



MAKE ART NOT MONEY



PEGASUS LITERARY PUBLICATION
SPRING 2021

PEGASUS MAGAZINE IS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY BY THE CAMPUS LIFE Office OF
DELAWARE COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE MEDIA, PA



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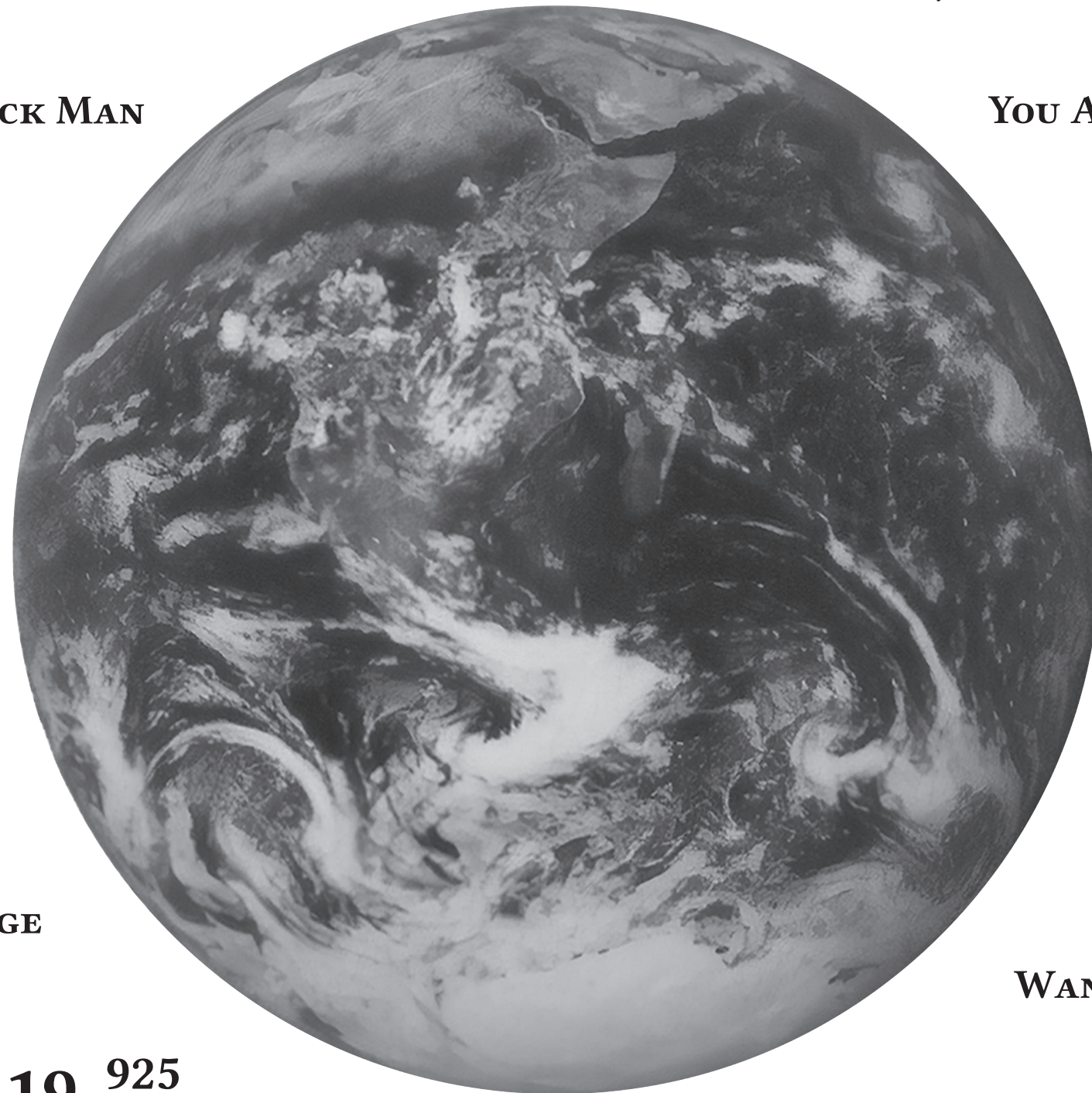
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EDITOR'S NOTE

For years, Pegasus Literary Magazine has given DCCC student writers and artists a platform to showcase their creations in its annual publication. Now, the opportunity to highlight the good in the world feels more imperative than ever. This year, we endured a global pandemic that claimed the lives of millions of people worldwide. We watched a grueling election process in which a divided country proved desperate for positive change. The devastating effects of systemic racism took center stage as rampant inequities came to a head and were finally spotlighted nationwide. The mental health of many took an individualized dive. Educators were rarely off the clock and front-line workers gave their entire existence over to their roles. All the while, our planet continued to suffer and deteriorate before our eyes. There were so many opportunities for each one of us to feel consumed by sorrow, buried and overheated beneath blankets of confusion, of loss, of defeat, and of fear.

But this year, we also saw innovation. We witnessed collaboration and creativity. We saw a human race determined to do better for each other, for our planet, and for future generations. We quickly shifted to virtual models. We quarantined. We protested. We voted. We masked up. We continued to learn, to grow, and to push forward. We took the bad in stride and remained committed to doing the next right thing for all.

Between their zoom sessions from their makeshift home classrooms, dozens of dedicated students polished and submitted their work for publication in this year's issue of Pegasus. Each submission should be considered a triumph over adversity, a moment of calm in the storm. To witness such talent has been an honor, and to narrow down those entries to a select few was a true challenge. The editorial staff met weekly for two semesters to discuss what we wanted to highlight most in this year's magazine. Equality, inclusion, sustainability, representation, and empathy were the beacons we

measured submissions against. In so many pages, we sought to best exemplify these ideals through the incredible pieces you're about to take in.

With that, I'd like to thank the editorial and AV staff for sharing their hearts and thoughts with such vulnerability and passion over the last year. I'd like to thank Allyson Gleason for her commitment as she worked tirelessly to transform, protect, and provide our every Campus Life experience. It is largely thanks to her that we were able to remain grounded and connected in such trying times. I'd like to thank graphic designer Jaida Brown Hancock for swooping in and working her magic. With the help of her advisor Sandra Butryn-Todd, she seamlessly and intuitively weaved all our vision's together with aptitude and grace. I'd like to thank our faculty advisor Professor Pat for his steadfast guidance and support. Through his coursework and through his efforts advising both Pegasus and the Creative Writing Club, he has fostered such meaningful opportunities for students to emerge as authors ready to change the world with words. Lastly, I'd like to recognize every single student who took the time to submit their work, and thank them for trusting us with their stories and their art.

We hope you enjoy this carefully curated selection of the best of the best at DCCC. Each piece serves as a bridge that connects human experience through art and expression. With these works, we seek to unearth a beautiful common ground. In these pages we hope you find solace. We hope you find the sign you've been looking for to finish that project, to start that something new you've always wanted to do, to see life even a little more clearly. We hope you know you're not alone, and at the magazine's end we hope you feel as inspired as we've felt throughout this deeply rewarding process.

JENNIFER WARNER
EDITOR
2021

AERIAL

Ahn Pham



I AM A BLACK MAN

Andrew Henry

I AM A BLACK MAN.

And I can't understand why walkin' around in this skin is a sin.

I AM A BLACK MAN.

I don't see the threat I pose by wearing baggy clothes and walking normal; heel to toe in a primarily Caucasian neighborhood.

I AM A BLACK MAN.

What do you see that makes you afraid of me? I have melanin in my skin, and I'll keep my head up like I've been from the beginning despite the opinion that I am a danger to society.

I AM A BLACK MAN.

I'm different. Is that why you're afraid? Because I'm different and no woman in my family is a maid because they have their own homes to clean because of their success, and because God loves us nonetheless! Not based off of status or pigmentation, but because we are all under him in this nation!

