she approaches. Scoffing and obviously offended by her presence she looks at the empty seat next to her, and back to Eloen frantically.

“Oh you have got to be kidding me!” she shrieks. “Ms. B you told me I could have a table to myself at the beginning of the year! And now you break that promise? With her?” she flails her hand in the direction of Eloen. She looks around the classroom as this scuffle happens. *They are avoiding me like I have snake hair. Oh there are some eyes! They seem to pity me.*

“Gertrude, the circumstances have changed. We have nowhere else to seat new students since you've claimed that table. I'm sorry but there simply are no other options!” Ms. Barton gestures for Eloen to sit. Making eye contact with a few students while walking back she notices the sympathetic and pitiful eyes warning her of her fate.

“Hi.” Eloen squeaks as she puts her backpack at the foot of the desk and pulls out the chair. Which only receives a glare in return and a prompt ‘Humph!’ from the girl next to her when Ms. Barton starts her lecture again. *This can't be happening again.*

Throughout the class period, Eloen tries to make small talk and friendly advances with Gertrude and gets



"The Escape"
by Zoe Creel

nothing out of her. Once they get their assignment on Pythagorean theorem, Eloen notices that Gertrude struggles with some problems.

“It is confusing for everyone don't worry.” Eloen whispers with a smile.

“I am not confused! Do you think I'm stupid?” Gertrude asks in a low voice filled with venom.

“No! I don't mean that I just-”

“Yeah, I thought so.” *Maybe you are quite stupid. You have no idea what I think of you, Gertrude. Just like the others. Always the same. Truly it's a shame your kind doesn't come in different flavors.*

This is about the only sort of conversation Eloen has with Gertrude or any other student that day. As Eloen finds herself in her other classrooms she notices how no one can seem to look at her. *No no no this can't be happening. What did I do?* At lunch, she is denied seats. *I bumped into one person and now I have the cheese touch.* That's when it hits her. There is nothing wrong with her. *I will not lose a chance at a social life here because of Gertrude. I will not! I swear it. They expect me to make friends.*

Eloen comes home defeated. Walking into the strange house and plopping down her bag she sees Mrs. Gardner in the kitchen. She turns and Eloen gives her a smile.

“Oh, your first day! How was it! Tell me all about it! Teachers, besties, romantic interests?” She gestures for Eloen to sit at the table and then picks up a mixing bowl she previously had in her hands. *Celebration cookies.*

“Oh, it was probably the best first day I've ever had! Out of the many.” Eloen giggles. Putting a handful of mushroom bits into the food bowl for Dobble. Mrs. Gardner at that moment glows as she had just seen God.

“I'm so glad! I'm sure people were flocking left and right!” She beams.

“Most definitely.” Eloen replies. *If only she knew. Thank god she doesn't.*

The next three days are a replica of the last. Offerings of pencils and paper, answers for questions when Gertrude is called on, and anything else is shot down immediately with no mercy or hesitation. Coming from an established family in this town Gertrude has never had to earn the respect of others, even with people whom her peers see as superiors. *Perfect girl.* And being any sort of close to her personally or physically means that you are tainted and it is dangerous to get close to you. Because of this ‘cheese touch,’ no one approaches Eloen in any other classes and she gets little to no recognition when speaking to other students because of their prompt departure from the area. *They won't speak to me because of her and yet they all speak to her? They must be afraid of her wrath.* Oh and indeed they were. If you cross Gertrude, especially if it's with a person she can't stand, there is no social recovery. You are either with or against her and everyone else. Being isolated and stuck with the mean girl who hates her, she is forced to listen to Gertrude rant about how she lost a hair bow she wore the day before. And when Eloen tries to offer some advice or ideas about what had happened with it, Gertrude reacts in her usual mean manner. Frustrated and defeated, Eloen finally snaps.

