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MID RIVERS REVIEW
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PHOTO CREDITS

Loria Harris – courtesy of Loria Harris

The Nightmare (Henry Fuseli), *Self-Portrait* (Joseph Ducreux), *Calavera Oaxaqueña* (Jose Guadalupe Posada), *Spirit of the Storm* (Louis Fleckenstein) and the excerpt from *The Drolatic Dreams of Pantagruel* (Richard Breton) are all images in the public domain

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and the **JIM HABA AWARD FOR POETRY** in 2022.*

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* Alyson Dickerman (1971-2019) was a poet and an English teacher at SCC. The SCC English department runs a poetry contest in her name every spring. Jim Haba is a poet, teacher and founding director of the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. MRR confers this award annually.

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MID RIVERS REVIEW
Writer in Focus



Loria Harris

**Jim Haba Award
winner 2022**

a passel of poems

Double Standard

Acceptance

On My Feet

One Day

Cora's Call

Golden Hour

Double Standard*

Since I've been exercising,

my breasts hang down like two
wide spaghetti noodles when I bend over.

They're not round and plump;
they're long and they dangle.

The skin wrinkles like raisins
when they're pushed into a seductive position.

Is this the reward I get?
To work so hard to become a healthier weight,

to undo the years of sacrifice of the care of my own
body to care for those of others.

But you have enhancement, so
you don't have that problem, do you?

It seems unfair, though we've birthed the same
number of children, for me to be held

to your standard.
You didn't nurse, either, did you?

You probably don't have the lingering
secretions, the extra reason to be hollowed out.

I never want to be the one who judges
these kinds of decisions;

apples to oranges, they say.
But if it's overripe clementines to grapefruits?

Everyone does what's best
for them, and I'd do the same as you if I did it today.

You're beautiful for what you've been
through, what you've sacrificed too, either way.

But still it seems unfair.

* This poem received the Alyson Dickerman Poetry Prize – 2022

Acceptance

There's a poetry of acceptance.
Abandoning penance and eulogizing
nature isn't idolatry;
it's acceptance.
Settling, not worshipping.
The tangible world. The tickle of the wind,
the touch of velvet stems.
The sting of tears, the ache in our sides.
Not self-indulgence but a reconciling.
The beauty of living, hurting – instead of
the despair of only hoping.

On My Feet

I'm the kind of woman with callouses on my feet.
I don't mind; I'm told they mean I'm prepared.
When I wear heels, you'll probably spy Band-Aids

from the rub and wear,
padding and support hidden, but there.

My toe polish will be chipped, but it will
be bright sexy red, coat layered on top of flaking coat.
I can never be bothered to remove it first.
I guess I'm afraid somehow it might hurt.

My arches are flat, and my feet turn in.
Overpronation, I'm told. I've tried to keep to

myself a little too much. It's okay.
When I push out, I can almost make it
right for a minute, a jog.

My ankle bones are never smooth.
Gritty and dry, not always a fight
I care to have. And I have to shave my toes.
I denied that once, but I do. My feet still
carry me, still fight and kick and run
and cram into my favorite cute shoes.

I'm the kind of woman with callouses on my feet.
They don't matter much, but it took time to get them there.

One Day

My whole life I've been asking.
Do you think we should go here tonight?
Is it alright if I take a few extra minutes?
When I already know I want to.

Then I wonder why my wishes don't matter.
Why don't my wishes matter?
How I feel depends on how you answer that.
How do I feel?

One day the answer won't be important.
One day I'll act on my instincts,
confidently take the lead.

That day is soon, ~~maybe~~
that day is today.

Is that alright with you?

Cora's Call

“Cora got on her knees and planted anew. It was her inheritance.”
– *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

When you escaped,
did you finally find freedom?
I've heard it's not out there,
but I haven't really tried.

When you escaped,
did you worry who would hate you?
I guess it wouldn't matter,
if you leave them all behind.

When you escaped,
did you forget you're a mother – mine?
It wasn't only those who hurt you
that you chose not to bring along.

When you escaped,
did you breathe and break bread?
I hope that all your needs are met,
that you're a bird who sings a new song.

But since you escaped,
it seems I'll never know.
I ask with no answers,
my voice in a void with no echo.

Golden Hour

Have you ever stopped—
noticed the blue and purple streaks of sunset
as you walked along the concrete sidewalk
and realized you've arrived
at one of the best times of your life?
And you know it. How rare to be aware.
It feels all the more sweet—to know
you are living it even as it develops.

And the sunbeams seep beneath the trees,
and the glow fades. And now you know
the sadness that it's already almost past.

SELF HOODS



Procedurally Dgenerated

Donovan Dickson

The whole of human experience is numerical.

Our interactions with life can be quantified, encoded, visualized.