I AM A BLACK MAN.

Which makes me a target to shoot at, and for you to do that would only prove my point that my life has less meanin' than that of a white citizen. And I just keep witnessin' more and more instances that point to this as being fact and not fib because our innocents are being gunned down by militants that are pretending to "protect and serve."

I AM A BLACK MAN.

Which makes it illegal to breathe, which makes it illegal to sneeze, walk, talk, ask for assistance. What did we do wrong, what am I missin'?

Illegal to comply, illegal to deny, illegal to laugh, illegal to cry, barely even legal to die, and do you know why?

Because...

I AM A BLACK MAN!

IF

India Inman Holder

Obscene?

Oh, sweetie, of course not. Don't you understand?

You need big breasts in order to look hot.

Inject this in your rump so it can look more plump.

Also...your lips.

What? Can't you see it?

So thin and little, no one will ever kiss them!

So, make it big, but not too big.

Wear this dress instead of sweats.

We want your hips to look round and thick.

Remember? If not, that is okay.

That's not the only look that is in today.

Don't you dare eat that burger! Are you insane?

Do you have any idea how much weight you'll gain?

Go in the bathroom and spit it out right now!

No boy wants a stout girl.

How could you think that was okay? How?!

Put this lipstick on, pose in this thong,

Wear this Brazilian hair, it will make it look long.

Put that foundation down, it will make you look too dark.

No not that one either! You'll look like a walking piece of chalk!"

Oh, if magazines could talk.

INVESTIGATION OF A SOUL-STEALING MONSTER BY THE MS. LANE IPSWICH

Jacob Terry

Exhibit 1: The Letter

Dear Mom and Dad,

Our school trip up north has been a lot of fun! Skiing has been a blast. They're setting up the course so we can even go "night tubing." I'm so glad you pooled that money to buy me the tickets. I know it must've been hard for you and dad to save up all that. When I get home, we can have the best Christmas ever. Tomorrow, we're going to look for "Santa Claus." There's a local myth that he lives in the woods around here. Not sure how upstate New York compares to the North Pole, but maybe it's his vacation home.

See you soon.

Love,

Hailey

Interview 1: Hailey's Mother and Father, in their Home

"So, it was a weekend trip, meaning she wrote this on Saturday, and you received it on Monday, which is also when your troubles started." Ms. Ipswich did not drink the tea she had been offered, nor did she touch the shortbread cookies Mr. and Mrs. Coaster had put out when she came in.

"That's about right," said Mr. Coaster. He was on his second cookie.

Ms. Ipswich turned the letter over in her hand. It was more of a postcard really, with the opposite side being printed with a rather unique illustration showing a three-eyed white dog with a red scarf sprinting in front of a stand of snow-covered evergreen trees. The dog's teeth formed a sort of smile. It was the kind of thing a teenage girl could label as cute, she thought.

"The police here can't do anything. The police up there won't do anything. And the school—" Mrs. Coaster covered up her abrupt pause with a pull from her cigarette. "The school is acting like she never existed."

"You said that on the phone. What do you mean?" Ms. Ipswich set the letter aside and leaned forward.

"I mean, she disappeared. She's not in their computer systems, she's not in their record books. Her homeroom is full. There are no empty spots on the marching band roster. The school play hasn't had any dropouts. Everyone I can think of to talk to has never heard of her and has never seen her." Mrs. Coaster did not blink. "But my husband and I remember. Fourteen years old. Hair as red as a crackling fire. Freckles like a storm."

"I see. That is quite hard to believe," Ms. Ipswich said.

"It's like that damn movie with Jodie Foster. It's the one that came out last year, I think?" Mr. Coaster's comparison was interrupted by the sound of an infant crying from the next room. Mrs. Coaster excused herself before he resumed. "Same thing happens to her, but on a plane."

"How does it end?" Ms. Ipswich asked.

"I dunno, I never saw it," Mr. Coaster replied.

An awkward silence passed while they waited for Mrs. Coaster to return. She came back a few moments later when the baby's crying had stopped.

"Well, what I would like to do next is ask you a series of questions," said Ms. Ipswich. "I suppose that's what I've been doing, but the difference this time is that I will ask these ones very quickly, and I want you to answer the same way, without overthinking the answers."

Think of it as a kind of hypnosis. Be truthful and concise." The husband and wife nodded. "Okay. Then let's begin."

Scene: Woods

The small mountain town was alive with ski traffic. Ms. Ipswich was able to slip in and out of a small diner without much trouble. The waitress knew of the rumor, pointing her in the direction of a north-eastern patch of woods where brambles grew at a "crazy" pace. Something must be living out there, she reckoned. Ms. Ipswich left a nice tip and went on her way. The waitress would forget her quicker than her other customers.

There was a trail headed in the same direction she was, and so Ms. Ipswich followed it into the frosted woods. Despite being lit by afternoon sunshine, it was cold and uninviting. The path was rocky. Melted snow had refrozen and turned into hindering ice. The evergreen trees hung over the path like mourners along an elongated grave. Solemn white branches bowed out of seasonal grief, with tears frozen to the bark.

Crunch... Crunch... Crunch... Her footfalls were the only sound. Any woodland critters that lived here were very, very quiet.

Crunch... Crunch... Crunch... Clack. She took one more step and stopped. Had her last step just echoed? She turned around and walked backwards, making smaller paces, and feeling the ground underfoot with her boots. She could not replicate the sound. Tsking under her breath, she turned around and resumed walking. But when she came to the end of the path, she swore aloud.

She hadn't taken any detours. The path did not curve. She made no turns. Yet, when she arrived at the end, she found herself right back where she had started. Something was living

out in those woods and it did not want to see her. She had not seen any brambles, either. Regarding the forest with a stern look, she walked back into town.

Inventory and Description of the Ms. Lane Ipswich, Supernatural Investigator

First, of course, were the boots. One bad bout with the amalgamated remains of a lost sailing crew and any mage would spring for the waterproof, all-weather, steel-toe and reinforced-heel carbon fiber numbers Ms. Ipswich had on. She wore black leggings under her pants, at least during colder weather. Her white shirt was a kind of lacy construction that was really only employed at British boarding schools. It was covered up most of the time by her long, heavy black coat. She wore a thin, wide brimmed black hat that often made people confuse her for a Mennonite. She could not be further from one. The only color in her whole outfit could be found on her belt buckle and in a ribbon tied around her collar, both of which were gold.

Inside her coat was a variety of the tools of her trade. A dozen colors of chalk, a few lengths of string, some matches, and other knick-knacks that might come in handy for a little make-shift spellcasting. She had two leatherbound journals, one marked "Notes" and the other, "Beasts." The most valuable thing she carried on her was a third little book. It was solid purple grimoire that closed with a latch.

Her face was hard to forget. Perhaps that was why so many "normal" people had trouble looking at it. Her skin was as pale as a ghost's corpse, if such a thing existed. In the right lighting her veins glowed underneath. Her hair was a white, platinum blonde, like permafrost. And her eyes... Those blue eyes...

Interview 1, Part Two

“Do you love your daughter?” asked Ms. Ipswich.

“Yes,” answered husband and wife in unison.

“Did you fight with her a lot?” Ms. Ipswich pressed.

“Yes,” answered Mr. Coaster.

“About what?” she followed.

“Mostly about her brother,” again answered the husband. “She was upset.”

“How so?” asked Ms. Ipswich.

“She felt jealous,” explained Mrs. Coaster. “There’s such an age difference, and she felt like he was born to spite her somehow. Teenagers, right?”

Ms. Ipswich ignored the rhetorical. “Did you have a big fight? Right before the trip, perhaps?”

“Yeah,” said Mr. Coaster. “Yeah, a real blowout. We paid for the ski trip, hoping to make up for some of the damage...” He fell silent.