“I'm sick and tired of you and your snotty-ness! I've been nothing but nice to you and what do you do? You knock every try! You are no better than me or anyone else in this school. Why do you think the whole world revolves around you? Maybe if you stepped down from that pedestal you put yourself on you'd realize how shallow you are.” Standing up and slamming her hands on the desk she turns to the rest of the class.

“And you all feed this self-obsession! Do you have no self-worth for yourselves? We all know that she has less character than any of us and you let her walk all over you-” she is cut off.

“Ms. Gardner, I think you need to go home.” Ms. Barton's voice booms in the classroom. This is the only time any of the students had heard her raise her voice before. It was a bitter sting that made anyone's stomach churn and crumble into itself. Angry and embarrassed Eloen looks around at her peers and sees every single pair of eyes looking away from her. *They know it's true! Don't act like I'm the crazy one!* She then walks to the office and gets picked up

“Do you want to talk about it?” Mr. Gardner asked. This surprised Eloen, these are probably the most words she has ever heard him say at one time and they aren't scolding.

“Not really,” she says, keeping her head looking away from him and out of the window. When Eloen got home she stayed in her room and ranted to Dobbie about the incident. Feeding him the occasional piece of mushroom or throwing it for him to retrieve. *This is just like every other time. I can't let this snotty brat keep me from having...this.*

Mrs. Gardner comes home from work a few hours after Eloen gets back home. She calls Eloen into the living room and is seated with a glass of wine.

“What happened today? I thought everything was going well?”

Eloen sits down cautiously. *This cannot be happening. Not again. These never end right.*

“She egged me on all day. I tried telling her how I felt and she ignored me. We were fine the other day i don't know what happened.” Eloen looks down at her hands, tears pooling in her eyes. “I couldn't hold my frustration back.”

“Okay. Do you go back tomorrow?” Mrs. Gardner asks. Eloen's head bolts up.

“I do.” In the smallest part of her voice, the statement could sound almost like a question.

“Ok, ask the teacher to move you to a different place in class.” Mrs. Gardner gives a small smile and walks over to the kitchen. “I was thinking tacos for dinner, how does that sound?”

“Amazing.” *Any food would have sounded amazing as long as it's here.*

Eloen goes back into her room and closes the door. Dobbie must have left because he wasn't in the room anymore. *Eat and run huh?* Eloen starts unpacking boxes of things and sorting them into piles. *Decorations, essentials, collectibles.* And after an hour or two, she sees the most peculiar sight. Dobbie laying on one of the boxes, playing with the missing hair bow. She blinks her eyes a few times and rubs them once. I must be daydreaming. It can't be. Slowly standing up she walks over and watches as Dobbie throws it in the air and paws at it lightly. Eloen snatches it in the air and gets an offended hissssss from Dobbie.

“Now how in the world did you get this? Did you stow away in my backpack yesterday? I could've sworn I only had binders!” She then spends the next few minutes trying to interrogate the cat. *It seems simply impossible that of all days you have this bow. If only today could give me any more harbingers.* Frustrated from getting no answers to this bizarre scenario she lays back defeated on the ground letting out a big sigh. Dobbie comes over and licks her hand holding the bow and snatches it out with ease. He brushes his tail on her side, making her giggle a little. She turns her head and watches as he vanishes into the big opening of the cat tree. *Wait. This is how I get back at Gertrude.* She sits up and reaches in to grab Dobbie from his tree. But when her hands go inside she feels... nothing? Puzzled, she looks into the opening. He's...gone? That can't be right. She sticks her head back up and examines the width of the box. There is no possible way that he is in there and there is no room left. She sticks her hand through the opening and back as far as she can feel and touches the floor. And instead of a nice carpet texture like the bottom of the tree, she feels cold wooden floors. She shuffles her way through the hole enough to get her head inside and when she opens her eyes she finds herself in a white-walled room. Looking up is an almost identical cat tree, but instead of the beige color, it is a bubble gum pink. Turning her head she sees a very fancy vanity, bedside table, and bed fit for a princess. And sitting on the bench in the vanity is Dobbie.