Everything we feel is easily replicated by those Unfeeling.

Machines that become more human than the humans that made them.

Humans didn't just make machines; they inadvertently invented desolation.

All that makes us human, including our senescence, removed from the equation.

With nothing left in life, we're just doomed to exist.

Nothing to display, a zero amidst ones.

Algorithmically destitute. The tormented end.

Let it happen.

Funhouse Mirror

Amber Budd

The philosophers warned me my own worst enemy
would be myself
and in a way
they were right.

Out of every person I've ever known
the one I dread and despise the most
is the girl I don't see in the mirror.

The issue was never
wishing to be someone else.
I can't imagine a life where I'm not me,
where I don't cry at that one scene
in that one movie.
Where I don't laugh at stupid jokes
uttered by a friend in the warm comfort
of a winter bonfire.

But if I became that perfect
reflection, a model
of false cheer
and boring, successful habits,
I'd be so far away from myself
that I wouldn't even know to mourn
the girl that could've been.

My worst enemy is myself
because I only see her
through a funhouse mirror.
Every time I see that distorted,
shameful face
staring back,
I ask myself
“Is this who you wanted to be?”
“Is this what you let yourself become?”

The answer is always yes.

Because this is the me who sings along to the radio,
who held on when her body failed her.
Even if she wasn't brave enough to face the reflections.

My worst enemy is the girl who warped the mirror.

One-Word Poem

Sharonda Nicholson

original version

Breath

Life

Destiny

Why

Hard

Love

Fail

Succeed

Live

For

Truth

Joy

God

Jesus

Love

You

Hate

World

Scary

Blessed

revised version

Born

Life

Adam

Why

Eve

Love

Sin

Succeed

Repent

For

Salvation

Joy

Repent

Jesus

Truth

You

Eternal

World

Free

Blessed

Sharonda Nicholson: I decided to revise the poem to create a new yet familiar vibe. I wanted to focus on some of the old words but make it more relevant to how I feel today. In addition, I tried to be sure to include God and sin and salvation and truth as a testament to the soul nature of the poem. I wanted to allow the reader to see old version and realize it's a new energy to the new version but still has the same soul nature to the writing.



***The Nightmare* (1781) – Henry Fuseli**



Self-portrait of the Artist in the Guise of a Mocker
(c. 1790) – Joseph Ducreux



***Calavera Oaxaqueña (1910) –
José Guadalupe Posada***



Spirit of the Storm (c. 1925) – Louis Fleckenstein

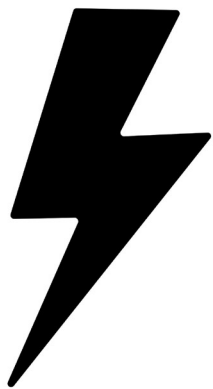
The images on the preceding pages – Fuseli’s *Nightmare*, Ducreux’s *Mocker*, Posada’s *Calavera* and Fleckenstein’s *Spirit* – come from the public domain.

In its treatment of dreamscape and mystery, Henry Fuseli’s *The Nightmare*, a color oil-on-canvas, stands on the vanguard of Romanticism and anticipates the 19th and 20th century movements of Symbolism and Surrealism.

The self-portraits of Joseph Ducreux (1735-1802), a French aristocrat, painter and engraver, brought levity to an art form that could be terribly serious and stodgy. His *Mocker* has been memed on the Internet endlessly in the 21st century.

The *calaveras* (skulls) of Mexican illustrator José Guadalupe Posada (1851–1913) were printed on broadsides for political and satirical effect during the time of Porfirio Diaz, who dominated Mexican politics from 1896-1911. After his death, Posada’s work become associated with the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*), an important holiday for the remembrance of family, friends and ancestors.

Spirit of the Storm by Louis Fleckenstein (1866-1943) is a toned gelatin silver print on the back of which are the photographer notes, “1510 East 3rd. St. / Long Beach Cal[ifornia].”



Love

Family

Community

World



The Stuff

Maya McCormick

You left me with everything, more than I felt I could handle.
Taking apart your life box by box
Heavy chests filled with glass Christmas ornaments
 that hadn't been pulled out since 2015
Bins of old photos with a brown wrinkled tinge
 around all the sides
And more boxes filled with items you think would have a story
You left everything here
Cabinets full of pearly white dishes seemingly
 untouched for years
An animal print sippy cup with a sky-blue lid hiding away
 in the cupboard
A fridge full of expired and molded food it was less a place
 of storage and more of a landfill
The state of her house would never be the same
Her perfectly clean house now had inches of thick grey dust
 covering every surface
The bed was not made to her military standard of cleanliness
 instead left folded and wrinkled
Mildew built up in the shower and sinks
The floor became her laundry basket
How did we not see death in her?
Her house died with her
I did not understand the stuff was the first and last step of dying

Love

Suzy Ryan

You exist somewhere,
you order a coffee unaware that I am
out here.

