This is the Blacksburg High School literary magazine. It's full of writing, photos, and art by Blacksburg students. Our aesthetic theme this year is journal, while the literary theme is travel. The Inkwell staff wanted the magazine to look and feel like a creative person's journal as they travel through this life.

This is my fourth year taking Creative Writing and my last year in high school. It's been a long, tiring journey. High school has been a rough ride, and now I am thrilled that it's almost over.

Making this magazine has been a great experience. We have an amazing staff, and this is one of the best magazines we have produced.

I hope you enjoy this journey through the myriad talents of BHS students.

- Thomas Brunsma
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Ephemeral
Katarina Yuan

Its rising white dome appears a tooth,
a molar looming under the moon-dim sun,
above the green gums of the trees.
Leaves rustle, a muddled heartbeat.
“A retreat,” they call it.
“A monastery.”

The gleaming teeth inside are the debris
of the teachings they helped speak
when they pearled a prophet’s maw.
Now they are locked in rock boxes
so the echoes won’t escape.
“Brought from India, once,” my father says. I nod
and feel the old stone, cracked and cold as a skeleton.

Some call the building grieving,
with its locked teeth secrets, lockjaw silence.
My father explains, “It is a celebration—of what has been,
of what was since.”
Perhaps that explains the sacrificed orange sodas, perched on the bench
where clementines would’ve rolled their heads in respect.

I remember my father telling me
about the twin housing the incisor:
the burnt-down temple.
The loss of life was catastrophic—but how ephemeral
that catastrophe was, gone
with the bright smoke that enwrapped the pitted, swirling sun!

More lasting was the loss of the garden,
of the dendritic texts etched in the veins of jade leaves,
of the liverwort hymns sitting innocent in wrinkled roots, sieving sunlight,
of the white-capped monks who hunched in the shade,
sending out spores and staying unswayed by the winds of change
that swept away their petrichor incense.

The red exoskeleton still gleams on that far mountain—
enamel-tiled smile,
mahogany-paneled eyes, lock-pursed lips.
Hollow, it sits and waits
for the chitin-knit monks to return.

With an empty chill, it burns again
while the born-agains whisk past,
hassling each other with their thundering walking sticks,
with their gunpowder camera flashes,
with their dark-muttered words that hiss
up to stain the grainy, smog-white sky.
People pose before the doors as hunters before a carcass.
(Even the vultures weren’t as arrogant when they’d passed by
to unearth diamond bones from the coal-black flesh.)

At each monastery, the tourists catch ivory smiles in their silicon nets.
(Their teeth gleam silence—they have no echoes yet to trap.)
My father shakes his head. We retreat home, each step
the crack of bone underfoot.
In the road-pinned wood, the unburned monastery sits
in the incense of city-churned exhaust,
a lost molar in the shade of a high-rise maw, waiting
for the monks to return.
Family

Lilian Morgan

Family, at its very core, is nothing short of manipulation. We have been told since birth that family is the bond that ties us to a certain household, a specific group of people we all share blood with. Complex things like trust, faith, and acceptance become infinitely simpler with just one word tied to them. You needn’t worry about whether or not your mother is going to come home; you simply know she will.

Family blinds us.

Family is what turns us all into oblivious children, gripping our father’s rough hand as he leads us through the dark. It is what presses us to cling to our mother’s side when we hear a frightening noise, and it is what makes us whisper little secrets into our siblings’ ears in between titters and giggles.

Family is the reason that, when we spend our first night at a friend’s house, we end up crying our eyes out and calling for our parents as soon as the sun sets, because we know—without family, we are hollow. Without our fathers and mothers at our side to hold our hands and whisper empty reassurance, we could collapse.

There will come a day, if it hasn’t come already, when you will have to let go of the hands that hold yours and face a world that is suddenly much crueler and much lonelier without your parents at your side. You will be thrust into the blinding light of reality only to find that all the shiny hopes you had are much duller and less friendly than before.

Family is the reason why it hurts so much more when your parents hit you than when a stranger does. Family is supposed to support each other, not shove each other to the ground. The sting is that much colder when it comes from your family.

It is all too easy to be blinded by the glittering, sparkly words that surround family. Society ingrains that into us, with words like “love” and “acceptance” and “home.” All of these words give us comfort, and when they’re stripped away by the very people who gave them to you, you’re left confused and hurt, once again a child gripping her father’s hand as he leads her right into the snake pit.

Family is suddenly no longer your mother’s famous cobbler served with warm smiles and friendly chatter. Family becomes spaghetti from a week ago reheated in the microwave for thirty seconds, because Mom is working late and Dad can’t cook. Family becomes a silence that looms over the dark house even with the television running late at night; it becomes the flicker of the blue light all night long, because Dad fell asleep watching it and Mom wasn’t there to turn it off for him like she did before.