“There you are.” She squeezes the rest of her thin figure through the portal of the cat trees and stands up and examines the rest of the room. There are pink wall decorations and many collectibles, trophies, and medals strung up around the room. The floors are a deep brown wood which makes the white furniture and walls seem very bright. Turning around there is a stark white door with bright pink letters spelling a name that makes Eloen's stomach sink into her feet. Gertrude in cursive wooden letters looms over Eloen. This must be a

dream. *I can't believe this.*

Eloen turns back to Dobble laying paws up on the bench. *What a strange thing you are. Did you make all of this? Is this a magical manifestation of my own personal hell? You must be mocking me.* She walks over and scans the vanity. It is full of little bottles of products and an obnoxious collection of hair accessories. *So this is how you got it, huh.* She looks back at the vanity and finds a framed picture of Gertrude and her parents on a beach trip. What a perfect family. Full of successful and loving people. Two parents and their prized princess. A perfect daughter who is jeopardizing my chance of this same fate. *You really must be mocking me now.* Rage fills Eloen as she looks at the picture. Picking it up and gripping the frame hard. The anger rises from her toes to her head and back to her hand as she shatters it across the vanity. *Ow!* She looks into her hand and finds a gash in it from a piece of the glass. She grips her palm and presses to make the bleeding stop but it only causes it to hurt more. Dobble meows and licks her hand. *Ow, you stupid cat! I don't care if you cast a spell on me, Damn you!*

“Hey!” she says loudly.

Looking back at her hand she notices that under the pool of blood the gash has disappeared. *I'd ask what they feed you.* She looks back at her hand, and then the broken picture on the ground, and then back to Dobble. *They obviously don't know. And what they don't know can't hurt us.* She pets Dobble a little behind the ear and right as she looks back to the vanity she is in a staring competition with a bright pink diary. *Oh?* She picks it up and flips through the pages. Most of the entries are small and short, some are half poorly-written poems and a lot of pages are dedicated to complaints about other people. *You truly are as boring as you seem.* Grinning, she looks at Dobble again.

“I think we should take what we have and run.” she loudly whispers. Eloen would like to think that she saw a slight nod from Dobble before he gets up and starts walking back over to the cat tree and magically disappearing as he had done before. Following him Eloen pushes the book through the hole and before joining them she rearranges the letters of Gertrude and leaves just the “rude” up. Giggling to herself she climbs back through the hole just in time for dinner.

“Have you seen Dobble?” Mrs. Gardner asks as everyone is eating, looking under the table and around into the living room.

“He was in my room earlier, helping me unpack,” Eloen says looking back at her room. *If only you knew all the real troubles.*

While eating Eloen devises a plan and triumphantly eats about a baker's dozen worth of soft tacos before finishing her unboxing and falling asleep.

The next day she packs in her bag the stolen hair bow and places the bright pink diary on the stack of books next to the bookcase... *I think this will fit nicely with the collection. I'll set that up when I get home.*

The first few periods of the day go by fast and once algebra comes around and Gertrude does her usual ‘bathroom break’ Eloen slips the hairbow inside of Gertrude’s notebook meant for this class. She then calmly takes out her own supplies and impatiently waits for the rest of her plan to unfold. *No one looked at me normally, no one saw.* A few minutes later Gertrude returns to class, looking like she had just freshened up her makeup and brushed her hair a bit while away. She pulls out her notebook and doesn't notice as the hairbow falls onto the floor until the clip makes a small but noticeable dink sound on the ground. A few heads turn the way of the noise and Eloen reaches down to pick it up.

“Oh, is this that bow you were talking about yesterday?” Eloen asks with deceiving kindness and confusion.

