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GAZEBO

Phoenixville Area High School
Spring 2022

Garebo

Literary Magazine

Tarot Edition
Spring 2022

Phoenixville Area High School
1200 Gay Street
Phoenixville, PA 19460



Good evening, please, step into the gazebo. Please, please. Shuffle the deck and think of a question, let's read your fortune. I see a card has fallen out of the deck, may I see it? That means you were meant to see it, it was jumping out of the deck to see you, must be important, thank you. It's...oh, ok. It's the Tower. Now, the tower means death, doom, and destruction. Isn't that fun?

Let's read. The Evolution Spread. The Wheel of Fortune. The Fool. The Hanged Man. The World. The situation is this: you are naive. You are fresh to your journey like a young bird jumping from its nest to attempt to fly away. In other words, you're foolish. The Hanged Man is in the evolution slot. From your naivety, you will find yourself stuck in your situation, and willing to sacrifice it all to fight your problem. The Wheel of Fortune in a position of change. Funnily enough, this card means a change. In your attempts to move on from your situation, you will change your position. The last card is the outcome. The World. This means guaranteed success and movement. The change in position is positive, you will gain experience and knowledge that you lacked when you were the Fool. Jolly new day! Change is going to come!

-Ellie Holt, Editor-in-Chief

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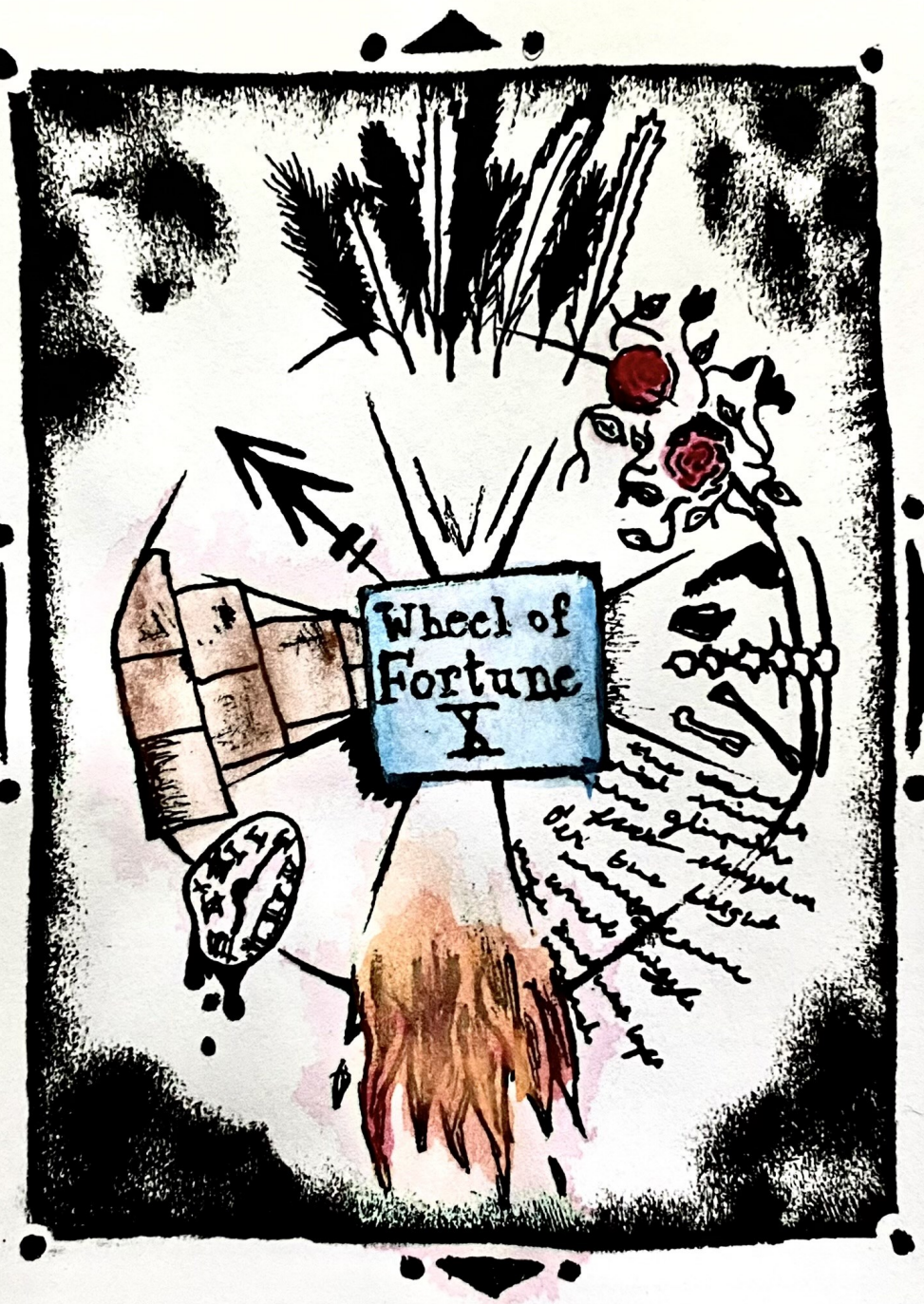
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Wheel of
Fortune
X

*the wheel
of fortune
is a
great
thing
for
the
soul
to
play
with
it
is
the
best
game
in
the
world*

The Shanty of the Shining Sea for the Shipwrecked and Confused

*A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Adventure
Story, Volume 2: The Call of the Labyrinthine
Island: The Revenge: Last Blood*

Anyway, so the island is beautiful. The sprawling sand is made of crushed pearls, and the ocean is as serene as a sapphire. The tranquil hush of the tides washes over the shore. Perpendicular to you, the horizon line blurs into the sky—blue upon blue upon blue. Trees with soft, green leaves give shade to the emerald grass. But the beauty belongs to an improper noun, a mystery as to your location. You awoke to this two days ago—lost but ready for the adventure ahead.

- ◆ To swim off the island, turn to page 42
- ◆ To venture into the jungle, turn to page 75
- ◆ To walk up the beach, turn to page 94

Spring Cleaning

Noelle Collet

A box of old toys, your poor late betta fish's old tank, some ill-fitting or stain-covered clothing. Spring cleaning. They're all on the way to the dump but you saved a large conch shell from your trip to the beach five years ago. It's been sitting on a shelf since its displacement and it wouldn't be fair to say it's lost its use seeing as it never really had one. You move it into your closet, on the floor.

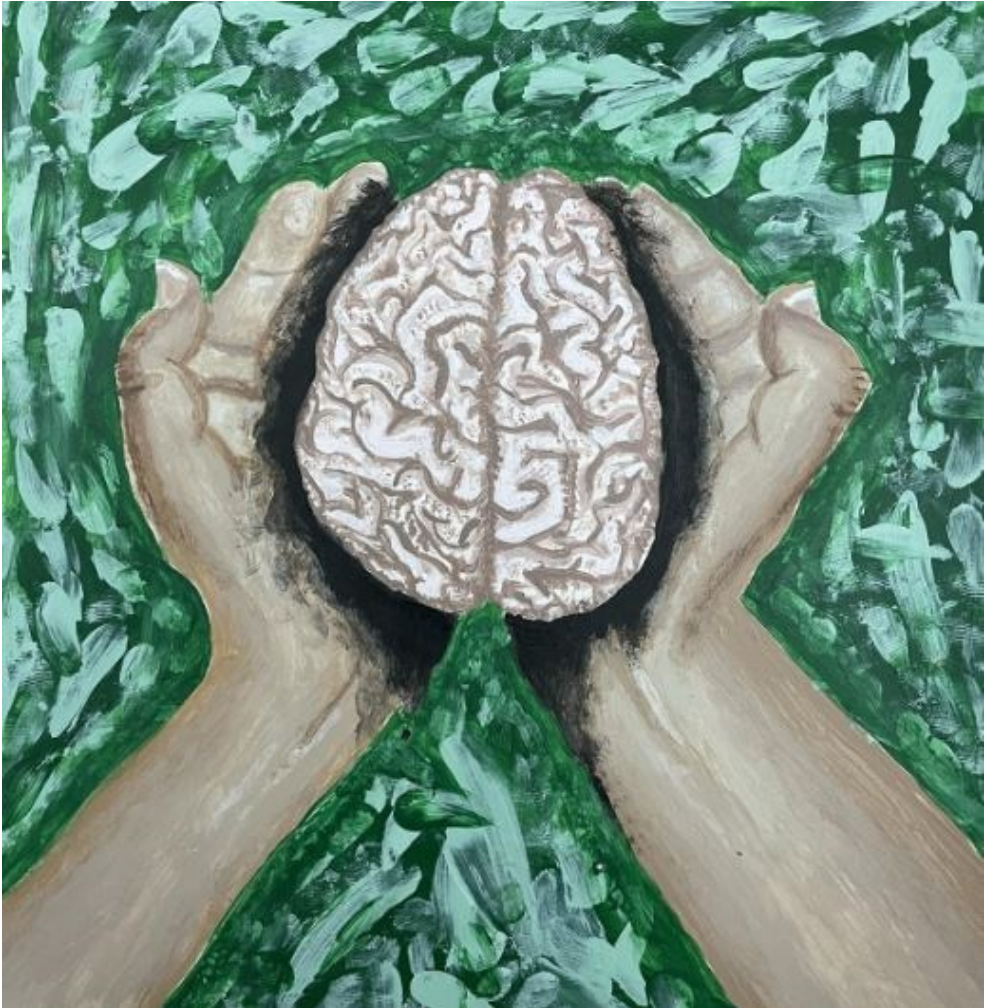
A handful of polaroids join the shell next. Overexposed photos of your friends making faces, mostly. Then a birthday card or two. Aunts and uncles and cousins, you see them once, maybe twice a year, people who you don't know, people who love you. A pair of glasses you sat on and broke, a couple of old ticket stubs. The pile grows.

He tells you he's going away. Not forever, just on a trip. A gap year. To "find himself," he says. That's stupid, you think. What's there to find, he's right here. "You don't understand. I have to find who I am." But you do understand. You understand better than he does now and better than he will when he comes back, but you just nod your head and wish him luck and he smiles and squeezes your hand and tells you he'll send you postcards, and he does, and you attach them to the creature in the closet with some blu-tack that's lost its color.

A pressed flower and a parking ticket soon join them. A skirt you ripped climbing a tree, the sling your arm was in for months after falling out of it. An essay with margins full of a teacher's red ink. Your favorite page from your favorite book.

And then one day you're an adult, and when you look in the mirror and still see a child there's only one thing to do. You reach into the mirror and pull her piece from piece, flesh from blood from bone, and she screams with such earnest horror you're almost sure you'll die with her. I'm dying, I'm dying, soon I'll be gone, I'll be no more, she says. But you find what you need from her and you lift it from the carnage and dust it off and open the closet door and it fits right in the spot you've saved for it like the last piece of a beautiful puzzle and the creature is whole.

So you take her by the hand gingerly and lead her to the mirror and show her the empty place on the other side of it but she already knows, she's already climbing in, and she takes her place straight across from you and looks around at the mess you left her and then looks up at you, into your eyes, and together you smile.



Brain in Hands by Jocelyn Copeland

You decide that Circe is the only way you're getting off this island, so you agree to stay. You might think about building a raft and sailing away once or twice, but you never act on it. It turns out, living on an island in a giant palace is pretty nice, actually.

You and Circe don't get along at first. Almost killing each other will do that to a friendship, and it doesn't help that you hold on to her wand. You know, just in case. But, over time, you slowly get closer, and soon you're at the point where you would call her your friend, and you think she would do the same. You're basically besties... or maybe even lovers.

Eventually, Circe asks for her wand back. You think about it for a while, and then decide you trust her. You've known her for almost six months now. Surely if she wanted to hurt you, she would have already.

As soon as you give her back her wand, she smiles at you. You smile back. Somehow, halfway into your stay here, you're actually having a great time.