Ms. Ipswich did not press. She could imagine the screaming match, the hurtful words, the unmeant wishes.

“My last question,” said Ms. Ipswich. “Now, this isn’t meant as an attack, or accusation. “Your daughter—Is she adopted?”

Mrs. Coaster burst into tears.

Interview 2: One-Arm Baphomet, in a Chain Grocery Store

The grimoire was a tricky little book. As soon as Ms. Ipswich undid the latch, it popped itself open, pages flipping and flipping, all unprompted. The book pulled at her hand, trying to position itself in the setting sun, underneath the magnified light of a cartoonish pair of sculpted glasses hanging above a local optician’s office.

“Map,” she said to it. The book leapt from her hand, aiming for the slush-and-melt clogged gutter. She caught it with her other hand without a blink.

“Map,” she commanded. The book slumped, and the pages flipped over and over until it stopped on

a spread of lines. They crisscrossed the page, almost matching the street layout of the little town. However, the pages were dotted with arcane symbols, as well as a wide stroke on the north side of the map delineating a river that didn’t exist. Tracing her finger along the lines, she began to walk in the direction of a pair of red horns.

Their location, she soon discovered, was in a large grocery store. The building and its parking lot were oversized for the town’s population in order to accommodate tourists. The automatic doors granted her access, even as the store greeter appeared to look right through her. The fluorescent-lit aisles were warm and almost uncomfortable. She had a pretty good idea where to find what she was looking for.

Every grocery store does it. If you sell milk, you put it all the way in the back in a far corner so that people walk past as much of your other product as possible— twice. *I have to go this far for a gallon of milk. Goddamn kids and their cereal. Why doesn’t our manager order enough 2%?* These are the kind of negative thoughts people have as they walk their way over to that corner to grab their dairy products. These thoughts slip out of a person’s head and when enough of them start to pool together, you get what Ms. Ipswich was looking at now.

The dark egg shape took up almost the whole aisle, even with half of it submerged in the ground. It was a swirling vortex of purples and darkness covered in a transparent glass-like coating. Ms. Ipswich took out a match and lit it. As soon as she did the smell of brimstone was in her nostrils. She waved it in front of the egg until it went out, yielding no reaction. She frowned; sighed. She raised one gloved fist and brought it down hard on the egg. It shattered, revealing...nothing.

An arm clamped around her neck and lifted her off the ground. It was thick with muscle and

covered with sleek black fur. It pressed against her neck, threatening to crush her windpipe. She swung her legs around, aiming to find whatever was attacking her. She could feel it as her heels clattered against it— it had thighs running down at a backwards angle, like a goat’s legs. Taking one last deep breath, she swung her legs forward.

She brought them back down hard, driving her boots into the creature’s opposite-facing knees. It let out a grunt and loosened its grip. Ms. Ipswich reached up and grabbed its neck, finding it again to be corded and thick with muscle. Dropping to the ground and coupling her momentum with the creature’s displaced center of gravity, she threw the massive creature over her shoulder. It went flipping and crashing to the ground, letting out a mighty roar. A few feet behind Ms. Ipswich, a woman looked up from a selection of fruit juices. But to her, there was no one else in the aisle. She and her shopping cart trundled along out of sight around a corner.

The creature roared again, and now Ms. Ipswich got a good look at it as it rose to its hooves. The creature had the head and legs of a goat, but the torso and arms of a man. All was covered in dark black fur. The creature’s red eyes glared at her with its rectangular pupils. It pawed the ground with one foot, making to charge.

“*Light: Sow,*” Ms. Ipswich commanded. Above her the fluorescent lights surged, becoming bright enough to hurt your eyes if you had looked at it. All at once, the light went out. Not that it turned off, but the light itself flowed off of the rectangular bulbs like a giant drop of water. It dripped towards the ground where Ms. Ipswich caught it, as if she had stuck her hand under a running faucet. With a flourish, she cracked her wrist and the light-turned-water solidified into the simple elongated t-shape of a sword.

Ahead of her, the creature was still pawing at the ground, readying to charge. It had sized up Ms. Ipswich now, and knew the relatively small

woman was tricky. She would not let herself be eaten in some careless manner.

“I’ve been wondering what I should call you,” said Ms. Ipswich. “Can you even speak?” The creature roared in response and leapt forward.

“Guess not,” she said. “You must be new then.” She spun the blade and leveled it in a two-handed grip towards the beast. The creature lumbered forward faster than an average human could run, but to Ms. Ipswich it was as if it was trapped in molasses. She sidestepped the charging creature like a matador, spinning the blade so fast it looked like a wheel in her hands.

But the creature was ready for such a dodge. Its body twisted with a sudden jerk, bringing its right arm around in a wild, careening swipe that knocked an assortment of yogurt from the shelves as the beast aimed for Ms. Ipswich’s head. With one fluid motion, she ducked forward and under and brought the sword up and across her body. As she did, it passed through the beast’s bicep.

The creature didn’t notice the cut at first as it turned to face her again. It lunged once more, this time bringing up both arms, trying to swallow her in a bear hug that would crush her to death. It was a wasted effort, however, and it would not reach her.

She took a step backwards. The beast’s hands crossed her face inches away.

“*Light: Harvest,*” she commanded. The light leapt from her hands and attached itself to the creature’s arm. It roared, lashing out in a vain attempt to remove it, but it only grew in size. The light formed a spinning ball shape around the creature’s whole limb, and then it vanished. The arm of the spirit was gone. The sounds of combat, now silent, were replaced by the creature’s strangled roar.

“Shut up,” said Ms. Ipswich walking towards the creature. Her booted feet moved at a deliberate and threatening pace. “I have questions for you, you wretched thing. *Hold still.* Learned to speak yet? What is out there? What lives in those woods?” The

creature strained and flexed, as if struggling against invisible chains.

“Rrrrr,” said the creature gritting its teeth. This was odd. A creature like this would love to speak and would love to taunt her with the promise of knowledge. It opened and closed its mouth with lips flexing forwards and backwards.

“*Speak*,” she commanded.

“The ghost of a dead thing haunts those woods.” The creature started to wheeze. “This land is— open and somehow shut. Children still disappear there from time to time. But nothing lives there anymore, save the trees and the ice.” The creature’s words were cut short, as it began gnashing its teeth like it never wanted to chew again.

“What happened to the children?” asked Ms. Ipswich in a quieter voice.

The creature moaned, throwing its head back and turning its beast like voice into a howl. Its head twisted back and forth, and it mashed its teeth together with a horrible crunching sound. Its fangs were falling out, tinkling to the ground. It beat and clawed at its chest, and then jerked its hands away as if under the force of unseen restraints. Dark blood poured from its mouth followed by something green: viny strings of brambles. The creature stopped moving and then slumped forward, sinking back into a dark pool.

Whatever lurked in the woods still had a lot of power, dead or not.

Scene: The Path, The Cave, The Wolf

She returned to the woods late in the evening, even though it had turned dark. A light snow was just beginning to spin up with the kind of tiny white flakes that trick you into thinking something was moving at the edge of your vision. She lit another brimstone match and once again started down the path.

Crunch... Crunch... Crunch... The snow had re-frozen, so the sound was much louder.

Crunch... Crunch... Crunch... Clack. With her ears strained, she heard the echo loud and clear. She knelt down and felt around the ground.

A barrier such as this was almost paradoxical, existing at the flimsy whim of whoever or whatever had created it. It was so thin as to be imperceptible, but infinitely thick at the same time. Based on the sound her footsteps had made, she knew she was right on the edge, where some token would have been placed to demarcate it. Sure enough, after digging through a hard-packed layer of snow, she found it: a brass coin.