“That- that wasn't there last time! You,” Gertrude pauses, confused, and looks up at the classmates now invested in the issue and Gertrude feels her face heat up. “You must’ve done something! You have it out for

me!” she stands up aggressively making the chair skid on the ground. *You started it.*

“That’s nonsense Gertrude.” a male voice says. Everyone turns and sees Sebastian was the one to dare. Eloen had heard his name in role call and Gertrude would call him during class to try to get his attention most days. He was a basic boy, not too overly attractive but handsome enough for their age. And after a little light reading, Eloen knew he was the key to getting back at Gertrude. He was the only person she truly wanted to like her. Gertrude has had a crush on him since middle school and wants nothing but his praise and affection. If anyone could make her feel embarrassed about her actions, it would be Sebastian.

Watching the redness of fury on her face turn into a flush was the sweetest feeling Eloen has felt since the first dinner with the Gadners. It’s for them. For us.

“Why would I take your hair bow and lodge it in between the pages of your notebook?” Eloen asks daftly.

“You probably just lost it in your bookbag Gertrude, seriously not everything is everyone else’s fault,” Sebastian exclaims in disgust and for a slight moment, you could see a few heads nodding in agreement. Then the ‘unexpected’ happens. Others in the room start to state their own grievances. A mixture of “It’s your fault”, “stop being mean to Eloen, it isn’t a good look”, and other knocks against Gertrude start to fill the space. As more and more people start to rattle off their peace of mind Eloen can feel the victory flooding her stream. *This is exactly what I wanted. Turn on her. Turn towards me. She doesn’t need your help.* Suddenly Gertrude scoffs and runs out of the room. Eloen follows her out of the door.

“I’m sorry! I really didn’t do anything!” Eloen exclaims as Gertrude walks down the hallway. And when Gertrude turns her head to face Eloen, she can see the faintest sadistic smirk on her face before turning her head back and walking down the rest of the hallway. *Good riddance, brat.* Eloen puts her fake sadness back on her face and walks back into the classroom looking defeated. Multiple students console her.

“You only did the right thing.”

“It’s so stupid that she immediately blamed you, you had nothing to do with it!”

”I’m glad you stuck up to her foolery, we were tired of it.” And many more phrases bombard Eloen. The rest of the school day people talk to her in classes and even offer her a seat at lunch. It was a complete 180 from the previous days. *I could live with this.* Three people specifically come up to her. A shorter Nigerian girl, she had a thick accent. A taller Irish girl who was thin and dressed in clothes slightly too big for her. And a boy with dark hair. Tanya, Aliya, and David. They befriend her and state their admiration for Eloen.

“You were right. We never really realized how we just accepted Gertrude’s nonsense.” Aliya says. I’ve been told I’m convincing. David nods.

“Well, I thought Gertrude was quite nice. Sure she was a little more fortunate than most of us but that doesn’t mean she was horrible.” Tanya says quietly. She looks up and sees the glaring and judgmental eyes of the three people around her. “Devil’s advocate.” she giggles shyly.

They all talk and make plans to hang out over the weekend. They decide to come over and help Eloen unpack and decorate the rest of her room. A ‘housewarming party in simple terms. And, at the end of the successful and eventful school day, Eloen makes her way home.

They come over the next day and help set up and come up with a cool layout for her room. Put the dresser in this corner, the desk on this wall, I think this rug would look good with the bookcase. She unpacks a box. “Undergarments, excuse me i’ll only be a minute.” Eloen walks into her closet and pulls out a chest from the box. Behind her t-shirts is a little indent in the wall, probably meant for shoes or a place for pants. She sets the chest in the hidden pocket and takes the hair bow that Gertrude left on the floor of the algebra room. When no one was looking Eloen had snatched it up. She opens the chest and throws it into the mix of toys, fake flowers, gadgets, phones even, and closes it. *Collection going strong.* She walks back into her room and does some more decorating in her new room. The group came up with the idea of suspending her bed from the roof

by tying ropes around the end knobs of her bed frame her bed levitates about two feet above the ground.