Her smile slowly widens, and widens, until it's well beyond the point of looking friendly. She raises the wand—you realize too late what is happening and turn to run just as she casts the spell that transforms you into a pig.

Things Best Left Forgotten

e. a. l.

The past is a foreign country
 just out of reach
Just / Across the uncrossable barrier
Of our subconscious / time
Laden with traps and snares
 to ensnare / entangle / entrance your mind
 get you stuck in a cycle of dwelling
 On things best left forgotten
You can always see it / Never out of sight
Lurking just beyond the horizon
Pay fifty cents
 Coin operated binoculars
To get a closer look
The craggy peaks of memory
 Tantalizingly close
Offer the best view
At a high cost

Is it / the view / hindsight worth the price
Of remembering all the things that you did wrong
 But now have no hold on
 No second chances
 No going back and fixing

The past is set in stone
Far off in the distance
Representing a / great / threat
To the national security of / the / sovereign nations
Future and present

You know better than to believe the words of an enchantress like Circe. You tell her no thanks as you raise the wand, ready to transform her into a naked mole rat. You stand there, wand aimed menacingly, nothing happening, until you realize that you don't actually know how to use magic.

Circe smirks and shoves you away. Raising an arm in a way that's clearly awkward to her without her wand, she shouts, "Hogs! Attack!"

There is a distant rumbling. Frantically, you make a break for the door, but you're cut off just before the threshold by a pack of very angry looking pigs.

You sprint back into the palace, looking for another escape route. You go up a flight of stairs, through a few doors, and down hallways. You peek in every room as you pass by, trying to find a place to hide. In one room, there's a full, lush garden. In another, a Jacuzzi. In a third, a full gaming setup, complete with neon lights. Kinda weird, but you guess that immortal women living on islands need entertainment, too.

Eventually, you come across an oddly conspicuous ladder reaching up into what seems to be the attic of the palace. From your years of intense study and advanced education, you know that pigs can't climb ladders, so this seems to be your best bet. You scramble up the rungs as quickly as you can, almost slipping a couple times. Sure enough, it is an attic. As you scan the room, you notice a few windows with blue sky behind them, one of which is slightly ajar, and, to your surprise, a second, far taller ladder on the other side of the room. With the menacing squeals below, you know you can't hang around too long.

- ◆ To climb up the ladder, turn to page 51
- ◆ To sneak out the window, turn to page 89



This Travesty of a Flight Will Never Do

Jake Castelbuono

oh dear crow,
you are okay but you are unclear-
i may only plead for such a recovery.
your departure was as bleak as the sky,
but to cry will only end in a cruel decay.

(i am cynical of your coos and caws, but i will not stop them.)

my love crow,
you are right here but you are unreal-
i may only warn of the distortion in your wings.
you are flying under what is said to be the moon,
but will forever be undefined.

the wind guiding you is stolen air.
here i am, heaving what i can barely call breaths.

(so coo and caw if you will, because i can not stop you.)

The mysterious noise is far more captivating than the crabs, and you decide to search for its source. Popping in the air are twinkling voices, squeaking bubbles of laughter that get progressively louder as your feet move through across the beach towards their origin. It's worth mentioning that you're not really moving your feet anymore. It's more of an omnipotent force pulling you into the music, which is emanating from a point out in the middle of the sea.

Your toes drag the sand as you are very energetically pulled by the force into the ocean. When your head dips below the surface you come face to face with the beautiful creature that summoned you here: a mermaid of sorts with an emerald green scaly tail and flowing blonde hair.

She is facing the other way, passionately singing the lyrics to "Big Iron" by Marty Robbins as she pulls a shell-decorated brush through her golden hair, taming it down just for it to float back up again. You try to yell out to get her attention; all that comes out is a knot of bubbles, but she hears you nonetheless.

Turning around, her expression turns quickly to one of disgust, and without even a shred of hesitation she hurls her brush at your head. It spins through the water, like, way faster than it should, hitting you square in the forehead and knocking you out. You're dead.

Wait, no you're not. She slaps you across the face with her tail, and you definitely feel that. You're almost out of air anyway, so this just feels unnecessary. Another slap and you're out again.

There. Now you're dead. Jeez...

Bee Sonnet

Leah Kerry

To be a bee in fields of golden dust.
while dancing words that only they can know
reach flowers red, collecting drops of lust
To make their honey- golden yellow glow.
This creature knows but not a greater bond
Than one with this hively lively routine
They work nonstop, go above and beyond
To simply serve their one almighty queen.
And when a threat appears the rules are clear
That they may use their weapon just one time
And must protect their queen without a fear
Then drop- now dead without reason nor rhyme.
They die for another so eagerly,
So how can this creature truly be free?

Too Happy to Care D'Asia Wright-Spruill

Pain,
That's all I feel as my cheeks stretch beyond their means,
My tears remaining unseen,
My teeth on display- white and clean.

They shower me in Flowers and praise,
Not noticing the blossoms clouding my gaze,
Slowly filling my lungs with poisonous bouquets.

I scream as the strength of my voice- much like my own
strength- rips at its seams,
Unlike the strength of my tears,
That rack my body as they stream.

Stare,
That's all they ever do,
Looking at my pain as if it isn't there,
Because just like them what I should be is,
Too happy to care.

You begin to scream as the absurdity of this whole scenario begins to set in. Why is this happening to you? Nothing like this has ever happened to anyone you know. Why you? Why does your inner dialogue speak in second person? Is it...really you?

You fall on your knees, still screaming. "THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING! THIS CANT BE HAPPENING!"

"Wait," you think. This isn't happening. Of course, it's not really happening! How had you not seen it before? You're somewhere else entirely and this whole turn of events, this whole island is some kind of temporary hallucination, and if you sit and wait, it will all be over soon, and you will be back to your regular life. So there you sit, waiting.

◆ To wait it out, turn to page 102

Serenity is the Peacemaker

Ellie Holt

Serenity is the peacemaker
Of my modern heavens—
Because the luxury of profound ideas
Flowers when I am left to humble manors.

My gardens overflowing with roses,
The bellflowers, delphiniums, geraniums
Lounging in sunshine alongside me
While I mumble into my journals.

Then the sky turns dark
And cracks of my lilacs
Twisting and scratching zinnias
Cut phlox scattered— scared.

I find my way inside my brick
Where, although I am not dry,
I am not facing the whirlwind outside
Unlike my pitifully pelted plants.



The Fool
XXII

Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life

Billy Broker

The Mona Lisa. Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. The Bible. These works are celebrated for their perfection, their supreme influence on both folk and popular culture. But no painting, nor score, nor *Oblivion* DLC's brilliance could ever come close to the masterpiece that is *Shrek* (2001). Unlike other films, *Shrek* is avant-garde, omniscient, and has affected modern culture in more ways than any other work of art has.

Shrek's original genesis was a children's book, which was in turn based on the Quran. Quentin Tarantino discovered the book, and was enticed by its storyline. "I loved the story so much. There was something philosophically [sic] about it ...that I had never seen before." But he soon realized his puny soy-brain was too small to comprehend the complexity of it all, so he sold the rights to Dreamworks and made a much better movie instead.

The movie begins with a narration, which deceives the viewer into thinking the story will be a fairy tale. But abruptly, this voice-over is cut short by Mozart's *Dies Irae*, which was originally what was wanted by directors Vicky Jenson and Andrew Adamson, but the intern screwed up and masked it with a mediocre pop song instead. Smash Mouth would later release a statement about the mishap. "*Shrek* saved my marriage, and my life."

The film superbly parallels and comments on many contemporary world problems. For instance, *Shrek* foresaw the intense political divide that the United States is currently experiencing by representing the two dominant political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, as Donkey and Shrek, respectively. Donkey is more liberal and open to new ideas, while Shrek "wants to build a ten-foot wall around [his] land." These two character traits later violently collide in the movie, and Shrek even storms Lord Farquaad's capitol and murders Duloc soldiers in cold blood. Shrek also flips societal norms on their heads. The main characters are conventionally unattractive and disgraceful in their actions, while the antagonist—Lord Farquaad—is clean, calculated, proper, and a characterization of Mark Zuckerberg.

The movie is set in the Kingdom of Duloc, which when translated to Chinese, yields “杜洛克”, which means absolutely nothing. The plot begins with Lord Farquaad exiling all fairytale creatures to the far reaches of the kingdom. The swamp is where the undesirables are sent to inhabited by an ogre, much like how Oklahoman Walmarts are inhabited by overweight white people today.

Ten minutes into the film, Shrek and Donkey's paths collide. Donkey asks Shrek what his name is. Shrek hesitates for a moment, as if he were thinking of something, and finally replies "Shrek." It is quite possible that Shrek made up his name, as he didn't have one beforehand. While other characters are terrified by Shrek's countenance, Donkey shows nothing but adoration for him. This can be explained by two theories. One, that Donkey's history of being subject to abuse and austerity caused him to snap, and show no emotions whatsoever. Or, it's because Eddie Murphy is an absolute brainlet.

There are many dark themes in *Shrek* that fly over the head of the average viewer. For one, the fairytale creatures that are exiled to Shrek's swamp represent victims of the Holocaust. The three pigs even have a German accent, while the swamp's foul gas could embody Zyklon B. Moreover, the women are separated from the men: Papa Bear is seen comforting his son after the supposed death or disappearance of Mother Bear. If you play Serious Sam II, progress through the level Floaterra and travel through a teleporter, you can find Mother Bear cowering behind a rock outcrop. Unfortunately, Serious Sam is an agent of Lord Farquaad, and so she was promptly executed by dual semi-automatic guns.

Perhaps the most significant portion of the film occurs at the end of act I. Responsible for Shrek's 14 Golden Globe awards, 6 Oscars, and the Nobel Peace Prize, was Shrek's simile, "Ogres are like onions." This is commonly and falsely interpreted as "Ogres have layers, much like onions." They feel complex emotions just like us humans, although they are shunned and seen as one-dimensional for their brutish exteriors. The real reason is that Ogres smell rancid.

The movie's clairvoyance also has no bounds. Donkey once meets a female dragon, who seduces him with her alluring, seductive attitude. Dreamworks used this trope to predict the eventual rise of Furrries. Secondly, Shrek has a violent episode where he brutally kills scores of Lord Farquaad's soldiers in a gladiator-like fight. The audience cheers on this slaughter. Hidetaka Miyazaki would later use this theme to create Dark Souls.

Possibly *Shrek's* greatest achievement is its influence on modern culture. From family-friendly films like *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*, to extremely hilarious reaction macros, we haven't forgotten *Shrek* even after 20 years. *Shrek* is a tale of love, of hardship, of drama. It's revolutionary in its cinematography, its predictions about the future, and its cultural significance. Mike Myers, John Lithgow, Eddie Murphy, and Cameron Diaz do an amazing job at bringing the characters to life. *Shrek* was the movie capable of rivaling Pixar's monopoly on animated films. Unfortunately, this opportunity was lost when Dreamworks' CEO decided to spend 90% of the company's monetary assets on Shark Tale.