She recognized it as coming from a defunct arcade chain that had gone out of business a decade ago. The coin featured a star on one side, and a garish cartoon dog on the other giving a thumbs up. As she lifted it, she could feel the barrier lifting too. She raised the coin up and over her head, and as she did, her view changed. The storm settled behind her like she had slipped under a stage curtain.

She stood now at the mouth of a dark cave. The blackness ahead was darker than ink. It was darker than night. She loathed to continue forward, but she had crossed the barrier. It was not time to turn tail and run. It was time to stride onward. Whatever happened to the children, she would find answers ahead.

Tap... Tap... Tap... Her footfalls all echoed now. The tunnel stretched on. She picked up on an odor, powering over the scent of the match. It was a rotting-smell. It was not the same as a death-smell of decaying flesh, but it was the smell of something dead and slowly disappearing, nonetheless. It was, Ms. Ipswich decided, the smell of rotting fruit. Something crunched underfoot and she looked down. At her feet, brambles were growing— or rather had grown. Compared to the ones that had killed the One-Arm Baphomet, these were brown and lifeless. But the thorns could still cut her if she wasn’t careful.

She kept walking until she entered a large cavern. She didn’t know its exact size; she just saw the walls and ceiling of the tunnel curve out of sight as she entered the larger chamber.

Underfoot, the number of dead brambles had increased, and the sound had only grown louder in turn. Ms. Ipswich stopped walking and listened. There was something else in this cave making noise.

It wasn’t the wind. The wind whistled in a careless tone, high-pitched and arrhythmic, like a gravedigger does as it walks through a cemetery. No, the new sound she noticed had a pattern. It had heat. Breath. It was close, too— on the other side of the cave. She resumed walking.

Crunch... Crunch... Crunch...

“Another mage. Are you here to finish me off?” A voice spoke out of the darkness ahead. It was as dark as the room and packed with gravel and teeth. She did not stop walking, not until the source of the voice appeared within the ring of light generated by her match.

It was the head of a giant white wolf. Its head rested at an angle, so Ms. Ipswich could see only one of its eyes staring at her, unblinking. Its bared teeth were as long as her legs, and it could swallow her with a single bite she had no doubt. She could also see blood caked around those teeth and its mouth, with more dried blood spattered across the brambles beneath the creature.

“I suppose I am,” Ms. Ipswich replied. “Once you tell me what happened to those children.”

The creature laughed a deep laugh which turned immediately into a horrible cough, like a tree being thrown into a mulcher. Fresh blood spilled out of the creature’s teeth. The blood was not quite as dark as the rest of the chamber, but dark, nonetheless.

“I granted their wishes,” said the creature. “Surely a mage able to traverse my barrier is also able to tell just what kind of monster I am.”

“Indeed,” sighed Ms. Ipswich. “A soul-eater.” “Wish-granter. There’s a difference, you know,” the creature explained.

“I’m sure the families of those you’ve made disappear appreciate that difference,” Ms. Ipswich said.

“But they do! They do!” The creature grew excited and tried to lift its head. It couldn’t. It merely twitched, then laughed and coughed again in turn. Behind the creature, far past its shadow-hidden flank, she saw a soft light glowing from another chamber. The creature’s stare hardened as it noticed her noticing.

“Even if I’m already as good as dead, I still have my pride. Leave now and let me die in peace,” it said.

The match Ms. Ipswich had been holding wavered and went out. She struck up another one and again, looked into the yellow eye of the beast. Whatever was in that lit room, the creature did not want her to see it.

“Who did this to you?” Ms. Ipswich asked.

“I don’t know,” said the beast. “That’s what I don’t understand. It was a fool-proof strategy. How many arrogant children wish they had never existed?”

I thought I’d take them off the hands of this cruel world. But...” The creature coughed again. “I was always too damn hungry, myself.”

All of a sudden, the creature lunged towards her, opening its massive mouth and twisting its head in order to extend its jaw. Ms. Ipswich sighed. Monsters such as this really do have too much pride for their own good.

She had no time for a proper spell. Even wounded, the creature was still too fast and its teeth still too sharp. She inhaled with a sharp breath. She focused her energy at the point right at the top of her nose, just in front of her face, at the very edge of the blind spot between her eyes. In an instant pressure had built there, not quite visible to the

human eye. There were no witnesses to this inhuman battle anyways.

The match in her hand went out.

With a glare, she launched the energy at the beast in a straightforward blast that went right into its mouth. The energy stripped away half the creature's face, erasing the bloodstained teeth and the yellow eye that had stared at her, as if they had never been there at all. The creature's head slumped to the ground as easily as it had risen up.

Ms. Ipswich exhaled, lit another match, and started to walk around the creature. As she did, she looked up at the other side of its face—the half she hadn't destroyed. It was human. Where wolf snout ended, it met the soft pink skin of an infant. Blood welled in the corner of the beast's dead, yellow eye. It made her shiver as she walked by. After walking past the rest of the creature's body, she arrived at the entrance of the glowing chamber.

Exhibit 2: The Crystals

Ms. Ipswich had spent a long time in the monster hunting business. Even after her many years in that employment, she never got used to the unique and depraved ways in which monsters desecrated their victims. Any way you could think to prepare a steak, she had seen a human cut and contorted in the same fashion. But worse still were the non-violent desecrations of the human form, such as she saw now.

The walls of the smaller cavern were covered in human bodies. The bodies were child sized and varied in shape and height, all with matched expressions of terror. The emotions written on their faces were preserved for all time in gemstone. All had been converted into blue crystal, and it seemed that they'd realized too late that their lives might be worth living after all. At least, that was what she read in their frozen screams.

"What the hell..." Ms. Ipswich whispered. At the back of the small chamber there was a raised dais. The crystal bodies that flanked it were less defined and ran together until they formed a horizontal spike that hung over the dais. Underneath that spike was a bed. And in that bed...

Case Summary: Holiday Cheer

"Excellent work as always, Ms. Ipswich. I mean, just fantastic work as usual." The Commissary was quiet, as you'd expect late on a winter's night, but the young bookie the Bureau had sent to meet with her more than made up for it. She sipped at her cool glass of beer as he went on.

"Of course, you'll see a bonus on your check at the end of the month." The bookie continued unabated as Ms. Ipswich set down her half-emptied glass.

"I did have one question, though this isn't official. It's just for my own curiosity. By our estimation, this monster had claimed dozens of victims. It should have been incredibly powerful. How is it then that the creature was bested by mere children?" The bookie was getting a little too close to her. She got down from her chair, leaving her beer unfinished.

"Well, the trick with wish-granting monsters is that they get your soul in return for whatever they give you, like balancing a bank account. This creature spent too much on upkeep." She put her jacket on and pulled some money out of one of her pockets. She put on her hat, walked towards the door and added...

"It just takes too much energy to forget someone you loved."

— *chapter closed.* —



**PHYLLOCRANIA PARADOXA
(GHOST MANTIS)**

ADULT MALE

Cora Dart



The BIRD CAGE

Sunny

The birds cage is finally open
but the bird sits frozen,
staring at the reflection of its own darkness
like somehow, it's forgotten what freedom looks like
or forgotten the burning passion that lives inside it
or perhaps forgotten how to fly
or so I guess its wings were broken for too long
and it learned to love the darkness,
to give up its hopes and dreams
and to let the madness and chaos do its thing
until there was nothing left to take.



I wake up and I'm already twenty-five minutes late for work. I spring out of bed and sprint into the bathroom. *Teeth?* I'll just make sure to keep mints with me. *Shower?* My deodorant will do just fine. *Oh, but my hair!* I have to at least *look* presentable. I am an ambassador for the company after all, no matter if I'm at work, at home, or on the street. We all are, everyone who signed the damned contract that tethered our minds to our computers and chained our feet to our desks. I suppose that's dramatic, but my point stands the same, nonetheless. Keep your appearances up, and your paycheck won't go down.