Family eventually becomes Dad going off to find work a couple hours away and never coming back home. It’s the muttered conversation between thin walls and raised voices. It’s not violent—that would have been easier to accept, honestly. Instead it falls apart quietly, like leaves off of the trees in autumn.

Family is no longer little stick figures drawn in harsh blue and red crayon all over your dad’s office walls. It is no longer hours spent meticulously crafting a bracelet for Mom with her name entwined in the strings. It is no longer staying up late with the lights off in your room, huddled under your bedsheet with a lamp drawing cartoons with your siblings while your parents pretend not to notice.
Family is instead replaced with empty office walls, tired and bare wrists, and texts to your siblings on occasion, but not very nice ones. Family is an excuse to get away from friends you’re tired of seeing, yet still always see anyways because, frankly, anything is better than emptiness of your house. Anything is better than seeing doors closed and lights off and hearing only the rapid click of a keyboard or a pen scratching at paper from your mother’s room instead of her laughing on the phone with friends.

Family is going to see your dad in his new home a couple of states away instead of a couple of hours, only to find that his definition of family is no longer the same as yours. Sure, there are similarities, and he insists, “They’re your family too,” but fundamentally, it’s wrong.

His family is chattering animatedly over TV dinners and laughing at a ridiculous comedy skit with each other. His family is always texting when he goes to and leaves work—on the rare occasion that she isn’t there to send him off.

His family is not hiding wedding rings because they make sore fingers ache. His family is not discreetly throwing away childhood photos to make room for office papers. His family is not hiding behind locked doors because there’s nothing left to hide.

Secretly, his family will never be the same as yours, and you both know it. There’s still a ghost of your family hidden within his, and it’s obvious through missed calls, a text—I miss you!—as an afterthought to an otherwise empty conversation. You can see hints of your family when you finally head home and his family spends hours wishing him a safe drive and giving a hundredth goodbye kiss.

You don’t cry when you go to your friends’ houses anymore, because you’ve become used to the dark. Your family means that it doesn’t make a difference whether or not you’re holding their hand, because it’s too late to turn around anyways.

And so blindly you march into the night with your feeble idea of a family at your side. The world is much too cold and much too busy to work with a word as euphemistic as “family,” because really it’s just a nice way of referring to an empty house and locked doors.

And if you’re lucky, somewhere in that dark corridor you’ll bump into somebody just as lost as you are, whose definition of family has been worn so thin that the frayed remains fall apart at the slightest touch. Together you can take your definitions of family and rebuild, rewrite it to be just the shiny, faux truth it had been when you were little.

Family is always the same, though. Just like the ghost of your family remained in your father’s, it will remain in yours, and eventually the vicious cycle will continue to repeat itself until you become the one with empty office walls, piles of paper, and a cold, bare wrist. Eventually you’ll see the lingering traces of your old definition of family nestled within your own, and eventually you’ll let go of your child’s hand in favor of holding your own.

Family is just as much holding on as it is letting go.
The deserts are expanding, and the tides are coming in; they have advanced far beyond the lines we drew in the sand as children and far beyond what any child could have imagined. Our city is burned down by industry, our lives are simply hour after hour of revolutions we build, and when those fail, we force ourselves through cracks in the concrete for a mere breath of fresh air.

Overlooking an alley on the limits of the city is an apartment with two dancing spirits, hovering above the oasis that has become a labyrinth of turning gears and heatwaves. They are waltzing to the rhythm of the din below, second by second whirling together sandstorms with earth-crusted feet and wind-swift hands, scattering Sun on his lightning-struck shores and Moon on oceans she thinks she controls.

They’re only dancers, these spirits; there’s nothing else they could ever be. Their minds are immortal, made of stuff most people could only dream of; their blood was born afterwards, flowing through paths we wish we had taken centuries ago. Nevertheless, their bones aren’t so different from ours; they break when crushed under mechanical fates never meant to see the light of day; they break when we tell them: There is no place for you.

The girl has always been this way; no one expected her to be any different. She’s from a time when poetry was a lauded form of art, when fire spurred the minds of millions and not just the factory machines, and she’s got every inch of her body covered in black, because she’s inked every word she can on her skin. Her petite form is merely a silhouette, outlined on the flawless oak floors and flying through the smoky air.

The boy once dreamed of being a poet himself, travelling the world before there was nothing left of it, before he settled for journalism instead. He’s from a time when facts were all people wanted to hear, when curiosity branded the minds of millions and not just the printing presses, and even now his skin is pale, thin, and waiting for the next line to be written. His lithe form is a trick of the light, framed in the glare on the windows and racing through the dusty haze.