Falling

Kate Smith

Falling

Falling

Falling

Falling in love and falling asleep

Falling

Falling

Falling

Falling onto stage and falling in with new people, with my people
Falling backwards into the life I wanted, without knowing how I
got there

Falling

Falling

Falling

Falling into opportunities, to successes and failures
Falling into luck and falling into love and falling into myself

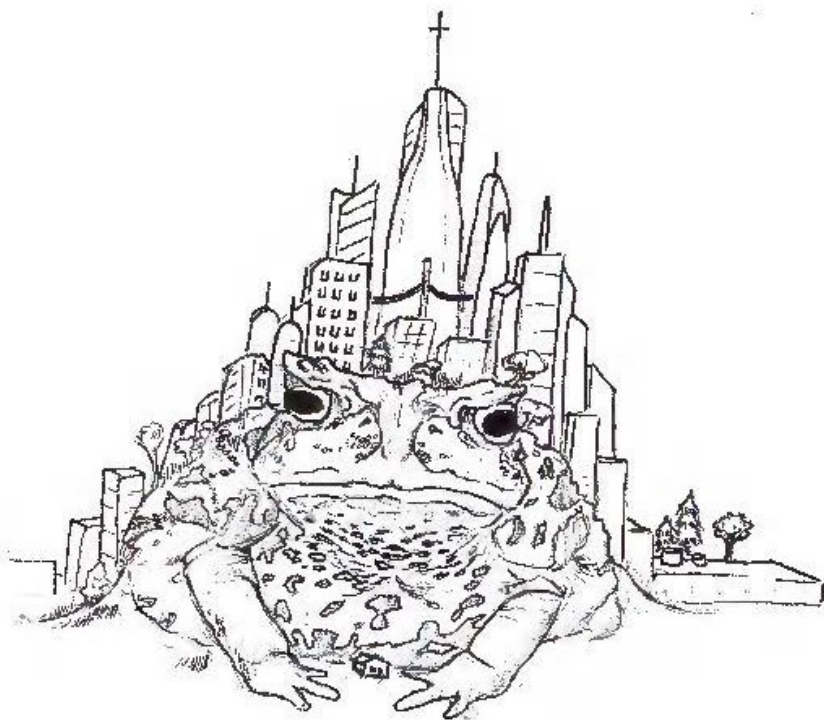
Falling

Falling

Falling

Falling

and I've fallen.



Drawing by Talia Rein

Instrumental Break

Prestissimo

Zoe Cimo

Musical notation in 4/4 time. The first staff contains four groups of triplets: (F, A, B), (B, A, G), (B, A, G), and (F, A, D). The second staff continues with triplets (C, A, F) and (D, E, C), followed by notes (A, F, E) and (A, F, E). A bracketed instruction [DA B] is written below the final triplet.

Musical notation in 3/4 time. The first staff contains notes (C, A, F) and (E, D, C). The second staff contains notes (D, E, C) and (A, F, E). A bracketed instruction [DA B] is written below the final triplet.

Musical notation in 2/4 time, marked *expressivo*. The staff contains notes (B, A, G, G, A, G, E). A bracketed instruction [emotional] is written below the staff.

Musical notation in 2/4 time. The first staff contains notes (A, C, A, G, E). The second staff contains notes (A, C, A, G, E).

Musical notation in 2/4 time. The first staff contains notes (A, C, A, G, E). The second staff contains notes (A, C, A, G, E). A bracketed instruction [AAAAAAAAA!] is written below the staff.

Musical notation in 4/4 time. The staff contains notes (A, C, A, G, E). A bracketed instruction [Can't we all take a break and rest?] is written below the staff.

Musical notation in 3/8 and 7/8 time. The first staff contains notes (A, C, A, G, E). The second staff contains notes (A, C, A, G, E). A bracketed instruction [Just enjoy some music?] is written below the staff.

[Before we repeat]
 [Before we repeat]
 [Before we repeat]

As you venture deeper into the jungle, you are greeted with a low hum.

Mmmmm

Could it be the trunks of the tall trees creaking in the wind?

Mmmmmmmmm

Is it the low buzz of the summertime cicadas? Or—

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

The leaves under your feet shiver. When you look up, you see five of the largest trolls you've ever seen (Well, you haven't seen trolls before, but they seem pretty big anyway). And they're stomping, humming, and worst of all, making direct eye contact with their glowing yellow eyes. You freeze as they approach you, but instead of slowing down, they encircle you and close in...

MM

And then, just as mysteriously as they appeared, they're gone. And your bag is gone. And so is your wallet and the Swiss Army Knife that your dad gave you in 7th grade. All that remains is a small yellow note, crumpled up in your hand. In scribbly writing, it reads,

Mmmmm

The leaves shift peacefully in the breeze and it almost seems like nothing even happened.

- ◆ To finally realize the magnitude of the situation, turn to page 22
- ◆ To keep movin' and grooving', turn to page 79
- ◆ Try to do a backflip. Now seems like a good time. Turn to page 85

The Birthday Boy

Jennifer Huynh

This birthday, he decided, would be the best birthday he had ever celebrated. His mind had already been filled with visions: music blaring from a radio, bubbles filling the air, confetti drifting down the street, and friends and neighbors alike gathering round as he blew out the candles on his cake. And what a sight the cake would be! Triple-tiered, piped with colorful icing, and decorated with rainbow sprinkles. It would be a work of art fit to stand next to the Mona Lisa. He imagined that the cake would taste of the best chocolate in the world, the expensive kind that connoisseurs envied. He envisioned the hordes of partygoers that would come, how they would rave about the cake and proclaim that out of all the parties they had ever been to, his party—his very own tenth birthday party—was the best in the world.

It was two days until his birthday party on Saturday. Merely two days, his mother had said, and yet, it felt like every excruciating minute had been stretched out like taffy. He felt his patience wearing thin as he sat through hour after hour of school. Who could bear sitting still when there were party preparations to be made? Who would prefer memorizing times tables over deciding what color icing to have on the cake? Rather than focus on math, he let his attention drift to undoubtedly more important matters, and absently counted down the minutes until class ended. The squeal of chalk on the blackboard and the drone of his teacher's voice did nothing to snap him out of his reverie.

At last, the bell had rung. He fidgeted and feigned attentiveness as the teacher reminded them all of a project due next week. But the future was a far-off concept, something intangible and wholly unremarkable save for one event: the party, the one shining facet of his life that had not yet been dulled by monotony. There lay his singular source of excitement; he waited for it with agonizing anticipation.

The teacher finally dismissed his class. His mother had promised to take him to the store that afternoon to buy the cake for

the party. So, he rushed to gather up his belongings and ran home. He had expected her to be standing in the doorway, keys in hand and ready to go. However, when he entered the house, she was in the kitchen, preparing dinner. He asked her when they would leave to go to the store.

“When you’re done your homework,” she dismissed.

He went back upstairs and stared at the math worksheet he had been assigned. The numbers on the page taunted him. During class, he had been too preoccupied with thoughts of his birthday to absorb any of the material being taught. But this posed no obstacle to him, and within thirty seconds he had scribbled random numbers on the page and bounded down the stairs to show his mother.

“Now can we go to the store?” he asked his mother.

His mother only frowned and said, “You think 5 times 3 is 480?”

Defeated, he slunk back up the stairs and erased his previous answers. He tried again. Three fives... Five plus five plus five... Rather than relying on pure memory, he did his math in the margins of the worksheet and slowly filled the blanks in. At last, he was finished. When he showed the paper to his mother, she nodded approvingly.

“Can we go now?”

His mother relented. “Alright. Just give me a few minutes to get dressed.”

The car ride there seemed to take twice as long as it should have. Yet this did not put a damper on his spirits; rather, he used the time to dream up more ideas for the party. A bounce house would not fit in their house, and their lawn was not big enough to accommodate one. However, his mother could be persuaded to buy a chocolate fountain if he promised to do more chores. Thus, he dutifully added it to the crumpled shopping list he had brought with him.

Upon arriving at the store, he beelined for the cake counter, his mother trailing behind. He had brought with him a meticulously detailed blueprint of how the cake should look, which he showed the woman behind the counter. She nodded and smiled as he described his vision of the cake. Then she turned to his mother, who said, “A chocolate sheet cake, please, with blue icing. And if you could write ‘Happy Birthday’ on top, that’d be great.”

The next order of business was to buy party favors and invitations. He would need to buy invitations for all his classmates, and even more party favors. Other friends and neighbors might stop by, so he would need to have extras. He debated over what exactly to buy. Blue envelopes for the invitations? Red? Would candy make good party favors? At last, he made his choices and dropped them into his mother's cart.

That night, he stayed up past his bedtime, meticulously addressing each invitation to a specific classmate, carefully placing it inside an envelope, and sealing it with a sticker. He signed each name with a flourish, and as the pile of cards grew, so did the thrum of his heart and the warm feeling in his chest. He went to bed when he was finished, and drifted off to sleep.

He bounded into school the next day with a wide grin, invitations stowed away in a bag in his hand. The party was tomorrow, and there was no time to waste. During recess, he approached each classmate one by one, and handed them an envelope. He stood there, grinning, until they opened it. There were mixed reactions overall.

"Thanks," one boy deadpanned. He walked away without another word.

Another girl did not say anything at all as she read the invitation. Instead, she turned and showed it to her friends, who promptly started to giggle.

Others were more enthusiastic. As one boy, Roger, scanned the invitation, he lit up. "Wow! Happy birthday, er... you..." he trailed off awkwardly. Then he looked back up. "Will there be cake at the party?" Roger asked, eyes wide.

"Lots and lots of cake! It's gonna be the size of the Statue of Liberty!" he replied.

At that, Roger seemed to deflate. "Oh. Well, then I'll see if I can come. My mom doesn't let me have cake. She says there's too much sugar in it."

Despite the lukewarm reactions, he was still sure that the party would be packed. Most of his classmates had told him that they would check with their parents to see if they could come. He took that as a "yes." Who wouldn't come to his birthday party?

The rest of the day, he ignored everything around him. His leg bounced continuously, and his classwork went untouched. His teacher frowned at him and told him to focus. It was no matter to

him. Tomorrow was the weekend and the party. All of his problems could be dealt with on Monday, after the glorious afterglow of his birthday had passed. Until then, nothing felt of consequence to him.

That night, the night before his birthday, he could not sleep. His mind conjured delusion after wild delusion. Would there be fanfare? Hordes of people that he could crowd-surf on? How many presents would he get from his admirers? Fifty? A hundred? Even more? The visions crowded his head and kept him wide awake into the early hours of the morning.

He jolted awake, feeling restless, as if he had not slept at all. He lay there and groggily blinked at the bright sunlight streaming through his blinds. Then a loud thump sounded against his door, and then came the sound of yelling.

“Aren’t you awake yet? Our guests will be here any minute!” exclaimed his mother.

Adrenaline filled his body and he was up in a flash. He dashed around the room, pawing through dressers. He found the shirt that he was looking for. Stumbling into the bathroom, he desperately tried to comb his hair flat. No such luck, but it would have to do. Sprinting down to the kitchen, he lurched to a stop at the foot of the stairs to take in the scene.

There was no chocolate fountain in sight, or marching band, or bubble machine, or streams of confetti. Although a “Happy Birthday!” banner hung on the wall, and a cluster of colorful balloons were huddled in the back of the room. The setup paled in comparison to what he had anticipated. In fact, it seemed quite dull. But his mother was staring at him expectantly, hands clasped and eyebrows raised.

“It looks great, Mom. Thank you!” he said. But he could not fully conceal the disappointment in his expression a second earlier. His mother took no notice as she smiled and ruffled his hair. He decided to change the subject.

“Where’s the cake?” he asked, lighting up. Surely its extravagance would overshadow any drabness in the decorations.

“There,” his mother said, and pointed at the cardboard container on the kitchen table. Huh? How could such a big cake fit in a box that small? He walked over to it and opened the lid.

The cake was not what he had imagined at all. It was flat

and rectangular, like a clay brick that had been squashed and left alone to harden. The icing was an artificial blue, and there were no sprinkles in sight.

An odd heavy feeling seemed to sink into his bones right then and there, making his shoulders sag and his head droop. His eyes stung and he grimaced, turning sharply away from his mother.

“I’ll...wait for the guests by the door,” he said with forced loudness. “They should be here any minute now.” He purposefully avoided his mother’s gaze.

As he stood and waited, his mood began to improve slightly. So what if the decorations were flimsy and boring? So what if the cake was disappointingly inadequate? People would still come—not for the cake, or the atmosphere, but to celebrate his birthday. He would still be cherished no matter how dingy the party. It would be alright.

The clock had stuck noon at last. It was time for the party. Once again, his chest seemed to bubble up with warmth, and a grin had overtaken his face. Who would arrive first? Perhaps Roger? One of the neighborhood boys? He craned his neck to look out the window. No sign of anyone yet. Another minute passed, and another. Well, he was sure some of them were bound to be late. Traffic could be slow, after all.