I comb my hair off to the side so I can create the facade of a successful and happy desk jockey. My clothes zip onto my body and I take one long look in the mirror as sweat drips down my head. My back explodes with pain. With how much time I spend sitting down and the fact that I can't even remember the last time I jogged anywhere, I'm not surprised by this. My face has the wrinkles of a 67-year-old and my hair is a nest of silver and brown wires. Despite this, my 35th birthday was only yesterday. I smile widely. This only accentuates my wrinkles. My boss is going to kill me. I burst out of the bathroom and almost kick the dog who happened to be pawing at the door, hoping to play. He's a golden retriever, but he only ever seems to *retrieve* from the bathroom when I'm not looking. I clutch at the pain in my chest with my right hand. It doesn't really hurt that bad, but if my wife's dog thinks it does, he might just leave me alone.

"Maybe next time, bud." I say.

He whimpers in defeat. Like a broken record, he slowly nudges his way into the bathroom and

sets down the small bottle of conditioner he had been holding in his mouth. Before he can look back and attempt to guilt trip me with his big glossy tractor beams, I barrel down the stairs. A look at the kitchen sends my blood pressure soaring high into the clouds. It's an absolute war zone of stacked plates and unwashed silverware after a battle fought between the cockroaches and the light switch. This historic conflict occasionally involves rats who serve as little rodent tanks and unsurprisingly, it's disgusting. The ceiling fan overhead spins ferociously, causing the smoke to traverse across the room like a haunted house. The fan blades cause the lights to flicker like an underground rave party, just without the drugs. The kitchen used to be so beautiful and ornate. It was lush with lavish paintings and the finest of silver appliances. Now, the hardwood floor is rotting, and the pristine white paint is peeling, revealing the insane array of colors underneath. Urine stain yellows, horribly offensive reds, oceanic blues, and greens that must have been the original owners attempt at painting a carnival. This apocalyptic renaissance painting of smears and drip is of course lit by what must be the world's most hideous light fixture. It's made of stone and copper, and it sticks out at awkward and opposing angles. If that doesn't sound horrific enough, it's also missing two bulbs, and the only one that works needs replacing. It's one of those old tungsten lights that takes a few minutes to reach its full brightness, and even then, it's dim. In fact, I feel like somehow it actually makes the wall darker as a result of this but don't ask me for any theory behind that. I'm not a scientist. Truthfully, I don't even remember why

my wife insisted on keeping that ugly thing. Well, scratch that.

Her reasoning was so asinine and churlish that she might as well have not said anything and that's why I *choose* not to remember. Still though, I can cite her words exactly.

"It's art." She said this with so much finality that I just let it go. I didn't want to get into yet another argument over nothing, and I didn't want to wake the new baby. Now though, after five years, two more kids and a miscarriage, I'm tired of looking at it. Morning after morning I would stare at the walls, trying to make it work, but everything just kept shooting out at me. The damn thing doesn't even work! I slammed my fist next to it, causing the light bulb to flicker out. One of our children starts wailing from another room, and through this screeching my wife emerges. Exhaustion is written on her face in as many as two words or less. Dingy blonde hair and sloppy pink highlights explode from her head, contrasting with the somber look of the baggy gray sweatpants she's wearing. I look at her with a desolate glare of indifference, which she reflects back at me in her dull, blue eyes. She's starting to cry now, but she's doing so silently, just like she always does. I look at her teeth and it almost looks like she tried to paint them yellow. She's still in her bathrobe, the one I gave her for our anniversary eons ago. She loved that thing so much I don't think she's taken it off since. It used to be cute and at times romantic, but it's been sixteen years and what used to be white and fluffy has been transmuted into a hole filled, mildew smelling, dish rag.

The holes that spent years forming in the robe reveal her bare skin, but they aren't the least bit sexy; not anymore. Things have been rough on her since she had to quit her job, and combining that with losing a child, I'd say she's definitely

given up on everything. But that doesn't explain why the hell I have to get fired from the only job keeping this miserable shamble of a house from getting foreclosed on. I demand to know why she didn't wake me up. She gestures to the crying child in the other room, and then to the burning skillet on the stove. She does this with all of the eye rolling and malice of a sixteen-year-old who was just told that they had to pay for college and their first car. I ignore her attitude, grab a flimsy piece of bread from the counter, and shove it in my mouth. *Breakfast.*

My wife just stands there staring at me. I shrug my shoulders and begin to walk out of the door when she shrieks and throws something at me that's tiny and metal. I push past her, realizing that she just threw her wedding ring at me, rather *our* wedding ring. *Whatever.* I don't hesitate to slam mine down next to where she's cooking (*burning* really.) She doesn't even look at me. Another tear rolls down her cheek, and in the hazy smoke and confusing flashes of light, nothing rolls down mine. I can hear her cursing me under her breath even over the children wailing. Unfazed, I walk over and kiss the baby. *My sweet pea.* She lies in her crib, innocently sleeping. She's so unaware of the swirling, mad world around her. I wish I could keep it that way, just for her. I grab my I.D. off of the kitchen counter and hastily speed into the garage. It's dark, but with a quick press of the key fob my yellow Lamborghini comes to life, illuminated by the white under lightning I had installed for my birthday. I remember when we used to have two cars. My wife sold hers to support her shoddy startup business and ever since then, this place has slowly become a warehouse for all of her failed dreams.

Soggy cardboard boxes line the other car spaces, along with old paint swatches and a

whole mountain of toppled over paint cans. These are the same paint cans that at some point, worked together to turn the walls of our house into a melting carousel. Next to the cans was a single, lonely easel stand covered by a thick tarp. Next to *this* is an aged mahogany desk with a dusty black typewriter on it. Its legs sag, in part from supporting the weight of the typewriter, but mostly from supporting the weight of her entire, unsuccessful career (or hobby) in art. I turn off of memory lane and pull back into real life, focusing on my dashboard. My hands rest on the steering wheel. I must have started the engine without noticing. The digital clock says 9:40. How? It's that damned hag starting a fire in our scrapyard of a kitchen, that's how. I swear when I laid next to her nine years ago today, she was an angel. A being of pure light in every single way; her personality, her smile, her skin. Now she's just walrus, in more ways than I thought were even possible. I exhale and try to focus on something more positive. I bend down to get in, exaggerating my back pain to levels I can hardly deal with.

My fingers tremble over the three buttons of the garage door key. I hit the wrong one, swearing like a sailor. The one I accidentally hit takes forever to move, if it doesn't trip its own sensor first and start going back up. Because today is not my day, this happens twice with a penalty of what feels like five years. Finally, the broken garage door closes, and I open the right one. My car zooms out of the driveway past the black, sleek gates. Just like that, I enter the flow of traffic, or rather the lack of it, cutting off some guy in a red Volkswagen. He's fat and has a gross, puffy scar across his sweaty forehead. He sees my shiny new spaceship fly in front of his rusty old junker, scraping it just a little, and he turns red. I mean beet red. I do *not* have time for this. I yank my wallet from my pants, take out the important

cards, and throw him the rest of the contents, which is to say, 500 in cash. It also included an unused gym membership that he could probably use. The light ahead of me turns green, and I speed off, but not before the end of his 1988 World Series bat shatters my taillight. In my mirror I see red shards of plastic fly out in all directions, some even went in the guy's eye. It wasn't until after this that he saw the wallet on the ground.

Have you ever driven in the city before? Well, if not, it's impossible to do so safely when you're late. I squeeze through the pulsating membranes of the thick, jam packed traffic at speeds that are highly questionable. My fingers nervously tap on the side of my wheel, and I keep a tight grip on it with the other hand. This keeps me calm as I run a red light, and barely avoid a collision. The others were barely as lucky though, as the only thing they managed to avoid was not having a heart attack as they stopped abruptly. Paranoia sets in and I know, I *know* just how illegal that was. But I *can't*. *Be. Late.* I continue down the busy street, weaving in and out of cars whose drivers raise up their hands, making sure to let me know that I'm number one. They don't stop there though, as they think I also deserve a song sung by each and every one of their car horns. I ignore their praise and I swing a hard left into my building's parking lot. 10:20.