Years from now, the deserts will finally invade, and the tides will charge in, never to leave. (Their power is far beyond what any of us could imagine; our lines were wiped out long ago.) Our leaders will have fought themselves to the brink of extinction, having ignored the real threats for far too long, and their advisors will attempt to continue on, only to find that they cannot; miles and miles of sand and sea separate them from the nearest living soul who could have helped them. They have only themselves, themselves, themselves and their dying machines.
And where will we be? We will still be a world of industry, we will still live revolutionary lives, we will still breathe the same old smoky air. Our city will be covered in sand, as the last of the machines sputter and die, desperately trying to keep up with the times.

And late one night, years from now, the girl will discover the boy’s corpse in the basement, slumped over his keyboard, and a quiet waltz drifting from above, as if he simply decided to leave his unspoken words for the next morning. There will be no ceremony, but a mere sentence: *I thought he died years ago.*

There isn’t a guy or girl like those dancers, those foreign bodies, and there never will be; there is nothing else that could be. Their minds are spinning in desert sandstorms and their blood runs along the edges of ocean currents, but their bones aren’t so different from ours—

They dissolve into dust when the deserts bury them.
Give In to the Music

Thomas Brunsma

Dancing like it’s my last chance to dance, I expect that this is the end of the world, so I’ll GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC.

The beat is there, thumping in time with my heart, and all of our hearts sync up to the beat (the beat), and I’m dancing with a girl; her dyed-blond hair, dark eyeliner make her stand in with the crowd. She seems like she is having a good time as I— GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC—dance with a guy with slick black hair. He is all too close to me, inside my space and I step outside, puking my guts out, all the drinks finally getting to me, and I GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC.

There it is again. Looking around, no one seems to notice. The girl and the guy are making out in the corner as if I was never there, and I look up at the booth where men with lab coats watch... GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC.

Me? Could it be they are staring at me? Grabbing a drink, I down it all, and then I start to notice the colors in the ceiling like the aurora borealis, and the haze around my eyes is intense, and I just need to— GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC—breathe deep, in and out. The doctor is flashing his light in my eyes, he injects something into my arm, he takes my pulse and shakes his head, have I— GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC.

I sit up. The room is sterile white, and I can hear the music in my head. My heart is still in time with the beat and— GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC— the door opens. A man walks in, looks at me, says, “Reject,” but all I hear is GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC.

He hands me something heavy and black; it feels cold in my hand. It feels dangerous in my hands, but I still turn it towards my head and I GIVE IN TO THE MUSIC.

Francesca Shaver
Milk Teeth
H. Stone

God’s mouth opens, and his teeth fall to the ground like seeds,
Burrowing under the soft black soil,
Growing in the cracks of our concrete casket.
O’ blessed garden, born against the odds!

Eve sits by the trunk of the last rotten tree in a wasp-nest city,
Hunger heavy in her stomach like the watermelon seeds
Her mother always warned her not to swallow.
Childhood superstition still fits her
Like the faded sweatshirt fits over her shifting shoulders,
Awkward and unfamiliar, another sign that time is passing.

“They’ll take root in your stomach
And grow and grow until you’re overcome.”
She hears the warning ring out,
Looks up at the rusted leaves and the soft green apple
Still clinging stubbornly to the bare bough.
It rests perfectly in her hands, hard but not too hard,
And the hunger aches like her mismatched legs.

She shines it on her torn sleeve and bites.
Her hand pulls back, blood bright on the white flesh,
As she spits her last milk tooth into her open, shaking palm.
Exit Sign

Genesis Simmons

Sit in an empty hallway at school
and watch the exit sign,
a red light with a harsh glow
that is bright enough to burn trees.

And as you watch the sign,
realize there is no arrow that sits upon it.
This exit sign points nowhere,
much like yourself.

Your harsh neon lights burn the eyes of others,
and your arrow might not be pointing anywhere,
but you know what you want
when you’re sitting in an empty hallway.
Starry-Eyed
Bethany Werner

She is stained with the blood of the universe.
Hands soaked in resplendent light,
She fingerpaints her songs
On the faces of strangers.
Her eyes are ice, her smile sweet fire,
Her footsteps leave craters in their wake.
She scrapes auroras into the sky,
Breathes moonlight, sings supernovas,
And as she hurtles towards the earth in a
blaze of light,
I make a wish...
Singly, Dragons

katarina Yuan

The dragons wriggle under my skin, grinning mouths of sizzling thunder, tails skimming tingling sheets of lightning out of my tousled, gray flesh. Bulbous eyes rise and stare, goosebumps peering in wonder. (I am dragons.)

My hands spread—the rasp of wings grasping air—and I, gesturing, breathe fire and stare the biting steam that rises from the dichotomy of pearled dew and embers embedded together in my chest, beating. (See: my heart, my mind is a dragon.)

East and West growl, prowling about my teeth, wyrms unhooking from under my tongue—puce, pulsing, they turn outward like froth, clawing the staleness from the audiencing air.