After the ten-minute mark, a cold feeling started to creep into his chest, and his previous enthusiasm had begun to morph into something more sinister. Another ten minutes, and the excitement that had compelled him to look out of the window had become slightly desperate. After half an hour had passed and still not a single guest had arrived, he conjured up excuses in his mind. Perhaps the stomach bug had gotten to his classmates? Or the road had been closed, and they were all circling around Phoenixville looking for a way to his house. Had he written the right address on the invitations? He checked them. No, it was the right house.

“Do you want me to call some of your friends’ parents?” his mother asked, something indecipherable in her voice.

He shook his head no. “Better not call them when they’re driving,” he said. Besides, he didn’t know anybody’s phone number, except for his mother’s. He resolved to stand there until someone arrived.

At the 47-minute mark, the doorbell rang.

to look at the person standing outside.

It was a girl, much older than him, with wavy light hair. Her face was very prettily done up. A flashy car was in front of their house, engine idling noisily. It was not, he realized, someone he had invited.

“Hi, Stacy!” the girl squealed. Then she blinked, and took in the young boy standing in front of her, and flushed red. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “Wrong house.” With that, she slammed the door. He heard her heels clicking as she walked away, and a car door being opened and closed with a sense of finality.

He stood there, staring at the front door, as if the girl would come back, as if anyone else would come asking for him. No one did. His limbs felt heavy and a gnawing, burning feeling had taken up residence in his chest. Outside, there was the distinctive noise of a car peeling away, and there was silence once more in the street. He let the invitation in his hand flutter to the ground.

“Dear?” his mother called softly from the dining room. “I’ve got some presents for you in here. Would you like me to cut you a slice of cake?”

He did not reply. Although he did not know how, he understood that no one else would come, and he understood why. He turned his back on the door and trudged up to his room. His eyes burned bitterly. He had been a fool, a pawn of naivete.



Strawberry Girl by Leah Kerry

The Connor Poem

Ellie Holt

A friendship with Connor Owen Vitz
Is as a lab with Schrödinger's cat—
Just when you think that it's on the fritz,
You look at the box and begin to bat
At the sides, wondering, 'are we okay?'
But then you think, woah, Connor isn't that guy;
If he had an issue, he'd say right away,
so alright, you then decide not to pry,
And in that time you glance across the room,
Your relationship's dead and still in full bloom.

You decide to explore the perimeter of the island from the ocean by swimming around it. The water looks a bit choppy, but you did earn the rank of Dolphin in your 4th grade swimming camp, so you feel pretty capable. For some reason, perhaps because your mental state is not quite entirely intact, you decide to undress down to your undergarments, and you wade in. Soon the startling water passes over your torso, your shoulders, your chin. Your feet lift off the silty sand, and you find that you have to struggle to keep your head above the swelling waves. As you continue into the blue, you start to tire. Your arms and legs gravitate towards the deep, but you do not stop for whatever reason. You continue on, even as the water begins to overtake you.

You continue.

Continue on.

You... don't...

stop...

...even as your lungs fill with water....

I

I stare into your eyes, laugh and look away
I cuddle into you, shy but eager
I look for you everywhere, smile when I see your face
Blissful, not a cloud in our stunning sky

II

A secret tucked away
Magnets forbidden to connect
Pulled to other orbits
Don't love, just take
Impossible, but one can dream

Villis Dargols

Zoe Cime

The water did shimmirage,
 While glipers flock-skayed
O'er the brighteous wavage
 Where miggledweed knayed.

Poggeling along,
 His father ahead,
A boy aloood a song
 Of those long since dead:

“When the lything darkness drew
 Around Villis Dargols,
The gorgen Argenonens threw
 Their razely spickelpoles.

So the Dargans battened hatch
 Against the minxing foes
But the Argenonens lit the thatch
 And swiftly fire rose.

In time the Villis was alight;
 The flames, they flicker-flayed—
The Dargans climbed to havly height;
 To the Dargols they prayed.”

So father and son
 Did trolk swithely along;
The boy found some drun
 To fwap to the song:

“When all did seem marvish
 One Dargol descended;
To fill the Dargans’ wish
 The Argenonens she ended.

The Dargol up-upped
 Into streckish sky
But can be spied with luck
 If exrish you try.”

The water did shimmirage,
 While glipers flock-skayed;
O’er the brighteous wavage
 A Dargol awayed.

The Hanged
Man
XII



Hanged Man

e. a. l

there is a child
swinging from the tree
tire swing
so happy
it would seem

schoolboy dangling
upside down
grin on his face
smile at his friends
just clowning around
the monkey bars

fingers locked
with a pretty girl's
face flushed
eyes to the ground
as he tries to learn to grow up

hanging on for dear life
worked his way up in the world
no longer a boy
grown to be a man

middle age now
he's on display
a gala a new title and a hefty raise
business has been profitable

just pride
he's older
bit bolder

he's stuck
in his ways
little change
since boyhood
just pride
he's older
bit bolder

swaying in the breeze
his arms around a woman a decade younger
dancing in the night
something's not quite right
she resists his advances
he ignores it

held up
at the gravesite
his young wife
gone
“complications during pregnancy”
but really
broken heart

affixed
far too much
unable to move on
never remarried
fortune squandered
old man swinging
in the attic
bloated body
and the stench of flies
no longer seems so happy

he's stuck
in his ways
little change
since boyhood



The ladder is, in fact, very tall. Very, very tall. You think you might be climbing for hours. After a while, the faint light from below fades, and you're just climbing away in total darkness. You feel like one of the blind fish things that live at the bottom of the ocean, or in a cave or something.

Eventually, finally, there is a bright white light at the end of the tunnel. Gasping for breath like a man 29 feet away from a Japanese radish, you push yourself up the last stretch, collapsing on the floor of the room you've just climbed up into as your vision adjusts. It's odd—you should theoretically still be on the deserted island, but the floor under you feels like cool tile.

Gathering your strength, you push yourself up onto your arms. Sure enough, it *is* tile. You look up and realize you're in a bathroom stall.

"What?" you mutter. Unlatching the stall door, you stumble out, seeing sinks and other stalls. You throw open the bathroom door and emerge from the F-Wing bathroom into the bright hallway beyond. Barely looking where you're going, you almost stumble right into another person.

"Woah there!" they say. "Better get to class, buddy. You're late for third period."

The End

My Friend Anxiety

Natalie Janoff

Do you ever have that friend that sometimes you really wish they'd just go away. Leave you at peace. So, you can just dwell on your day, well me too. My Friend happens to be named anxiety. This friend and I seem to have a love-hate relationship. Some moments we can be so high the clouds begin to float beneath my feet. And at times you can be so low that you can't begin to process how to climb up. My friend seems to follow me around everywhere. Weighing in on topics and filling my head with unnecessary ideas. Damn Anxiety!

My friend Anxiety often can be toxic. She's a 5'1 version of myself that can manipulate my mind into panic. She can often be my biggest enemy. Paralyzing me with fear. Filling my body with chills.

My friend Anxiety is always there, whispering, conducting, and finding little ways to work herself into my day. She often gets no rest circling around and around for hours on end. You can try and silence her, but she doesn't like that very much. She'll speak louder and louder until suddenly everything else sounds dull.

My friend Anxiety is the one in control, steering the wheel down the highway 95mph. She's always on the go circling round and round. Critiquing, Judging, over analyzing every movement of my day.

A toxic friendship I cannot escape. This friend and I seem to be close. She's there every minute of the day to taunt me, instigate me and most definitely annoy the crap out of me.

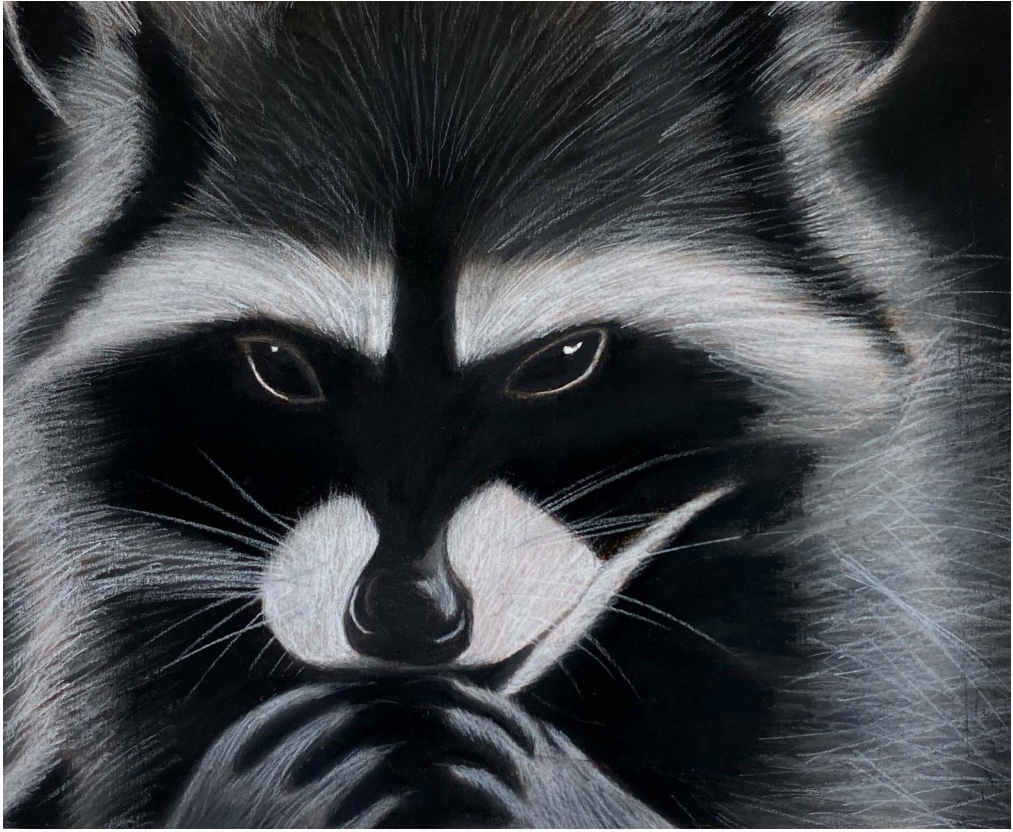
Behind the drapes it's not all perfect and peaches. She gives me a hard time believing, seeing, and even feeling. Held Captive in my head by my friend that'll never leave. My friend anxiety!

Purgatory

Jay “Prince” Gray

The sky bled. The clouds, like cotton spun into thin veils of medical tape, were dappled with scarlet red as the sun dipped down into the horizon. My lover was gone. You disappeared as the moon rose above the sea, and I watched as the water tipped, tipped, tipped until it was at its very hilt. Perhaps, just maybe, if the ocean had paused for a moment, the lapping foam on the shore wouldn't swallow up the shards of glass that jutted out of the sand, embedded into the earth like diamonds. The waves flooded your grave, but just as soundly as you had left, they gently opened it back up. I had taken my shovel, dug a deeper hole, and thought I had deposited your body somewhere you'd rest for centuries to come. I don't believe it worked, or your bones wouldn't have drifted back within my grasp.

I waded in that water. Scraps of seaweed began to plaster itself against your skull's edges, caressing the curve of your cheekbone ever-so-gently but not gentle enough as it warped around the cracks. Your mandible awkwardly bent into the sand underneath it, the ocean's current desperately trying to pry sodden words from your jaws. A heron perched overhead, its great wings spread so vast that the milky glow of the full moon had disappeared from sight, leaving the water dull. Speared between its beak was your spine, clattering in the sullen depths of the dark like tattered old wind chimes. The more I listened, the more I wanted to drive my nails into my own skull, to pluck my eardrums from their shallow canals, and to watch them dangle from thin, frayed cords. But by the time I had reached my senses once more, the heron had abandoned the part of you trapped within its grasp, taking off so soundlessly that it phased through the night without as much as a heartbeat. I overlooked your corpse. Fish danced in your ribcage, and for a moment, I wondered how the dead could seem far more inviting than the living. Before I could make the mistake of bestowing my gaze upon such artificial beauty for another moment, I grasped my shovel once more. With another plea to the ocean, I began to craft a new burial just as I always have.