Shit, I am a whole hour and twenty minutes late for work. In other words, I'm fired. The door of my car slams shut, and I shoot into the elevator, a silver beacon of hope. I call for floor 5, one level before the roof. Shockingly, the elevator doesn't stall, and it doesn't even take long. But the pain is back, and this time it's shifted into my head. Twenty seconds later, and the dinging of the elevator pounds against my skull. It feels as if the sound waves are actively trying to split my head in two. I blame the nausea of motion

sickness on the elevator, and I press on straight to the front desk.

Veronica flirts with me like always but today is not the day to have a scandalous affair. I know I'll be fired before I can do anything anyway, so in addition to clocking in at 9:00 AM, I finally scribble down the number she's been so desperately trying to get from me. She flashes me that cute smile of hers and I hurry to my office. On my way there, something rips my attention away and focuses it on someone absolutely terrifying. It's bright, brighter than the sun to be exact, and I have an instinct to duck under something. The shining light is the bald head of my superior, my god, my devil, Mr. Richard. *My boss.*

I ignore him and he ignores me, allowing me enough time to open my office door and slam it shut. Immediately I begin sorting through the old hard copies of files that I need to transfer to the computer. As you can see, this company is at the forefront of the technological revolution. Well, it was back in 1992 at least. Now the boss is pushing for absolutely everything to go online, even old pictures from the very first Christmas party. This wouldn't be so bad if my boss wasn't exactly like Joseph Stalin. Seriously, he wants this done in 5 days and there are filing cabinets on top of filing cabinets that need sorting. I'm not even kidding when I say that I think I've heard him call it his 5-day plan. It's ridiculous. Now digitizing files may sound cushy to some ignorant blue-collar worker, but I guess those people aren't suffering from chronic carpal tunnel syndrome, are they? The font is so tiny, and each document is labeled strictly by numbers, so if I hit just one wrong key, the document is falsely archived, and I'm grilled for it. I read, I type, I correct my mistakes, but most importantly I repeat. This goes on for hours, and its finally time for my 15-minute break. I peel my sweaty back

from the dilapidated black chair and walk out to the terrace.

I turn the knob to a beautifully furnished concrete box, complete with plastic chairs and all of the 70's swank that you would expect from an old action movie. My fingers dig deep into my pocket for a cigarette. The deadline for this project is two days out, and it feels like I've only had two days to do it. I'm not even halfway done, and I feel stressed beyond words, so I light up the cigarette and inhale. My health is so far in the trash can right now, I'm certain that if you tried to reach in and grab it your bones would get smoked, and your skin would be used to roll up another cigarette. With every drag I take from the cancer stick wedged between my fingers, I feel the pain in my chest surge as clear as day. A soft swig from my flask graces my lips in pure stealth, as I whip my head around making sure no one sees me. My doctor says I should quit but my wife doesn't give a shit. So, to that I say, *take another drink, take another drag.* There's a song in there somewhere. Oh, my sweet dear, how far we've fallen.

I think about how much she used to complain about me smoking, but I also think about how bad it is to be stressed. They say either one will kill you in just half of your lifetime, so what does it matter? Damned if I do and damned if I don't. It's just like the time where me and some of the guys got a little drunk at an office party and wanted to mess with the boss. He had been complaining about chest pains that just turned out to be indigestion, so we paid one of the guys to jam the door to the Automatic External Defibrillator while the cameras were down for maintenance. The plan was for Mr. Richard to realize how much of an idiot he was, but then of course, he never touched the damn thing again.

A couple of years have gone by and I've never had the guts to ask how the guy did it, or if he

even did it. In retrospect it was probably a little too far, but if I spoke up about it now, I would be fired and likely arrested. Even though all I did was give him a couple of bucks, the guys would probably paint *me* as the big bad ringleader. You know the deal. Some things in life just go that way. He probably didn't even do it knowing how cowardly he was, I'm sure it's fine.

Funnily enough, we had drunkenly agreed that I would be the guy to unjam it, but of course, I didn't have the time or the desire to get caught doing that. I had plans that night with my wife. It was one of the better days I had with her. I ended up taking her out to dinner. We didn't have any kids to worry about back then. Those are times I truly miss. Don't get me wrong, I love my kids, and I hope my little boy is resting in heaven, but I miss the woman I married.

Because I skipped lunch a few hours ago my stomach is killing me, but I exhale and inhale anyway. One last puff of smoke leaves my mouth before I jam the vice into the ashtray. I take a final look around and declare that this city is filthy and fit for pigs. All I can see are smokestacks billowing their carcinogens, poisoning the air I breathe. My 15 minutes are up and thankfully my day is almost over. I head back to my office and marvel at how much work I managed not to do. At least I didn't get fired yet. I'm biting my nails and looking at the clock, twenty minutes go by and the pain in my shoulder surges up out of nowhere. This causes a knee jerk reaction, leading to me wrap my fingers around a bottle of Advil before swallowing three pills with no water. Sweat drips down my forehead as the hands of the clock drip down to the thirty second mark. Just a few more minutes to go. A few more minutes and I will have escaped the wrath of my evil boss. I file papers away and tidy up just a bit, invoking a new wave of pain, this time in my black lungs. I

slowly turn the knob of my door and emerge in the hallway, which is empty. There are only a few lights on, my dictator's excuse of a green initiative. Though a little unnerving, the dimness sets the mood for my sneaky escape. The hive shuffles and pulsates as its workers continue on. Typing incessantly, they stare unblinkingly into their bleak, pointless futures. Well guess what dirtbags, I am out of here!

With each step, I feel my age increase by half a year and by the time I reach the sign in desk I feel 92. I sign my name and clock out at 4:59. I'm a minute early but if I can be in my car by 5 nothing can stop me from taking as much time to get home as possible. Veronica smiles and passes me her number. Her name is signed at the bottom and the *V* is very exaggerated and fancy; a not-so-subtle hint for her plans with me this weekend. I smile back, thinking about how wonderful it would be to actually feel like someone cares about me, like someone wants to make me happy. I look at her, and I mean I *really* look at her. Absolutely gorgeous long hair the color of corn silk, braided into the most seductive pigtailed that complement her tight pink skirt. It all makes me want to caress her shapely, hourglass figure. A golden necklace with an unknown pendant shimmers and dips below her neckline, resting in her cleavage. The way her white blouse is undone just to give me a taste makes me want to lick my lips, and it's all topped off with her full, red lips, perfect for... My heart races at the thought.

How wonderful it would be to actually have sex for the first time in years. Veronica has noticed my bare ring finger and playfully strokes it. I look past her green eyes and she can sense that I'm drifting away. I still haven't taken her number. Her smile wavers as she stops playing with her hair. I think about my wife and how wonderful it would be if I could have all this with *her*. I

used to. We should probably talk more, it isn't a surprise our marriage is falling apart because we aren't big talkers, just big feelers. We would yell, scream, curse each other's name into the ground and then kiss until we couldn't remember what we were fighting about. It wasn't the best cycle, but at least we talked. At least we made progress back then.

You know, there's a part of me that wants to walk out and come home to her, but then there's the part of me that knows that these things take time, if they ever take at all, and nothing will change overnight. That's the part that knows what *can* change overnight; the dry spell my sex life has been going through for what feels like decades. This also happens to be the part that's getting harder to ignore, until Veronica speaks up.

"What?" She asks with an edge of offense in her soft voice.