Hear me:

I arose, a thin serpent, like reeds from the river-paint—opium bitter—of mutual death. My skin is loess, is oak bark, is the harkened, dark-hardened tales woven in smoke’s acrid wake. I slake myself on ozone and shake off opaled sunlight. But mostly, I rise, curling like the thermals found in the shadows’ silence. (I am dragons—indivisible, singly, dragons.)
Summer

Rachel Hoffman

She placed spring in her pocket
So she could always have it with her,
And people couldn’t help but notice
Soft lavender flowers flourishing,
Vines lacing across her legs.

She tucked winter behind her ears,
Put it out of sight.
But its frost still crept along her skin,
Its crystals clinging to her breath,
And snow dusted her shoulders
From the blizzards in her mind.

She shoved autumn in her boots,
Since it seemed to follow her.
Long shadows stretched from her heels,
And leaves swirled from her feet
With every step she took.

Twilight fell beneath her fingertips,
Crescents of deep velvet and stars
Left from when she clawed at the scraps of day.
Her sleeves were stained with daybreak,
Streaked with rose and gold and light
From reaching up to touch the sun.

But she held summer in her hands,
Stirred its golden light with her fingers,
Ruffled its leaves with each breath.
It collected in her creases,
Seeped down into pearl bone,
And after all these years
She refused to let it go.
Twin Eyes

H. Stone

You were born under the watch of twin, bright eyes,
A constant, suffocating, silent stare,
A reminder of what could be, but wasn’t.

They say the desert never forgets its children,
Created in the dust of listless wind,
But now you know that bone is just bone,
Picked clean and as white as sunlight,
But nowhere near as permanent.

The sand swallows and swallows,
Selfish, greedy devourer.
You remember digging, digging,
Trying to find an end to it.
The wind almost sounds like laughter.

Those piercing, yellow eyes stayed frozen,
Watching unblinking as you slipped out of their gaze.
Blood-red light spilled over the ground
As they wept for you, son of many,
But a sun nonetheless.

Remember, remember:
This life is cold.
This life is cruel.
Come home, come home,
Wandering son, come home.
Wandering son, you are not alone.

Those twin eyes have always been familiar,
As recognizable as your own,
But now a stranger stares back from dull metal,
Sunlight burning at the edges of his irises,
Weeping, weeping, but watching still.
The Empty Woods
Will Marin

I walk through the empty woods.
It is too cold for birds to sing,
But the squirrels still play,
The deer still run,
The vines still grow up to the top trees.
I walk through the woods.
Freedom drips from the mouths of many; revolution tangles in the hair of the soldiers. Going to sleep not safe, nor sound—Death is the only certain now. The bombs are quiet, for the fear is louder. The night lights like a match. Screams of the innocent blend into the dust, settling in the soldiers lungs like the men settle in their armchairs—They gripe and groan over the issues, but when it comes time for sacrifice they shake their heads and excuse themselves, for they are too busy counting their money to push thoughts of salvation away.

Freedom drips from the mouths of many; revolution tangles in the air. In the flags the heroes raised, the unbreakable system has broken. Its wings lie tangled and useless; they have such purpose, but do naught.
The boy carefully removes a grub from his grass-stained pocket. He inspects its wriggling, rosey legs, deciding it fit for aquatic consumption. He picks a bent nail from the fishing basket and forces the grub onto the makeshift fish hook, his face scrunched up with effort. He ties a length of twine, wrapped tightly about his fingers, around the head of the nail and dips it into the calm pool where the streamwater gathers, the way his father taught him.

After a few minutes of watching the minnows skirt around the dead grub, he decides he won’t take up his father’s trade. Nothing has made so much as a ripple in the water’s surface. He peers forward, trying to see something deeper down. His father sits for hours with his nets in this very pool of the river, returning with baskets full of carp and trout and eels. He never seems to move.

The boy sees a small, speckled trout nose his grub. He freezes, watching the fish inspect his offerings, its gills flowing with the cold current. The trout gives a tug on the insect. The boy hauls the line backward, flinging the trout clear from the water, off of the hook, and leaves it flopping twenty paces into the forest. He scrambles to his feet and takes off, kicking up pebbles and clumps of moss, bumping his knee on a rock.

He grabs the fish, clutching it above him as it thrashes about, dying. Finally it is still. He carries his prize back to his father’s fishing basket and deposits it proudly, the first of his catch.

The evening air begins to smell of woodsmoke as cookfires are lit in the nearby houses, mingling with the wet scent of the evening mist. He flops back on the moist soil, looking up at the cloudy sky.

He has caught his first fish, his greatest triumph. The fish is a little small, he thinks, but then again, so is he. He searches his trouser pockets for another grub, but his pockets are empty.

Over his head, the sky turns pale pink. The evening stars blink. The trees’ shadows grow long and cast darkness over the river’s surface.