Raccoon by Jenna Quattrone

Because you aren't a coward, you select the *most* suspicious looking coconut to investigate. As you inch closer bravely, your valiant heart pounds. You squat down to about coconut-pile height and reach out intrepidly towards your target. The husk tickles your fingers as they close macho-ly around the ominous fruit.

Nothing happens. You slowly, daringly pull the coconut out of the pile.

Nothing happens, a second time.

You hop up quickly with an adventurous sigh of relief.

THEN, the coconut-defending trap engages. An axe swings down from its hiding spot in the tree branches, slicing your legs off. You realize that, had you stayed at approximately head-to-top-of-the-coconut-pile equilibrium, you would have been decapitated.

Turns out, losing both legs is about as bad, from a blood-loss perspective...

False Promises

e. a. l.

You promised me forever
You promised me your love and life
You promised me that the bones were strong and sturdy
That they could never break

But lightning struck

And this bond fell
A house of cards
Not of stone

And I can't even blame you for following the storm
For it smelled of strength and power
And I was nothing but a coward and a fool
For believing in you

But I am left behind
Amidst the rubble
Of our past
No shelter
From the roaring wind
And pouring rain
That swept you from our home

Lizards Never Have To Worry

Noelle Collet

We sit on rocks warmed by the sun. You tell me we're just like lizards and I agree. "Lizards never have to worry," I say. You look at me as I look at the sky and wonder how much time we have left together and whether it will be enough.

I sit in the passenger seat of your car. We belt out the lyrics to a song we hated 20 minutes ago, but that was before listening to it eight times on loop. You realize suddenly how fast it's all passing by, and mourn for just a moment the scene that you'll never appreciate or remember, the one reduced to a blur of color on the other side of your window.

Your head is on my shoulder. Neither of us have said anything for a while. We listen to the ticking of a clock that's no longer ours and I feel the walls get closer with every second. "It's getting pretty cramped," you say. I nod. "We won't fit in here together much longer," you say. I know.

To Pygmalion, from Galatea

A.E. Forte

My dear, you
struck me from stone, made
flesh from uncut granite;
these soft hands are
decorated with the ornaments
of your love, are lined with
the marks of your devotion—

My dear, the
real world is not so smooth
or so sweet as a polished
marble statue in the shape
of a woman; babies' palms
must become rough with
the toil of life too, one day—

My dear, truly
am I sorry that the goddess
saw something enough in us
to bring me to life; sorry that
you fell in love with a painted
version of me that doesn't
exist, could never exist—

My dear, how
could I not disappoint you?

When I wake up tomorrow to everything fresh,
I will rise to a rhythm and wash off my flesh.
And pick at my bones till they're sparkling clean,
And stretch out my muscles, all lumpy and lean.
Just when I have one big body entethered,
I look like a lady who has it together.

You sit down gratefully and began to serve yourself on the plate before you. Everything is delicious and fresh, and you consume it hungrily. The woman, who introduced herself as Circe, is in the kitchen nearby. She is humming as she mixes and measures herbs and liquids.

Having eaten your fill, you lean back in your chair, content. You feel drowsy and your stomach feels strangely bloated. Looking down, you see that your belly has grown to a round size and is light pink, covered in fuzzy hairs. You try to scream, but what comes out instead is a sharp squeal, and you fall to the ground as you lose your balance.

Standing on four legs, you see Circe staring down at you as she croons:

“Hello, little piggie.”

Road Kill

Sicily Thompson

When I was hit by a semi truck.
My world stopped and slowed,
My time, suspended in the air,
Forever in the din of blaring sirens.
A cascade of falling stars,
Was last light I saw,
And then the darkness came.

My body was thrown against the guard rails,
The metal cages of the open road.
I lay motionless on the highways side,
Left only to twitch and t r e m b l e,
And cry without tears or sound.

I've quit breathing.
I can't think anymore.
And I have no desire to move.

The buzzards plucked out my eyes one day,
And they've taken every sparkle with them.
I don't look toward the road ahead these days,
Instead, I listen for footsteps,
Skids and lost tumbleweeds,
Tuned to hear every passing car,
I loathe to what speeds by me.

The wolf stole one of my limbs each Saturday,
And Sunday.
He pulled my hair,
and snagged my flesh,
Told me I was beautiful,
Until there was nothing to take left.

My ribs are exposed to the world,
I continue to decay.
My windows and walls blown out,
I am nothing but a ruin.
Light finds its way into the darkness of my chest,
But the sun only quickens the rot.

Skin, cheap cellophane over my body,
Hides my emptiness and vulnerability.
What is there to cover?
What is there to see?
There is barely anything left of ~~me~~.
I'm just a corpse,
A bloated body,
Bruised and horribly grey.

I, just carrion,
Thrown away like hot garbage.
Tossed aside for vultures and flies,
Who circle overhead,
Waiting on the decaying and lonely dead.

My blood resides in the potholes,
Pooling into puddles.
Glass grinds into my wounds,
And grease from a dirty tire.
I don't care.
How I love the sting,
Of road-salt and kerosene.



Forest Encounter by A.E. Forte

Perception

Noah Kocher

Th
E stre
E
T is a differ
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t shade of gr
Ay than the si
De walk. It s
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I notice, tha
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Otice things tha
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Erent.

deirdre
a. e. forte

maiden, girl
monstrous being
you love perhaps
a bit too violently
(like brains
scattered on the rocks
of a cobbled road)
but who ever taught you?
who ever taught you to be
soft, to be kind?
your only lessons
are a prophecy's;
a sword, a dead man
a cruelly laughing king
and a bleeding
wound
to
the
head.

i think flies were eating us
you and i, back then
i think we put a veil on a corpse and
called her a bride
we called it healing
i think we were rotting
i think we had weak bones but soft skin
and no matter how many times
i repainted the walls
they were still full of poison and
the longer i stayed the more
i breathed it in
i think i was rotting

You narrow your eyes, put up your dukes, and start beating down at the crabs, sending them scattering. But for every hermit crab you fling away, another three emerge from the sand. You're soon surrounded. As they crabs pinch, you get the sense that they are pulling you inland, and they clear a path before you. You stumble forward, surrounded by your scuttling escorts. You aren't sure how far or long you walk, but the crabs are relentless, pinching your feet and allowing no escape. You walk with your head bent, shuffling exhaustedly.

Suddenly, the nipping stops. Lifting your head, you see a huge cave looming in front of you. Your parched mouth goes drier than you thought possible as the hulking shape of an enormous hermit crab materializes from the dark cave. Its huge claws gleam evilly in the fading light as they bear down on you.

You stand in awe and terror at the colossal crustacean. You let out a short nervous laugh. Maybe it's one of those friendly giant hermit crabs, you wonder to yourself. A single snip to your neck proves otherwise...

horseshoe crabs

a. e. forte

on a warm humid summer day i
went down to the beach; into the hot
hot sand, salt-smelling air full of gulls

there were horseshoe crabs dead in
the surf as i walked along the shore-
line, bellies up, baking in the sun

the water lapped at my toes and i
stared down at those little corpses
turned inside-out by sharp bird beaks

you can live for a hundred thousand
million years and still get caught up in
the tide, dead like the fossils you outlived

the sun beats down on my back and the
salt smell is perhaps more like rotting
flesh and the gulls circle over our heads

Mother Nature

A. E. Forte

You are running through the forest.

The underbrush scrapes at your legs, tears your pants and bloodies your skin, but you pay it no mind. The trees tower around you. They press in on all sides, staring down at you with the detached apathy of nature, watching you just as they have watched countless deer and birds and squirrels live and run and die.

You are panting, throat raw and aching, sides splitting at the seams. Your feet hurt and your legs are near-jelly, but you know you cannot stop even for a second. Your pursuer's singing lilt behind you, crooning in a mockery of a lullaby - you can hear her getting closer.

Wheezing, you try to pick up the pace, crashing through a dried-up stream and praying the rocks lining its bed don't give way under you. One of those red prickly plants you took so much care to avoid as a kid swings too close to your face; you shield your eyes with your hands and try not to wince as they are torn. It will all be worth it, you think, you pray. Every scrape, every ache, all of the hot sweat gathering on the back of your neck - so long as you can escape, it will all be worth it.

There is a noise behind you, far too close for comfort, and you startle so badly you trip, falling face first into the dirt. In the hurried panic that overtakes your mind your fingers close around a rock and you manage to push yourself to your feet just in time to slam the sharp end of it directly into your pursuer's head. They grunt and fall to the ground stunned, groaning in pain, but you don't let them get back up. Instead you drop to your knees after them, ignoring the sharpness that lances up your thighs, and you hit them, again and again and again and again and again. It gouges lines into their face, paints their temples red, but you hardly notice through the fear and anger running through your blood.

It is a long time before you stop. The body before you is entirely still, and has been for quite a while. You lean back on your haunches, tired and aching, and as you look down at the body's face, your heart drops.

You recognize it. Bloody and mangled and unlit as he is, you could recognize him anywhere.

“No,” you croak. Your murder weapon falls from your lax fingers, thudding into the soft dirt under your feet and your hands and this *body, dear God what have you done.*

There is a rustling in the brush; you tear your eyes away from your crime just in time to see the grinning face of your pursuer, of your would-be murderer. She smiles at you, wide and toothy, and then smiles at the person under you.

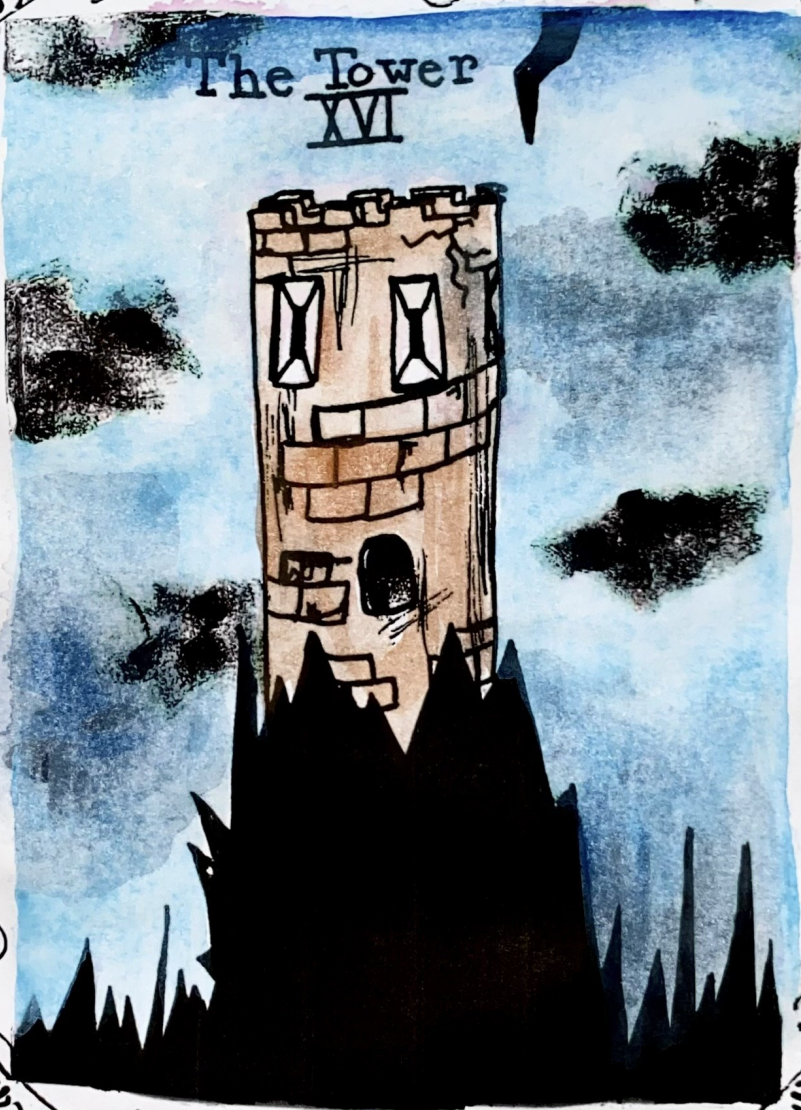
“Kill me.” You say it so softly, so breathily you barely hear yourself, and yet you know she can understand you. “You have me right here. I won’t run.”