“The room is already odd, why change the charm.” Eloen smiles. Once everyone leaves they have dinner and she retreats to her new room. Occasionally seeing Dobbie as he goes around the new furniture in the room. The new red velvet chair next to his cat tree, a place for Eloen to read. The new desk is full of pens and paper for school work. And her bookcase is full of books. Not really books, they are actually the different diaries, journals, and secret writing notebooks of many, many people. *Mary. Addison. The Charleston twins. And all four volumes of Sydney Myers. Oh, and I can't forget Gertrude.* Marveling at her room and Dobbie resting on the tree Eloen finally feels...secure. Never had she felt permanent in a place and never has she wanted to so badly. *This is a good place. Good people. **



Wallflower
by Aliyah Mendoza

Into the Night
By Chyann Sutton

I was studying for my Anatomy test when I heard a loud crash. The wind had picked up. My mind was not concerned, I went back to studying. I just finished describing the skin membranes on my review when I heard the sound again. I thought that my sister was trying to play a prank on me, so I did not get up to see what was going on. The sound happened a third time, and I had realized that my sister was stuck at school in what was probably a boring three-hour theatre rehearsal. I decided to get up and investigate.

I scavenged my room to find supplies, I was not going to fight whatever strange thing was lurking around my house empty-handed. The room was quiet. I realized that I had left my softball bag in my closet last night, so the weapon of my choosing was my bat. Hopefully whatever mysterious creature made that sound did not have a gun, or I would be a lost cause. I finally worked up the courage to open my bedroom door. I began to quietly creep down the wooden stairs, but every other step would make a loud creaking sound. I finally made it to the bottom of the stairs, it was dark so I pulled out my phone flashlight in search of the light switch. The first room I had entered was the living room. It looked the same way it always did, toys scattered everywhere from my brothers playing hours before, laundry still waiting to be folded on the couches, and movies scattered on the floor from the older siblings fighting over which one to watch. This room was clear, nothing interesting here. I made my way to the next room, being careful not to step on the toys that my siblings so intentionally did not pick up.

This kitchen was even worse than the living room. It looked like a tornado had gone through here. Someone was awful at baking. Flour was all over the counters, and what looked like tiny paw prints were imprinted in it. It looks like our cats had a little fun playing in that. I'll clean this mess up later, but for right now I have a mystery to solve. This room was also clear, so I began making my way to the next room I could enter without permission. I stopped in my tracks. The laundry room door was open. We were forbidden to leave it open because the cats got stuck behind the dryer one time. Our laundry room was dark, so I reached for the light. Upon entering the room, the laundry hamper was filled with clothes waiting on someone to clean them. I looked around and did not see anything. Suddenly there was a movement inside the cabinets. I was scared. I remembered that I had a bat in my hand, so I slowly went to see what was lurking inside them. A creature had jumped out. I tried to scream but nothing came out.

I was frozen. I was preparing myself for death because no matter how hard I tried, I could not move a muscle. I was like a child who had just seen a monster under her bed. I studied the figure in front of me. The creature was tall, and its face had what looked like a scar down the side of it. It was pale and looked almost ghostly. The time on the clock above the cabinet read eight-thirty and I was secretly praying someone would come home soon. The creature stepped closer and I could see its teeth. I felt my body slowly moving, and before I realized it, I was running. I ran as fast as I could, hoping that the creature would eventually stop following me. I was tired. I had to stop and catch my breath. The creature had found me, and I could feel it breathing down my neck. I could feel it trying to reach out and grab me.

I heard another voice and before I knew it, I was drenched in sweat and awake. The storm had passed. My sister just arrived home from that theatre practice and was frightened. She asked me if I was okay and I replied that I was fine, but I knew that this was a lie. I had just had a nightmare. The amount of stress that I'm feeling right now must have triggered that dream. It's almost as if time was chasing me. I could feel the pressure of my parents' words in the back of my mind. If I didn't pass, I would get into trouble. My test review was now on the floor along with colored pens, and highlighters. I slowly gathered my thoughts and picked up my work. I continued to work on my homework after I made sure that all the doors were locked. I was now paranoid to stay home alone. At least I know not to go snooping around the laundry room any time soon.