The boy tosses his line carelessly in his fishing basket and walks off into the woods, dragging his basket behind him so that it bumps and bangs against tree roots.

The boy carefully removes a grub from his grass-stained pocket. He hikes its wriggling rosey legs, deciding it fit for aquatic consumption. He picks a bent nail from the fishing basket and forces the grub onto the makeshift fish hook, his face scrunched up with effort. He ties a length of twine, wrapped tightly about his fingers, around the head of the nail and dips it into the calm pool where the streamwater gathers, the way his father taught him.

After a few minutes of watching the minnows skirt around the dead grub, he decides he won’t take up his father’s trade. Nothing has made so much as a ripple in the water’s surface. He peers forward, trying to see something deeper down. His father sits for hours with his nets in this very pool of the river, returning with baskets full of carp and trout and eels. He never seems to move.

The boy sees a small, speckled trout nose his grub. He freezes, watching the fish inspect his offerings, its gills flowing with the cold current. The trout gives a tug on the insect. The boy hauls the line backward, flinging the trout clear from the water, off of the hook, and leaves it flopping twenty paces into the forest. He scrambles to his feet and takes off, kicking up pebbles and clumps of moss, bumping his knee on a rock.

He grabs the fish, clutching it above him as it thrashes about, dying. Finally it is still. He carries his prize back to his father’s fishing basket and deposits it proudly, the first of his catch.

The evening air begins to smell of woodsmoke as cookfires are lit in the nearby houses, mingling with the wet scent of the evening mist. He flops back on the moist soil, looking up at the cloudy sky.

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The sky is indigo on the eastern horizon. He counts four stars out, then five. Around him the noises of insects and animals crescendos. The smell of cookfire smoke strengthens in the air. He half-smiles, thinking of his mother making dinner. His stomach growls.

Up ahead he sees the light of his house. He breaks into a run. “Momma! Father!” he shouts. “I caught a fish!” He hears a scream.

The boy drops his basket. He runs ahead, veering through the trees. The light coming from his house glares like the noonday sun.

The cottage in the forest glows. Tongues of orange light flare from the shingled roof. The hinges on the door burn through and break off, clouds of ash illuminated by the scarlet light.

A dozen or more men are lined up, passing water buckets one to the next. The closest one to his cottage throws the water on the house. It hisses, throwing up billows of steam, and the fire seems to burn brighter with every dousing.

“HELP! HELP US!” His mother’s voice cries out.

“No!” A man runs from the line and catches him up before he reaches the cottage. He feels the man’s shoulder bone digging into his stomach. “Boy, don’t go near the house.”

“I’ve got him.” A woman takes him from the man’s strong arms. “Listen, love, you’re going to be safe, now, hold still—”

He rails on her back like a fighter, every ounce of strength in his body going into his strikes. He screams until his lungs burn and pain ripples down his spine. “NO! LET ME GO! LET ME GO!”

He tries to swallow, but can’t. “Momma, Momma and Father, they need help. You have to let me go! Let me go!”

“They’ll be fine. You just have to come with me, where you’ll be safe.”

“No, no! NO!” he gulps, his tears running down the back of her shawl. “Please, I have to help them. And I forgot my fish.”

“We’ll go get your fish,
“Alright?”
“I don’t want my fish. I want my momma. MOMMA!” he wails. “MOMMA!”

His body heaves with every sob, as if he lacks the strength to cry. He sees a tiny ember in a bed of moss. Its vermilion light flickers on and off until it finally goes out, a wisp of smoke curling upward.

“Your parents are going to be safe, I promise.” The woman strokes his wild, sweat-soaked hair.

She takes him back to her cottage, where a pot of stew sits on the hearth. It’s too hot and burns his tongue, but he eats it anyway. When they all go to sleep on the straw mattress, he sleeps on the rug before the hearth. He sits, awake, his back turned to the fire. When he’s sure they’re all asleep, he puts the fire out.

A black sloping line. An arm extended. A burnt sleeve. An ash-stained hand, the skin broken and bubbling in the heat. Hair burnt down to the scalp.

He wakes up in a cold sweat. His hands are shaking like the blackthorn boughs in an autumnal gale. All of him is shaking.

He stands up in the darkness. It is paler, somehow, than it was after the sun set. The moon makes a silver tattoo on the floor.

His bare feet press against the packed dirt, against the road. The earth is cool. He kneels, raking his fingernails in the soil.

The boy walks down the road. Smoke hangs in the air like a curtain. He closes his eyes.

The light is all wrong. The moon’s silver on the black wood seems incongruous with the orange of the previous evening. The bottoms of his feet turn black with soot. He stands where the door was, gazing off into the misty wood with trees like columns of a derelict palace. The burnt beams are wet with dew.