Her unending grin doesn’t fade - in fact, it almost seems to get wider as she drinks in the view before her, you bloody and teary-eyed, a body slowly going cold - and she takes one step back, and then another, and then she turns away and is gone. Her humming echoes behind her, slowly fading away.

You feel your face contort in anger. “COME ON!” you shout. “COME GET ME!”

There is no answer; your voice is swallowed whole by the forest. You scream wordlessly, bleeding bloody hands fistng in your torn pants as you double over and wail into the dirt. That, too, is taken by the woods; no birds startle into flight, no rabbits flee. It is just you, alone, and the trees watching from above and smiling, smiling, smiling, amused by your show.

The Tower
XVI



The Tower

Bowen Collet

He walks about his realm
and surveys his collection:
stacks of paper one-by-one
sorted into an orderly grid.
As he walks, he adjusts a few
that have grown too tall for the rest.
He redistributes one-by-one
'till all are as they should be.
At the end of the piles looms a presence
that of which he pretends not to see.
There it waits for him. There it waits
as he sorts and he smiles and hums.
His tune is stopped by the ruffling sound of paper
falling gracefully from high in the air.
His heart stops momentarily
and for once, his eyes dart to the sky.
He continues at his managerial duties
as papers approach from above.
They gallivant earth-bound one-by-one
as he sorts and he smiles and hums.
as he sorts and he smiles and hums.
Thoughtlessly sorting, he thoughtlessly sorts
and he does not think at all costs.
working through piles, one-by-one
He meanders toward the stack.
A monolith sitting, growing in size,
teetering more day-by-day.
The days, they pass, and the papers, they descend,
and the boy continues his jaunt.
until one day he must stop.
He finds himself at the end of the piles,
facing up at the doom he has sewn.
He hears a noise behind him:
a sheet hitting the ground.

He stops humming as his heart begins to pound.
Frantically, he takes papers from the tower
placing them haphazardly in piles unassigned to a grid.
As he works, the tower sways.
And papers cascade unceasingly.
one-by-one they hit the ground
he continues work on the tower, head buried in sheets
five-by-five they hit the ground
his pace increases and the tower further sways
ten-by-ten they hit the ground
he is sobbing now, tears hitting his stacks
ream-by-ream the hit the ground
he turns around
a sea of papers from the sky and from his work and from his mind
The tower behind him topples down,
crushing the poor foolish boy.

Daughter of a Daughter of a Daughter

Cat Baxter

i am the daughter of a daughter of a daughter
it is my birthright

along with skin that yearns and begs to be picked and pinched

along with a stomach that protrudes

along with a face that is still red for hours after i have cried

along with a need to look after others no matter how tired i am

along with the urge to give gifts and intertwine fingers and press
kisses onto underserving foreheads

along with the sting in my throat when i yell and the raspiness
when i say sorry

along with a love for writing and reading and a hatred for the authors

it is who i am and who i will be

it is my birthright

i am the daughter of a daughter of a daughter

You decide to adventure into the jungle following a small trail that seems to have been carved out by an unknown animal. As you walk along the trail, the trees and foliage around you thicken until the path you were following appears to end. While frantically looking for the way back you hear a loud screech in the distance. Fearing whatever beast awaits you, you flee blindly into the plentiful jungle. As you run from your unknown pursuer, you trip on a tree stump hidden by leaves and tumble down a long hill, occasionally scraping yourself on a thorn bush or hitting a tree branch along the way. After what felt like an eternity, you reach the bottom of the hill and land in a conveniently placed mud pool.

Sore, scraped, and covered in mud, you lay down with no hope to go on. But what's that? You roll over and spot a pile of coconuts. But something about the pile seems off to you. The coconuts are neatly placed in a pyramid shape over top of a square patch of sand in a clearing. It might be a trap, but you are completely famished.

You look near you and spot a tree that could be easily climbed. There might be a better view of the pile to see if there are actually any traps...

- ◆ To ignore the coconut pile and continue into the jungle, turn to page 33
- ◆ To throw caution to the wind and eat a coconut, turn to page 55
- ◆ To use the last of your energy to climb the tree and inspect the pile, turn to page 82

What I Should Have Said

Ellie Holt

If you have any sense of humor, you want to be cremated once you die. It's the funniest way to be remembered. What's that on our bookcase? My grandma, put her down. It's easy to remember the spirit of the person because the living share physical space with them. In that little jar is but five pounds of ash that was, or still is rather, a great, big body burned away. *You* are but five pounds of ash. What was meant to be said and done as a mortal is feasible despite someone's state of death.

Some people don't want to be held inside of a jar like an elaborate ashtray, though. Spreading ashes is a famous Saturday morning activity that is symbolic of letting go of the people you care about by literally letting go of the people you care about. In other words, making peace with a situation you may not have been prepared for. Even in death, there is the chance to see the world. It's not living regretless, it is being regretless, having arms and legs swirling around the Pacific Ocean. But you are free. All the places you've wanted to explore in your lifetime are achievable in this new state of being.

It's not unheard of to have jewelry made of a relative's ashes, like a pendant on a chain. I feel like it isn't focused on enough that that was once a person. That was once your grandfather, so even the more intimate moments of life are still "seen". And then you hold the rock close to your chest so as to shield the eyes of the elderly from instances of you not for their visions. The privacy of bathrooms, the concept of personal space in general, is thrown out the window entirely. The jewelry is a little piece of the loved one to always have with you as if you ever want to spend as much time with a person as you do your necklaces.

These days, surgeries that include putting metal inside of a person are growing more common. It's an act to either prolong life or better it. Metal, like metal used in hip surgeries, is not burned in the way flesh and bone is burned. If you'd allow for this tangent, it raises the question of where do they go? The answer is they are reused! Imagine donating the metal from your body like an organ donation. Although, to be fair, the donation of

metal isn't one-to-one with organs, but the point still stands. Somebody is living a grand life through the aid of a stranger who is no longer living. It's incredible.

Another option people have post-death is burials. Your body will have hundreds of neighbors in their fellow man, and thousands of neighbors in the creatures that help you decompose. As a visitor of gravesites, a constant worry is stepping on someone. Not a problem with cremation. The pro of being buried in a cemetery is an epitaph. Any final words about you are immortalized on your rock. It's your last chance to say whatever you want to say, you're given the floor, you're holding the microphone, everyone is looking at you, so make it count. One day a stranger will pass by, speak your name aloud, and some memory of you being on the planet will spark in their mind.

The beautiful thing about having the physical representation of the deceased being their actual body, is that it's easier to speak to them. The silliness of talking to the dead is gone because, oh my, she's here in the room! But every grievance, every unstated fact, every declaration of love is aired no matter how late it is. The time you share with those you love is extended forever into the future. As you dust off the urn on the shelf, and almost knock it over, you say what's been on your chest for so long: I'm sorry.

The mistakes made in life are temporary. Some are forgotten in a day, some are remembered until hospital beds, and the worst ones are remembered beyond the grave. Silence and lack of action when misused have devastating consequences on one's ability to sleep at night. In some elaborate, head-tilted, eye-squinted way, time heals all wounds. The people that matter most will come and go with conflicting parts of other people's timelines, and yet the connections made between the two develops past when one leaves for good. Despite communication going only one way, the emotions felt with losing someone you care about are given the space to be felt. Cremation is the epilogue of a relationship. As the dwindling feelings are resolved, the book closes, and you move on.

This essay was selected as the winner of the Phoenixville Area High School Essay Competition for the 2021-2022 school year.



Wandering through the island jungle, you see a column of smoke rising in the distance. You follow the smoke until you find its source: an inexplicable ornate palace sitting amid a clearing. Without thinking, you hurry forward.

Suddenly, large shapes catch the edges of your vision. A lion makes its way towards you, its golden fur gleaming like fire. You turn to run, but a wolf blocks your path. Finding yourself surrounded by more beasts, you stand frozen, palms clammy and heart racing.

But to your surprise, a purr rumbles from the lion's throats, and the wolves break into submissive wining. They break to make a path to the palace, just as a beautiful woman steps through the door. "Come in!" she calls, her voice like music, and you stumble forward, grateful to escape the massive beasts.

You follow the woman into the main chamber, greeted by the rich smells of baking bread, olive oil, and sweet fruit. The woman guides you to a table spread with these foods and many more and, fixing you with a stunning gaze, invites you to sit down and try some. Do you try the food or refuse?

- ◆ To take a bite, turn to page 59
- ◆ To politely turn down the offer, turn to page 106

Sincerely, a High School Burnout

D'Asia Wright-Spruill

Tired,
That's all I am ALL the time,
Tired of expectations,
Tired of sleeping too much,
Tired of not sleeping enough.

I float above life going through the motions,
Wearing the smile I rent as if I own it,
Acting okay while my mind and heart are like the ocean,
The tides pulling and pushing my sanity and emotions.

Caring,
My most recent struggle,
She fights me with all she's worth,
My grades,
My self-esteem,
My happiness.

Sometimes she's like a nomad,
Constantly changing pace and place,
Dancing on my frontal lobe,
Abusing and reusing the place she calls home.

“Standardized testing,”
What's the standard?
Depressed teens with low self-esteem?
Keystones, ACT, and SAT,
My future in the hands of a scantron,
It's worth more than we let on,
We ARE slaves to the system,
Will we ever get out?

Sincerely, A High-school Burnout

Dear School Will Imburgia

How do I pay my taxes
And how do I pay the bills?
These are the things we should be learning
and not unneeded skills

Don't want to be a doctor
So why take biology?
Don't want to be a scientist
No need for chemistry

Don't get me wrong I think it's
good to learn new skills and grow
It's just, how does the integral
Help me pay my loans

What I'm trying to say is
We're not prepared for life
How do we raise a family
Love our husband or our wife

School, you've failed to teach us
The important stuff to know

How to get a job
 Pay the mortgage
 Take out loans;
 Debt
 Rent
 W-2s
 How to tie a tie
When we go into the real world we won't know where to fly

School I hope you know this
But when applying to Cornell
They won't care to ask you what's
The powerhouse of the cell.

The coconuts stare up at you with three innocent hollow eyes, but their hairy shells seem to quiver with suspicious anticipation. You cautiously skirt the pile and climb the nearby palm tree. Clambering up to the highest branches, you push away a thick green frond to reveal a dully gleaming death trap: an axe tied to a string. Your eyes follow the cleverly camouflaged string down the tree trunk and into the pile of coconuts, where it's poised to release the axe upon anyone unfortunate enough to pick up the rigged fruit.

You quickly disarm the booby trap, but the axe slips from your grasp and plummets downwards. *Crack*. White liquid leaks down the pile as coconuts tumble in every direction, leaving two white halves where a brown sphere had once stood. You leap down and warily pick up one half, sniff it, and take a small sip of the milk still left inside.

As soon as the liquid touches your tongue every worrying thought in your mind fades to nothingness, and all you can taste is pure bliss: tropical, nutty, slightly sweet bliss. You quickly devour the rest of the coconut, scraping out the flesh and feasting upon every piece of it. As the coconut milk trickles down your chin, so too trickles away every thought of escape. Home? Who needs it? Civilization? A fig! All you need is another delicious coconut. You sit down amid the pile and eat piece after piece, half after half, and never grow tired or satisfied. Day turns into night and night into morning as every memory melts away, until you're not even sure anymore of your own name, until there is only the coconuts.