"I'm... married." I expect her to scowl at me in disgust, but instead she laughs like I just told her a hilarious joke. Her face pointed towards the ceiling and her back arched. She was still touching my empty ring finger. Wiping a tear from her face, she reaches down and grabs at the bulge in my pants, causing me to jump back.

"That's not what your finger says..." She licks her lips and pours all of her gaze into mine.

"Well, that's what *I* said." I snatch her number from the desk and tear it up, getting ready to go home to my wife. Just as I begin to turn for the door, Mr. Richard appears behind me like a shadow of death; I don't know where the hell he came from, but in his booming voice he says, "Hey uh, Markson." *He can barely remember my name.* "I almost missed you. Can I see you in my office for a second?" I follow like a dog with its tail between his legs.

Although I expect it to be laden with devices of torture or have the simple yet elegant look of a

supervillain plotting world domination, his office is actually quite comfortable and well furnished. Unlike the vintage style of the break room and the terrace outside, his office has a new couch, luxurious paintings and replicas of modern art sculptures. His walls are decorated with souvenirs from all his travels: camel saddles from Qatar, elegant sheets of silk from Paris, a Balalaika from Russia. I look at his desk and drool over his fountain pen that's rumored around the office to be made of real gold. Now I don't believe that the pen is 100% solid gold like people claim, but I know *for a fact* that he has the money to make something like that happen.

My wave of admiration crashes as I remember why I'm here. *He knows, doesn't he? That I was late? That I was very, very, very late?* I take notice of how much taller his chair is than mine, he's practically towering over me. I can't tell what this is about, because he's just smiling, and this alone is stressful and perplexing. My forehead breaks out into a sweat for about the four hundredth time today, prompting my boss to laugh. His laughter incites a dazzling pain in my left arm, shooting like a gun. He mentions something about me being late, but my hearing is going quiet. The only thing I hear is a sharp, stabbing, ringing. My chest feels like it's splitting apart. I hear his words echoing through my mind.

"I know you've had a lot to deal with lately and as a result of that you've been slacking off," he said. "So I feel like I'm obligated to do this..."

What will I do for money?

"For the good of the company..."

Will my wife still love me? What about the kids? "You're..."

Uggh! Just get it over with already, I can't take any more of this hair pulling strain! Yes, fired, I get it. JUST! SAY! IT! Beads of sweat shoot down my face like bullets, dropping onto the carpet below.

“Really going to like this...” Puzzled, a look of confusion tears across my pain-stricken face. He hands me four tickets to the Bahamas, shakes my hand, and smiles warmly as his laughter returns.

“You’ve seemed a little stressed out lately and given that you’ve been working your ass off in that filing room, this is for you and Alyssa and your kids. Congratulations, man, you’ve earned it,” he said.

“What?” I ask, bewildered.

“It’s a vacation! Hey, are you alright?”

I collapse, gasping, my sweaty hair slapping against the carpet. Just like the way my wife used to paint hard brush strokes of passion slick with oil. Clutching at my heart and rasping for air, my vision is doubling and getting blurry. Richard is screaming for Veronica to call 9-1-1, and for someone to get the AED. His meaty hands press firmly on my chest as he begins CPR.

“You’re going to be alright. Hey! Stay with me! Mark! Come on.” He cranes his neck and shouts into the hallway as everything slowly gets dark. In my foggy state of consciousness, I hear what could only be the alien sound of my dying body gasping desperately for oxygen. This is what we get for fishing.

“Where the hell is that AED?” my boss cried.

My shard of hope disintegrates when a panicked voice responds, stuttering over every syllable.

“I- It’s stuck, I can’t get it open!” the voice said.

“What?” Richard demands as his CPR slows and his breathing becoming more and more labored. I hear the shattering of glass along with multiple sets of footsteps bounding towards me. My left hand is ringless and the vacation tickets are strewn across the floor. Oh, Alyssa. I rasp her name in the darkness. If only she could feel just how much regret overtakes me. My suit jacket and undershirt are ripped open. The cold air hits my chest like a blizzard, but it’s too late. My eyes feel like they’re gluing shut and it’s getting harder for my weak muscles to push against the weight of death.



MISCONCEPTIONS

Emily Isabel

The air was cold and crisp, like the first bite of a fresh apple straight from the fridge. She had asked me to meet her at our spot, the one where no one else ever came. The old and rickety wooden bridge over Stony Creek was shaking more than usual in the November wind. I could taste the snow in the air as I walked to meet her. I looked ahead and saw her there, standing stationary at the edge of the bridge. She was not moving about as she usually did but standing still and staring at the river four stories below. She looked frozen. I wanted to run to her and grab her in my arms but the number of layers I had on made it difficult to move fast.

She had on a yellow dress. It was knee length with a little cap sleeve and cinched tight at the waist. She first caught my eye in that dress when we met and now, she wore it on every special occasion we celebrated together. But why was she wearing it now? It was typical of her really, to do the unexpected. She hated order and rules. "I live the life I love," was her mantra. She was obviously beautiful, but it was her spirit that attracted me to her. We had gone through so much together this past year between the rumors and having to hide our love, but she never let it faze her.

"How do you do it?" I once asked.

She asked what I meant, but wasn't it obvious? Gossip travels fast through a town as small as ours and the snide remarks about our relationship have taken their toll on me emotionally.

She just laughed, and with a smile on her face she responded, "As long as I know that you love me, then nothing else matters."

Such a simple response, but one I should have expected from her. Nothing could get her down and I could count on one hand the number of times I had seen her upset.

"You know how much I love you," I responded.

With another smile she said, "Of course, to the moon and the stars."

I was thinking about that day as I was walking closer to her still. I could see my birthday present to her shining from her neck in the slight rays of sun peeking through the sky. Miniscule beams of yellow bounced off the diamond encrusted necklace like fireworks on the fourth of July. It was in the shape of a moon and star with our initials "W" and "E" engraved on the back. This had always made her smile.

"WE can do anything, WE will conquer the world, WE are unstoppable..." She would go on and on with these phrases, each one making her giggle. We made a list of them once and I would pull it out when things got rocky to remind me of the good times.

I was less than twenty feet from her, and I could finally make out all of her features. Her long red hair was blowing like a tornado around her face and her skirt was swirling up like a ballerina practicing turns. The restless energy that had gotten her in trouble so many times before had taken over her body once again. She had gone from staring down at the creek to spinning in big, slow circles with her dainty little laugh that made her open her mouth and smile like the sun. I couldn't help but smile. It was only thirty degrees, and she made the world around her look like it belonged in the ninety-five-degree July heat. There was a happiness in her I hadn't seen

in quite a while and it brought joy to my heart to see her like this.

Something had changed in her when the cold began. She had started to keep to herself more than usual, making excuses to stay home rather than spending a night with me and our friends. I asked her why and she told me that the world felt too big for her and she didn't belong. She looked so sad, but I told her that she would always belong in my heart.

"Of course," she responded. "Forever and ever."

There was a period of time where she got better and her light shined bright once again, but after October the brightness began to dim.

"It's because of the weather. I become sad when the sky turns gray," she'd say. Excuses began to pile up like presents under a Christmas tree. I couldn't do anything but be there for her, she said. She said that she would explain everything when she was ready, but I was still waiting for that day.

I was ten feet from her, and I noticed that despite her smile and laughing, she was sobbing big fat tears that were flowing down her face as fast as the river below. I ran the last couple of feet to her and grabbed her arm, making her stumble out of her turn.

"Elena, what is it?" I asked. She was never one to cry. I was concerned when she asked me to meet here, and now I was more confused than ever. She responded to my question with a kiss, burning with passion. She held me tight in a hug, whispering in my ear, "Do you know how much I love you?" I pulled back and took her face in my hand. Her hot tears burned against the icicles that were my fingers.

"Of course, I do. And I love you even more!" I answered.