“I’m home, Momma,” he whispers. “I caught a fish.”
Different

Erin Hansbrough

A menagerie of monsters
Roam in the little glen,
Climbing and flying over the ferns,
Swimming in blue river bends.
Bright feathers flash between the leaves.
The creatures call each other’s names.
Soft fur ripples in the breeze.
They climb tall boulders, play chasing games
In the waving grass and morning light.
They jump and laugh with a child’s delight.

And I call out into their world,
“Let me join you, let me play!”
But with black scales and wings unfurled,
They bar the way,
Hissing “Go! Leave this place,
For you are different, you are disgrace.”
And I flee, brushing droplets
Off my blush-burnt face,
Letting go my glimpse, my hope
Of paradise, of a home.

Bang!
Gun smoking, followed breath quick.
From opened chest out pours blood. Overtaking instinct,
Flight or fight, my fear overwhelming with hand on gun.
Me asking him, “Foe or friend.”

Michael Ansley

Friend or Foe

Snow
Bethany Werner

The world is washed with white.
The soft hum of the stars
Echoes across the silent slopes.
The forest sleeps, pines painted
perfect,
Snow sparkling beneath the crystal
clouds.
Soft flakes flutter and land
amongst their kin,
Lightly, gently dusting the deer
tracks
And glistening rivers of ice.
The icicle castles lord over fields,
Frost crowning the moonlit
sky
And the forest sleeps,
Blissfully,
Beautifully
Blanked in light.

Jacob Dawson

34
**Look Up**

Erin Hansbrough

She always looks up.  
It's like she's waiting in the silence  
For something to end.  
Thunder rumbles high above, the heavy skies lower,  
And I stand quiet, watching her.

The grass waves, dry and brittle,  
Brushing my knees with its tufted tips.  
She runs her hand along the rough and tumbled walls,  
Chalky dust puffs under her fingers.  
I imagine these halls full of the calls of people,  
But nothing moves as she stares at the sky.

She runs her hand along the rough and tumbled walls;  
Chalky dust puffs under her fingers.  
I imagine these halls full of the calls of people,  
But nothing moves as she stares at the sky.

The drying stream trickles slowly in the heat  
As we walk beneath the lonely trees.  
She tells me that death is walking,  
But we're wandering away.  
I don't want to hear it singing!  
It will say to me that it's time, but  
I want to stay here, with her.

**Laughing Boy**

Sebastian Kocz

Laughing Boy doesn’t laugh anymore.  
He just mouths words to himself,  
Giving every single living soul  
The very same expression—  
The same, disconcerting expression.

After a few weeks,  
Stubble grows on his chin.  
He has a mustache too,  
But it’s far less noticeable.  
They eventually see his facial hair,  
And they shave it away.  
No worries.

Never open the doors,  
Because he’ll wander away.  
The concept of paying attention  
Is lost at this point.

But, for real though,  
Lock the doors.  
He’ll wander into a road,  
And that certainly won’t turn out well.

The world that we live in  
Is not the one in his head:  
That one I don’t know about.  
This one I wish I didn’t.

The world that we live in  
Is not the one in his head:  
That one I don’t know about.  
This one I wish I didn’t.

But he better come back here anyway,  
If just to wade in my pain,  
Join me in its shallow waters.

He has no world in his head:  
His brain is completely and utterly dead.
The November air bites at my face and I stand up and climb into a pair of walls. 
settling in, sealing the scratched, white bones and climbs inside, curling up and the cold splits the itchy anxiety in my soaked hands, gripping my arms and legs; window slides into the room with rain-station, storms or not. The cold air at the en nightstand. The train is sitting in the shaking bitterly against the cold, wood-
My bones jump at the noise when I bend my arms around my knees and roll off of the bed; sitting on the en enough. I fold it into the palm of my hand it like it'll burst into flames if I hope hard
solar systems painted across it. I stare at the nightstand and stare at it like it's got you're gone.
Aching bones and shaky knees, when you leave.

Storms won't crash into the town
Leaving today and the ground isn't empty, I think.

I pick the ticket up off of the nightstand and stare at it like it's got solar systems painted across it. I stare at it like it'll burst into flames if I hope hard

The old MegaMart stands swaying in the rain with fluorescent lights and broken hearts; no one whole ever goes to the store at 2 A.M. The only people out are either in love or lonely, and I can't think which is worse.

The doors crash open and creak back together once I'm inside. The white lights beat the linoleum tiles into dirty shelves, thinking about thieves and soup cans. I stop at the top of the bottom shelf, toe-to-heel, heel-to-toe, balancing a foot above the ground. Looking at the cold linoleum floor, I slip and fall and crumple into another body, bumping and stumbling over them. I look up. A tall boy with brown eyes presses his hands on the ground and stands, staring at me. I shake my head and get up too. His hand is cold as he wipes a piece of dirt off my face. He smiles with crooked teeth, and I smile too.