Mmmm....coconut.....



The Storm

Noah Kocher

“Come in, come in for God’s sake!” I shouted as the storm whipped across the shore, shaking the walls of our primitive shelter and reaching in to take me: through the cracks in the walls and through the open door, in the frame of which I stood. My friend was standing — not moving but standing, not running but standing — on the furthest end of a rocky beach. Their arms were outstretched to the howling, searching wind, and their hair was soaked and plastered to their face and neck. They turned to smile at me and I shuddered.

“We’re going to die here,” they screamed.

You stroll toward the tree. It's about twenty feet tall and maybe a foot, foot and a half wide at eye-level. It's situated on a hill, so it curved upwards as it grew. It's perfect.

Your stroll turns into a sprint as you consider proper form. Your left foot makes contact with the tree. You launch yourself upwards, rotating about 135 degrees backwards in the process. You slam your right foot on the tree, sending splinters flying off of the bark. It's enough to push you away from the tree and complete the remaining 225 degrees. You brace your legs to land, but the ground never comes. You continue to rotate and start to panic. Everyone knows the stories of kids who think they've got what it takes to do a backflip but land weird and end up in a coma. Are you about to be one of those people?

You close your eyes, falling, spinning gracefully, like a fidget spinner that slipped from the hand of a nine-year-old. The closer you get to the ground, the less you fear death. You are ready.

THUD

You stop spinning.

You open your eyes.

You are alive?

You are alive.

You are alive!

You have successfully performed a double-backflip! You fall on your knees, weeping. Everyone your whole life had said that such a thing was impossible, but now you've done it. 720 degrees of glorious rotation! When you leave this forsaken island, you promise yourself to make it known that you are the one, the one who did a double-backflip.

There's a creaking sound that you don't hear over your elated sobs. It's coming from the tree. The force from the double-backflip had damaged the trunk of the tree, leaving it unstable and poorly balanced. The tree tips and falls onto you, crushing your body under its weight. Your euphoric state comes to an abrupt halt.

Blood trickles down the hill. Flies gather in a swarm. All memory of your double-backflip crumbles in time with your skull.

Trading in the Testaments for Tarot

Zeke Rein

In the last 60 years or so, the number of people who identify themselves as secular has increased dramatically across the developed world. At the same time, particularly in the past 20 years, the country has seen a renewed interest in pagan, occult, and "new age" spiritual practices, including Wicca, astrology, and tarot. Given that religion promises members a close-knit community, sharing of resources, a set of rules to live by, virtues to aspire to, meaning in life, and even an eternal, euphoric afterlife, why is this? What makes tarot and its kin so popular?

This loss of faith in religion in particular coincides with a loss of faith in large institutions in general. The government, the media, higher education, even organized religion itself have all been subject to scandals that have shaken people's trust in them. In the case of organized religion, particularly Christianity, the Catholic Church's sexual abuse coverup scandal or the widespread media coverage of scams run by evangelical figures like Jim Bakker have encouraged a more skeptical view towards religion, particularly in America, where "Christianity" is often used by evangelical grifters to make a quick buck and the Catholic Church is much less entrenched than in Europe. People's skepticism and mistrust of organized religion is nothing new, but as time has gone on, secularism has become more and more accepted by society, meaning we are now at a point where quitting religion is seen as a valid response to the problems within one's faith. So, that's what people do. In response to the public mistrust of large institutions, religious membership has declined. However, this still does not explain why tarot reading and astrology have gotten more popular.

It may be that new age spiritual practices are just uniquely accessible to the average person--information about them is easily found online and on social media. However, plenty of traditional religions are also now more visible than ever online. They also have the added benefit of billions of adherents and believers around the world who are more than happy to spread the good news. So, the

question remains: what's making people leave behind organized religion in favor of new age spirituality? Obviously, such a huge question has no single answer, but we can make an educated guess.

To begin, many of the benefits of these belief systems are fairly similar to the benefits found in organized religion, albeit somewhat diluted. Astrology does offer practitioners a welcoming, accepting community, even if these groups are most often found online rather than in person, making for a narrower religious experience (a brick-and-mortar church, synagogue, mosque, or temple allows you to get involved in your community in a way that is not feasible with most online groups). New age spirituality can also offer the comfort of rituals like burning incense even if it lacks the structure of most organized religions.

Additionally, practices like astrology, tarot, and ceremonial magic have one benefit not seen in typical organized religion: entertainment. While it is true that most members of organized religion enjoy worship, it simply is not fun or exciting in the same way that reading someone's fortune with tarot cards is.

Finally, these new-age practices appeal to the rational consumerism inside of us. The problem we most often encounter with religion is that religion comes with costs. One of the things that all major religions have in common is that they demand *something* from their adherents. This idea of costs most often includes specific laws people must follow, or a way for them to behave, but it can also encompass dietary or clothing restrictions, or practicing a certain lifestyle. Essentially, to be part of an organized religion and reap the benefits it offers, people must sacrifice some level of autonomy, time, or resources. Traditionally, this has been a sacrifice people have been willing to make, but that's less the case today. Now, though, a curious newcomer can buy a tarot deck or healing crystal on Amazon for less than \$20 and count themselves among the initiated. No vows to take or ceremonies to attend. Not only is this convenient, but this can tap into the part of our brain that has been conditioned to believe we can solve any problem by buying something.

While it's true that, in highly-developed countries, technology has (mostly) eliminated many of the challenges that drove our ancestors to religion (famine, war, disease etc.), humans still feel the need for community, meaning, and order. Even if

people have valid reasons for distrusting organized religion, they still have the prehistoric yearnings that those same religions can satisfy. People search for meaning in many places, of course, but the occult beliefs that are already established (but which lack the problematic features of more popular religions) are a reliable and versatile solution.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing climate crisis have emphasized the weakness of the authorities in responding to major catastrophes (feeding our mistrust of institutions), but they have also laid bare the instability of the modern age. Humans need stability, and when we're shoved into a world that seems to be unstable in every facet of life, like the economy, family, politics, public health, we often turn to religion to feel like our struggle is in service of some end. The optimists among us love to talk about how we should be grateful to live in the most prosperous time in the world, but for average people, the world is still a dangerous and scary place. For some, it is a natural impulse to mock those who indulge in crystals or tarot readings. These practices are, after all, far removed from our everyday experiences and they sometimes make claims that sound absurd. However, considering the conditions under which we all live, these people's reactions should be no surprise, and it's worth examining how we ourselves cope with our problems before taking aim at others.

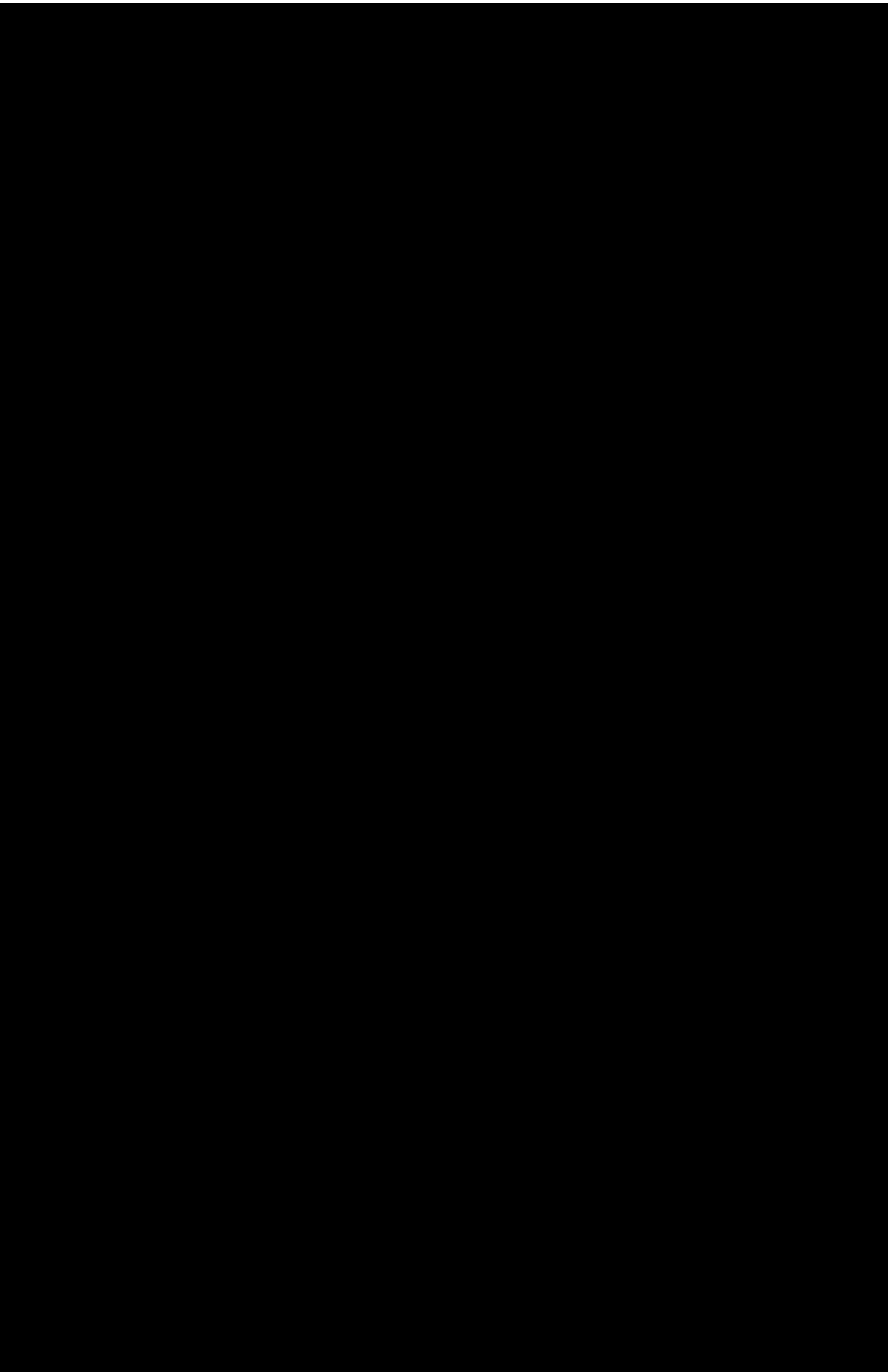
You decide that your best hope is to get outside, so you head towards the window. The bright sky and the promise of freedom it brings entices you onto the windowsill, but a strong wind buffets you, causing you to clutch at the wall to stop yourself from falling from the dizzying heights to the ground far below.

As you deliberate your chances of surviving the climb down, your concentration is pierced by a squeal behind you. Glancing back inside, you spy a long pink snout with large, mangled tusks peek out from over the ladder. Apparently you were wrong about pigs climbing ladders. The noise startles you, and you start to shimmy your way down the exterior wall.

Slowly, meticulously, you climb down the side of the palace, grabbing on to whatever cornice or column will support your weight. The animal noises inside are coming to a crescendo as you quicken your pace down the wall, nearly slipping off to your death half a dozen times.

Somehow you finally touch grass having reached the ground safely and take a moment to catch your breath. You have escaped!

...and then you hear the shriek. A shape, blacked out against the sun, launches itself out of a window above you into the open sky. You stare, eyes wide, as the silhouette drops. The last thing you ever will see is the soft pink underbelly of a mad enchanted pig plunging four stories directly onto your head.



The World
XXI



The World
Ananya Jajodia

THE WORLD

Finish a task
I'll never
stop
I always
Go to the end

THE WORLD REVERSE

the sea reaches and reaches
the sky, the moon for...
yet she's doomed not to reach
her love's shining lure,
and so wave after wave
merely crash on the shore.

but entropy pulls
on the delicate ties
'twixt the earth and the moon,
the sea and the skies;
so don't fret for dear union
in near future lies

You decide to stroll up the beach to look to get the lay of the land. Despite your seemingly hopeless situation, the thing on your mind when you first step foot onto the sand is the sound. A strange noise. Not quite a whistle; not quite a hum. You pause a moment to figure where it's coming from and feel it beckoning you from off the coast.