She smiled through her tears and said, "Then you'll let me go."

Time flashed before my eyes. Memory after memory came into view: the first kiss, the first touch, the intimate and the simple, lying together under a tree, trying to beat the July heat, our legs tangled up talking about everything and anything, wearing matching bathing suits to the town pool because we could, helping each other get ready for the homecoming dance earlier this year. So many wonderful memories replayed, like sneaking out late at night just for one "I love you" followed by one more hug. They kept playing in my head like someone had morphed them all into a movie. I couldn't comprehend what she was saying. I couldn't talk. I couldn't move. She was talking crazy! I could never let her go.

"Whitney," she said, and I flashed back into the present, "I love you."

I went to grab her, hold her, keep her...but everything happened so quickly. She shoved me backwards with all of her strength, the wood-of the bridge beneath me catching my fall. I sat up and looked, but she was not there. I started screaming her name, but she did not appear. The tears had found their way onto my cheeks and they were falling faster and faster as I crawled to the edge of the bridge. I looked in the river and saw a beautiful yellow flower now floating along the rapids, shining like the sun against the dark sadness of the rocks.

YOU ARE WORTHY

Caroline Colwill

Do not let your wounds overwhelm you
you are worthy of a better day
Do not let the hurts of life turn you into a cynic
there is still some goodness in this world
Do not let past injustices define you
you are much more than a victim
Do not lose hope
With your initiative, better things are coming your way
Do not give in to despair
you are worthy of hope
Do not give in to hate
you are worthy of love
Do not let your isolation destroy you
You are a good person
No matter how you have been treated
You are intelligent
No matter what insults they have hurled at you
You are spectacular
No matter how ordinary you may feel
No matter how lonely you may be
You are not alone in your pain
You are worthy of deep joy
No matter the life you have been given
May your joy be complete

JESSE'S WORLD

Sarah Dougherty

Photographer's note: "Jesse is 5-years-old and on the autism spectrum. I wanted to create something that represents how he doesn't always understand the intricacies of the world going on around him even when he is right in the middle of it."





The FEELING OF YOU

Tara Hoogen

Your ocean eyes look into mine and again,
I feel alive.

Your warmth flees your body but fills mine
and at that same time,
I suddenly feel less deprived.

Your hands intertwine with mine
and do not leave,

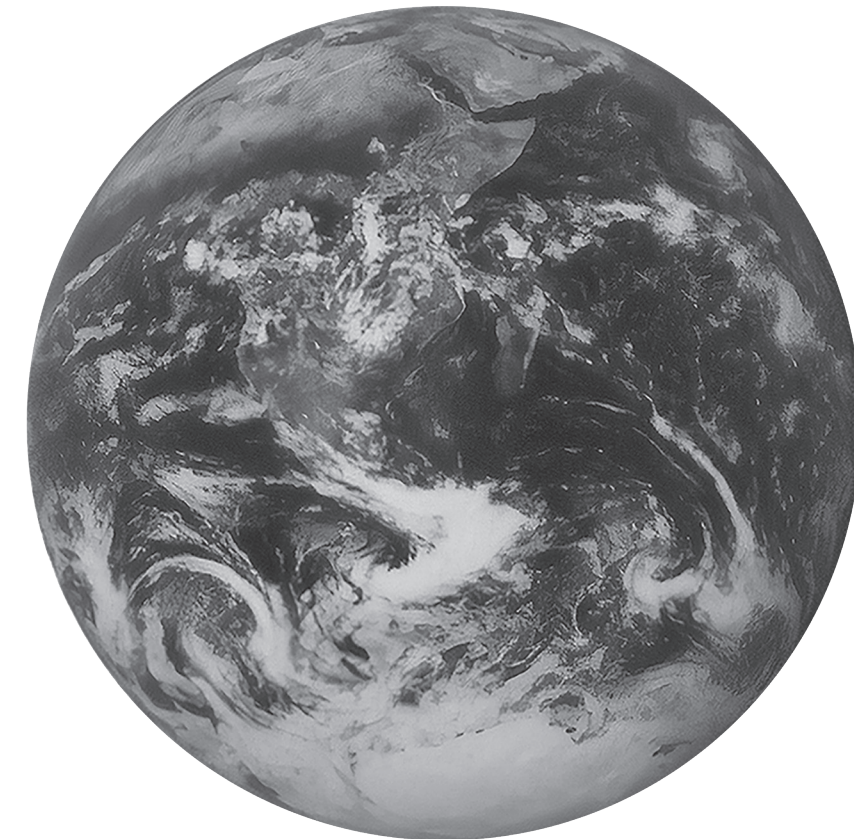
so now my tears are dried.

There is never goodbye, only sunrise,
and that alone

is enough to satisfy.

We can only hope that this lasts forever
and when we die, we won't divide.

Because the feeling of you
was enough for our souls to survive.



THE FIRE AND THE TRAVELERS THREE

Jaida Brown Hancock

I am a fire

I burn bright and dwell deep within the woods inside an unremarkable cabin— unattractive
some might even say

There are small cracks in the cabin

Occasional drafts find their way through these cracks

But within this cabin where I live

I have the blessing of providing warmth from the most bitter of winter nights

All are welcome ‘round my hearth

No weary wanderer is turned away from the comforts I can supply

It matters not whether the individual is rich or poor, male or female, fat, thin, old, young,
whole, broken, and so on

I am here

‘Round me have stories been told

Stories of matchless love

stories of loss

stories of unimaginable horror

stories of sacrifice

stories of life

I have aided in cooking the food that nourished the mortal bodies surrounding my glow

In the room I call my home, songs have been sung

The songs were sometimes off key

Sometimes they were lovely

Sometimes they were mumbled out of the lips of children whose parents insisted they partake

I enjoyed every singular one

Within the vastness of this world, over and over again I meet 3 travelers

The first traveler acknowledges me and is grateful that I am

Before leaving my presence, they throw on an extra log to nourish me and let me know of
their gratitude

The second traveler expects that the next sojourner to come upon my unremarkable cabin will
nourish my flame

They walk away failing to recognize the energy I have burned up to give them relief

I did not ask them to provide me with what keeps my flame alight because I thought they would know

Despite their oversight, I still burn

Because, if I don’t, who will?

The third traveler is the one who abuses what I am

They throw ice upon me, upon this gift I have so willingly given—

simply because they like the hiss the ice makes as it melts within my depths

This traveler dispassionately watches as my incandescence slowly

slowly

fades

until all that is left is the most minuscule of embers

It is painful to not be able to fulfill what I was made to do

Traveler three had no more need for me and perhaps did not realize or did not care that I still had
work to do

More bodies to warm

More light to provide

It is after the third traveler leaves that I hold on

But simultaneously wonder if I should stop being what I am

Stop giving so much because I never know when the third traveler will, by and by, come into my
home, my sanctuary, my peace

Inevitably, as I question why I was born to be fire, another traveler arrives to light me anew

And I let them

Because I am given the chance to burn up something old in order to create something new

And even though I know that I will see many, many more travelers

Travelers of every type

I will choose to keep burning

Because I am a fire

TRAIN-HOPPER

Isabella DiDonato



WANDERING SOULS

Paige Reisling

Soles click on worn stones
Each soul has somewhere to go
Sunken eyes, weary bones
The destination, only they know

Children play by the fountain
Cherubs dance in the spring
Of pretty coins there is a mountain
Good luck they will bring

Midsummer sun drifting away
White sand, azure bay
Drifting tides of humankind
A washed-up shell to search and find

An evening sky full of hues and tones
The sea is calm, the tide is low
On the boards, one stands alone
Shrouded in the honey glow

Soles click on worn stones
Each soul has somewhere to go
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**PEGASUS LITERARY PUBLICATION
SPRING 2021**

Delaware County 
Community College