“I think the wall dropped you,” he says, his voice low and soft like silk and stars. I smile again.

“T think you’re right. I think it did,” I say, reaching around to touch the ticket in my back pocket. It’s still there, crisp and smooth, the edges rough like pennies.

I take a breath and he smiles again. He smiles on and off like a light switch, clicking the world on and off, over and over. He reaches for a can of soup and slips it into his pocket, smooth like honey, without even a twitch in his fingers. I look at him with my mouth open. He doesn’t smile this time, but he makes this little upturned smirk, something I hadn’t seen on a human face before.

“Don’t worry, I’m a retired thief. But the game hasn’t quite left my hands yet.”

He turns and walks back the way he’d come.

The world’s a thief itself sometimes, and human hands are full of games of take-it-back.
I think the earth is going to swallow us both up like flies if we don't feed it. Like dogs in the summer.

She has a thick southern accent that is sweet like honey with salt at the edges. I smile and her face lights up like fire. "You've got yourself a pretty smile there. It's pretty like the sun, and the sun will burn people alive. Be careful with a smile like that, pretty girl."

I bite the side of my cheek and smile again. She smiles too, and the ash turns to fire in front of me.

2:52 A.M: Snake Bite Girl

I press the folded train ticket smaller and smaller in my palm, the sweaty air around it wrinkling the clam-shell of my skin. I can feel the cracks it is making, and I can taste sweat on my tongue.

"My brother's snake tried to eat a lawn mower clippings. The girl takes two steps closer to me and smiles this brilliantly. It's soft like silk and rough like rocks all at once.

"Six times?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, it is quite a lot, but it makes everything sort of dreamy, don't you think?" she says, staring across the fluorescent ceiling, "It makes things quite blurry and dreamlike. It's nice."

I take a breath and look at her, not saying anything, waiting for her to go on. She looks down from the ceiling and stares straight at me. "Say, what's your name?"

I smile. "I'm Lou."

She drops the cold cat food fast and hard and grabs my hand, shaking it vigorously up and down like tree limbs on fire. "I'm Archie, Lou. It's nice to meet you, don't you think?"

"I really do," I say, smiling behind my mouth. Archie is the most brilliantly psycotic person I've met in my life. Her hands grow like trees up my arms and her eyes look like swimming pools and never-ending rope ladders.

Archie tilts her head and looks at me funny, like there's something hidden behind my mouth, and she can't see it. I bite the inside of my cheek and stare straight back at her, watching her smaller eye switch back and forth quickly and her bigger eye move slowly over my face. The fluorescent lights make her look grayer than I'm sure she is, and the contrast of her black hair makes her pale.

"Lou, you're pretty like stars," Archie says.

"Lou, do you want to walk with me? I find grocery stores very romantic at 2:53 A.M." Archie's voice breaks the surface, soft like silk and rough like rocks all at once.

I look at the cracked watch on my wrist and touch the train ticket in my back pocket again, turning it over between two fingers. I need to leave for the station soon.

"I'd like that," I say with a prick in my chest.

3:04 A.M: Archie and Lou

We walk up and down the aisles seven times before Archie stops talking. I don't mind, though. I like it when she talks. Her eyes are uneven and bright like stars, and her hair is black like the sky outside.

All of a sudden, she stops dead in the middle of the aisle. "Let's go to Jim's. Do you know Jim's, Lou? Do you know where that is?"

I smile. "Yeah. I go to Jim's all the time."

Archie grabs my hand and runs fast down the aisles, zigzagging to the creaky automatic doors. My head is pounding, and I swear I can feel it in my arms and legs; I think my heart has stopped already.

The same old lady as before glares at us as we run past, but then we're gone, running up the street and over the intersection, gluing ourselves to the paper moon in the sky.

Archie stops outside the old record store on the corner of Main Street, and my throat aches from the cold night air; I haven't run like that in years. Quickly and quietly, Archie pulls a plastic card out of her pocket and jimmies the door open. The old wood creaks as it swings back, the store slowly unfolding itself from the inside out. I let out a hard breath. I haven't been here since I was sixteen.

Archie holds tighter to my hand and pulls me into the store; the door closes and locks behind us, and we are left in the dark between the record cases. Suddenly there is a small light, and I look at Archie's face above a lighter. She has a cigarette between her teeth, and she's smiling.

"You want a smoke, Lou?"

I smile. "Sure, Archie."

She sits down on the floor and pulls another cigarette out of her pocket. I sit next to her and take it, lighting it off of hers and letting the cigarette hang from my bottom lip. I puff the smoke out of my mouth and into her face; she laughs like she's seen god.

"Can I ask you questions, Lou?"

I nod slowly and bend my head to sit beneath the record crate.