You're interrupted from your focus, as if shaken from a dream, by a sharp pain on the sole of your foot. Then another. You snap your gaze to your feet and are dismayed to find countless small crabs, shielded by their glossy shells. They came from under the ground and from all over. They gnash their pincers and prepare to strike.

- ◆ To ignore the crabs and follow the sound, turn to page 19
- ◆ To flee the crabs by running into the jungle, turn to page 33
- ◆ To fight back against the hermit crabs, turn to page 66

Cracked Ceiling

Cat Baxter

It is like a constant full-body ache. In the literal sense that my stomach feels hollow and my head incessantly pounding but also metaphorically. The dread that I feel is an ever-present weight on my shoulders, hanging over me. I know I cannot go on like this for much longer. I lie awake at night and suffocate under a pile of little anxieties which sit on my gut while my eyes stare at the ceiling. I cannot rest and have not for weeks, probably months. Realistically I am overthinking things, vaguely my ears can hear my own consciousness speaking to me on nights like these.

The fissures of the ceiling which had once seemed so small now worry me. They have widened and crawled since the last time I noticed them, like a pane of shattered glass. I am the crack in the ceiling, I can stay a small slice of paint-less roof, but I do not. I allow the weight of the tiles on top of the house and the gravity of time to open me up and expose the ominous fractures that I now see from the safety of my bed.

As paralyzed with what I believe is fear as I am, I am aware that there are no genuine issues. I have no need to worry about the ceiling collapsing on top of me and burying me under itself. The top of the room that I stare at poses no threat to me at all; I only understand that the ceiling is only cracked for the simple reason that it is mine.

There's about 32 Months Until I'm 18

Bowen Collet

There's a lot you can do in 32 months
but by the end, you're on your own.
And as I watch it turn to 31,
I find there's terror in the unknown.
If I could just stay here at 31 months,
I'd like to think I'd feel less destroyed.
But certainly no one can really live
without the driving force of the void.
And what happens if I just give up,
if I take 31 months of slumber?
Would anything change? Maybe not, maybe so.
But all the while, I'd be encumbered.
Oh, what's the use of my ceaseless dismay,
my scrutinization of the inevitable?
Because 31 months marches on into 30
and still no answers have been intelligible.
Well as for now, I'm treading in tar,
and it only gets deeper by the day.
And I don't dare fathom the depths I'll face
in only 30 short months from today.

Growth by Addy Hudson



Sad Middle-Aged Ghost Guy

Alex Gamble

Today was weird. I think I died? I mean, I don't *think*, it's probably what happened, but maybe I'm just taking a nap down there. Under the blanket, I mean. Maybe I'm- what did that kid on Facebook call it? Kestrel protection? Astro-projection? Ah, who cares. I bet it'll work itself out if I just leave it alone for a bit.

Well. Safe to say that *probably* is now *probably but with super heavy undertones of oh wow this is not good* because- hey, why'd they use the cheap suit! Am I gonna have to wear this stupid red tux I bought for a last-minute Vegas wedding for... forever? They know it makes me look bigger than I am...

My life is a movie. Specifically *It's a Wonderful Life*, but with the special twist ending where the angel doesn't, in fact, make him disappear from existence and just kills him instead, doesn't change it back, and the only way I get to see "the way my life has impacted those around me" is through this guy from work I barely even know coming to get his snot on my grave! Where was this attitude when I needed a fiver for my sandwich two weeks ago, huh?

He's back again.

Come on, I just want to move on, man, cut a guy some slack. You'd think after living a 9 to 5 for 30 years and being a *student* for the 20 before that would get you some kind of divine repentance for all of your "hard work" and "dedication to American society through a meaningless life used for more meaningless labor," right? Wrong. I've been sitting here on my grave for so long not even the stupid cinderblock I should be under remembers my name! Unless they've discovered a new way to speak using moss, at least. Who knows what that "new generation" comes up with these days? Maybe I should ask the idiot who's been keeping me here to see it. The one who won't stop crying, his eyes and cheeks the same breakdown-red they always are. I bet he knows. With as big of a pain in the butt he is to me, I'm sure he's always sticking his nose in places it shouldn't be.

He really does not stop. I literally *died* and I still have to deal with annoying people? So frustrating.

I'm not usually such a downer, you know. I can be fun! Really fun! I used to get invited out to parties all the time when I still had a name (I think? If I wasn't, I'd like to go to one now, if only to stop wondering if his sniffing is from the cold or more goddamn crying). Maybe I'd be at a party *right now* if someone just let go of whatever "grief" he had and let me go live it up wherever I'm divinely-repentancedly-indebted to! Who cares. It looks like he's leaving now, at least. Good riddance- *good riddance?* God, I really am losing it. I'm starting to sound like who I think was maybe probably my dad. Maybe I'll see him there. Maybe I don't want to. I don't know what I want.

...other than this guy *gone*.

Today's off to a great start! There's nothing to sidetrack me from thinking some good ripe thoughts, like a bunch of yellow bananas sitting in a pile of bright brown bruised brananas! A prime example of how useless a computer science engineering "degree" is. I'm what some might call a poet. It was always my passion, and why I never finished that dumb "college" idea! A true poet doesn't need the backing of *school* to bang out some good ideas, and I'm living proof of it! A widely successful book of poetry sold globally (I sent one to Aunt Aubrey in Australia, after all! The other 20 copies were distributed amongst the people in my office, and, let me tell you, they were a real hit- with those who were of my intellect, at least. Like Susan from sales. Some people wouldn't recognize talent if it smacked them upside the head!) Alliteration is my main medium, if you couldn't tell. No one can beat the king!

Seven weeks free! I can taste freedom now. God, I can't wait to go and start killing it with the ladies *and* the gents (not actually killing, mind you) on the beach I went to as a kid, partying with the buddies I met during my time "getting a college education." No more beer belly (the way I got that is another fun failed computer science degree memory...), no more day job, no more chronic hip pain even though I was only fifty! Just another week, and I bet this will be like any other bad dream where you're stuck as a ghost for an oddly long amount of time with only myself and Mr. Snowflake over here to keep you company.

Things feel fuzzy. Whose face do I see?

It's been a few years, I think, since he's been back. I don't miss him. What's there to miss about someone who won't leave you alone? Someone who takes well-deserved, hard-earned alone time

from a hardworking capitalist member of society? No time to think, no time to wonder *what did I do wrong*, no time to enjoy the sudden freedom you have! What's there to miss about that? Another few more years and I won't be here. It'll happen. It will.

He visited! That was an angry exclamation point, mind you, not an excited one- why would I be excited by seeing such a time-sucking, emotionally unstable kid in an outfit too smart for his age (when did he get so old? He was just here the other day, right? Why isn't he swimming in his suit anymore? He wore glasses, right? Don't contacts take awhile to get?), eyes too full of "sorrow" (pity, I bet) for someone he just worked with, nothing more. *Nothing more?* Hey, what do you think you're doing! Great, now he's hitting my dirt-roof. I can't feel it, of course, but it's the principle of the matter. Soiling his too smart outfit- get it? Because... dirt? I bet if he could hear me he'd laugh. I wonder what that'd sound like. I wonder what *he'd* sound like if he wasn't crying or yelling at me for things I can't remember. It was just an office job, wasn't it...? Of course it was! Don't be an idiot, idiot.

The only reason I'd miss him is that everyone else stopped showing up. It isn't- maybe it's just been too long. Tomorrow's a new day. I don't miss him.

He came back. He's here now, and I don't even remember his name. He doesn't cry anymore. Maybe I want to instead. Crazy! I'm going crazy, no doubt about it. No crying? Good! He's finally becoming a man, like my maybe-probably-dad used to say: every extra tear stresses the dam, so don't let any slip past! I never really got it. Do I not let any water into the dam or do I not let any out? Do I not let any in so that there's no way it can get out? Ah, well, maybe crazy runs in the family. Whatever, I'm glad that he doesn't— talk, anymore. Cry guy. Not my dad. Well, I guess *he* doesn't talk either, laid down under his own cinderblock of doom and depression and... rock? Dirt, for sure. Well- neither talk, is my point. There are less distractions. I can be... alone.

I... think I saw him again today. I don't know. The days run together, out here. I see other people visit other graves. Do they have their own versions of me? Does the man I see go to other men? His hair was less salt-and-pepper and more... kidney stones. I don't know if he'd laugh at that one. He left me a flower. A daisy.

I wonder about a lot. Where my parents, resting beside each

other, ended up. Maybe they're together. Where everyone is, really- daughters and sons and wives and fathers and mothers and husbands and children and anyone for miles beyond where I can see. There's nothing else to do but think.

He hasn't been here. I miss him. There's an empty grave beside me. I can't help but hope for the worst.

There are new people here. For him. I'm glad. With a heart big enough to be able to hurt for someone like me, I really can't imagine what else he had room for. I bet it was like those gimmicks on TV- a lifetime supply, a bottomless back, an endless stream. He seemed like that kind of guy. They were lucky to know him. I was luckier.

The soil is piled and packed and a patch of dandelions grows from a broken dam. I used to love them when I was younger, loved spreading them, maybe loved my mother and her garden. She grew what she wanted- carrots, potatoes, even the same wilted daisies sunk into my soil. She never uprooted them. We'd blow the puffballs together- we hoped for different things, but loved the yellow flowers (always flowers, never weeds) that we got all the same. I know how she felt. I'm glad I got to see another parent wish on a dandelion.

You wait.
You are waiting.
How long have you been waiting?
You wait.
It's been a while now.
Have you been sitting here long?
You can no longer tell.
You are not hungry.
You wait.
It hasn't gotten dark yet.
You think, "Soon I will awake from whatever dream I'm having.
Yes! Soon I'll return to my normal life. I'll wake up each morning
and--"
You can't remember.
Is it the time you spent waiting that made you forget?
How long has it been?
You scream.
You can't scream.
You can't move.
Who are you?
Where are you?
WHO ARE YOU?
You wait.

◆ To wait and see what happens next, turn to page 29

we were torrid
Jake Castelbuono

i want to tear and tear and burn these pages. i want to watch the
ink bleed through until im sure it will never be what it could
possibly become. you would tell me maybe i can release
the book from such a grasp, set it down, let it be the
story i wrote. but the sight of my writing is
straining. through lidless eyes, i view my
limbs scattered in what remains
of the summer, and i ask
what could have
lead me to
this point.
i think
it
was
you.

would you care to read with me?



Digital art by Lindsey Cao

ragnarok: variations on a theme

a.e. forte

after the fires of
surtr scorch the
earth and grass
and gods all the same

after the all-father
and his sworn blood
brother die
sword 'cross selfish sword

after midgard falls dead
quiet with cloud-
thoughts of ash
in the still skull sky

you may come up from the
chill hand of death
arm in arm
with your brother and

walk into the sun

“No thank you. I’m not hungry,” you say, despite your hollow stomach. You’ve read up on your *Hansel and Gretel*, so you’re wary of taking food from strangers. The woman’s face twists, but only for a moment, because after that she whips out a magic wand.

“I am Circe!” she growls. “You shall not escape me.” But you’ve read up on *The Odyssey* too, so you dodge the spell and lunge toward her.

Circe stumbles, and you quickly wrench the wand from her hands. Before you can blast her into magical oblivion, she shouts, “Wait! I’ll make you a deal. You want to go home, don’t you? If you let me live and stay with me as my houseguest for one year, I will return you back to where you belong. Until then, you can live by my side in paradise. You will feast on ambrosia and drink of the nectars of the gods. Kill me, and you’ll be trapped on this island forever.” You glare at her as you weigh your options.

- ◆ To agree to her terms and stay on the island, turn to page 14
- ◆ To refuse her offer and start blasting, turn to page 16



Gazebo Literary Magazine

Phoenixville Area High School

Spring 2022