She scoots closer and whispers it at me. "What's your whole name?"

"Louisa Jean Connor," I answer. "What's your whole name?"

"Louisa Jean Connor," I answer, quick like thunder.

She takes a breath of smoke and blows it into the floor around us.

"Do you really smoke, or are you just sad and thinking about dying? Sometimes people are sad, and they smoke. Sometimes they don't really like it, but they do it anyway, because maybe it'll kill them quicker. Do you really smoke, Lou?"

"I used to smoke, in high school. Not anymore though. I don't anymore.
But why not? It’s 3 A.M., and I’m sitting on the floor of a closed-up record shop with a pretty girl named Archie.”

“You think I’m pretty, Lou?”

“Pretty like wildfires.”

Archie’s smile pools in pockets on the ratty carpet floor.

“How old are you, Lou?”

“I’m 23.”

“I’m 19,” she says. “What’s your family like?”

I exhale deeply, and I swear I feel the breath come out so heavy that it lifts like fog onto the floor. “My parents died six years ago, and my brother left town to marry a girl named Daisy.”

This incredibly sad look comes like water into Archie’s eyes. I feel her move a little closer.

“What’s in your pocket? I’ve seen you check for it a few times. You reach into your pocket in a second of panic, and then you breathe out relief. What’s there that you have to be so sure of? You don’t have to tell me, Lou, I’m just wondering. Something’s there, though, isn’t it?”

I breathe too hard and choke a little on the cigarette smoke. “Oh, that. It’s a train ticket. I’m supposed to catch a train.”

“A train?”

“It leaves in six minutes.”

Archie jumps up and almost sets the place on fire with the lighter. “Lou, you have to go to the train! It’s leaving soon, you have to go, come on!”

I grab Archie’s hand and pull her back down. She sits next to me again, closer this time, holding her breath next to my ear. “Archie, I don’t want to go.”

“Why not?” she whispers, her voice climbing into my brain through my ear, like soft gold.

“But I don’t want to leave this place behind anymore.”

“Why not?” she asks again.

“But for some reason, I think I want to stay. I think I want to stay here at Jim’s with you.”

“Why?”

I smile and breathe her in.

“Why not?”

I take the ticket out of my pocket and hold it above the lighter; I flick the switch and watch it burn, watch it bury itself in fire and ash, watch it wither up and die like an old flower in a forest fire.

Archie leans in close to me and kisses the edge of my jaw. She says I taste like wet paint and sunflowers. I tell her she feels like gold. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to live quite this much. I look at her, and I say, “Beautiful girl, always keep the sun shining out of your ears.”

Archie smiles, and her ears light up the whole goddamned town.
A Landscape Within

Myranda Holden

I do not know how to describe to you
The feeling of Incomplete so powerful
It permeates every crevice of my soul.
I wouldn’t know where to begin
If I were to tell you
I walk in more worlds than just one,
How the truth seems just out of reach,
And I see memories that aren’t mine.
And how I wake some mornings confused,
Unrefreshed,
And unsure of my place.
My soul is a fragile thing
Trapped in an opaque box, a sign taped to the outside:
“Please do not tap the glass;
It frightens the Individual.”
But of course
Those children still place their grubby, little hands on that box,
Smudging the glass and
Making my soul harder to see.

A river runs through my heart, dividing it in two:
The north holding what I know and the south holding what I wish.
Quiet days, they come again,
Crawling closer and closer every passing minute,
Reminding me of my missing pieces
And the holes in my heart.
Through my arteries runs Desperation,
Clawing at a cliff’s edge, reaching for a fading memory.
Somedays,
She curls in my chest and wages her war there,
Weighing my steps, pulling me down to Earth.

But in my bones, I feel a Change.
I can smell it in the wind, taste it in the clouds, see it in every freckle
on my body.
I feel it in my quivering muscles,
Braced,
Ready to run or fight or scream or cheer for that moment when that
corner is turned.
Change lies just behind it.
I wait,
My breath baited, my fists curled,
Holding on, every molecule of my being shaking,
Hoping beyond hope that the Change
(Whatever it may be; I know not what it is.)
Will fill those crevices in my soul,
Seek out every nook and cranny, and push the Incomplete away
And finally make me whole.
Then maybe my breath would come easy
And I could tell you, without my voice shaking,
How it used to feel
All those eons ago.

Aubrey Albimino
Wish you were here!

Love,
Blackburg High

Photoshop Credits:
- Fuzzimo – Polaroid Frames
- Fuzzimo – Embossed Labels
- Fuzzimo – Sticky Tape
- Artistmef – Coffee Stains
- Artistmef – Water Color
- Dukal – Vintage Postage Stamps
- 1001 Graphics – Vintage Paper
- Devv984 – Vintage Paper
- 20-stars – Ink Splatters
- My Script Font – Handwriting Fonts