It was an accident
when I started hiding from you.

One hellbent heart left another in the abyss
with no flashlight—

just ropes in a total solar eclipse
that dangle and I

don't know which to grab to say

I am ready to be pulled out.

I miss you,

Love.

I Can't Speak, Because I Love Him Too Much

Anjolina Blackwell

Where he had been next to me, a honeyed scent
wandered. Inside the car is warm and quiet,
There isn't anywhere to be, so I sit.
The driver's seat feels unstable, like the edge
of a cliff. On the hood, there's a one-winged bird.
Faint sounds travel from the creature, gentle.

My foot rests against the pedal,
thoughts roll like end credits. Dreamt
of him and I, breathing heavy through all our hurt.
Alone, these thoughts of tenderness can be violent—
it ravages me, where he left me. In this loveless trench.
I'll perish I think, leave him words like a diseased poet.

Since he made his exit,
lonesome sound sinks into my ears like a needle.
My nails traced his hands, left with nothing to etch.
Looking over the empty lot that we crept
around at late hours to unveil the lust
that lingered within. Haven't cried in months, now inspired.

From the driver's seat, where I sit perched,
my eyelids weigh heavy like expensive velvet.
Out of the driver's window, an image of glimmering stardust
crosses our lovers' valley, his steps are lyrical.
Outside my door, handle in one hand and the heart meant
for me in the other. Fell to his knees, I looked down from
my ledge.

I felt what I yearn for outstretch
a weak arm, one broken wing. The bird let out a chirp
taking words I couldn't say. Lest
he mold and rot, I held my hand to his cheek, desperate.
Always been too fickle, people are made to be fickle—
yet he manages to steady me with hands, quite ardent.

And in the door, his scent still sugar and I haven't
known that this love weighed like heavy cement
in my bones. Head rested over my legs and my hands fiddle
with the falling hair. Only now I work
my way from atop the cliff; wretched
is the one who sits high, lonely in a bird's nest.

I didn't speak, yet love was confessed. Each fragment
of each other held themselves together, silhouetted against
the iridescent moon. Until sunrise we'll lurk in our lot and let
our affections kindle.

Understanding the Unhoused: A Translation

Kaitlyn Mitchell

When a person says, “I’m homeless”

People might hear

“I’m less than you.”

“I’m filthy and lazy.”

“If you don’t look at me, you won’t have to think about me.”

But what the person means is

“I’m human like you.”

“I miss hot water and wish I could stay clean enough
to have a job.”

“I spend most nights on the streets cold and in fear.”

When a person says, “How long has that cup of coffee been
sitting out?”

People might hear

“Your free coffee isn’t good enough for me.”

“I don’t care if you came here to help. I expect the best.”

“I am picky and difficult even though I can’t buy this for myself.”

But what the person means is

“Is this coffee safe?”

“Did someone have time to put something in it?”

“I live on the street. I can’t trust anything I don’t see made
with my own eyes.”

When a person says, “I’m sorry I’m taking up your time”
People might hear
“I’m giving a simple apology to be polite.”
“I am going to end this conversation now and leave.”
“I’m inviting you to leave the conversation.”
But what the person means is
“I’ve been made to believe that I’m not worth your time.”
“You have more important things to do than talk to me.”
“Please don’t leave yet. I feel guilty but miss having someone
to talk to.”

When they say
“I’m homeless”
Look them in the eye
“How long has that cup of coffee been sitting out?”
Pour a new one
“I’m sorry I’m taking up so much of your time”
Give a few extra minutes
Please take note I did not write, “When the homeless say”
Because they aren’t “the homeless” but simply unhoused
and still people like you and me.

L.O.V.E.

Callia Robinson

Mr. Dazzling Beanpole,
Should **I** trust *you*?
You give **me** nothing but
licentious auras.
You and **me** together are like
slight flakes of hellfire.
Not the most torturous but
surely sinners at fault.

It is no secret that **my heart** is
under *your lustrous spell*,
but **my heart** refuses to believe that
You and I are
eternal.
I often picture **me** being *your queen of the damned*,
But will **my darkness**
reign over *your light*
Or will *your iniquity* trump **mine.**
That now is **uncertain.**

I am *your* **concubine** not *your* **kryptonite**

I hate the idea that *your* L.O.V.E

is like a *competition*.

Your eyes linger for *other women*.

Why can't *you* see that **my love is completion**?

But for **me**

that is something *you* will not do.

Will *you* L.O.V.E **me** the way **I** do *you*.

I have this feeling of **Stockholm syndrome**

With **my** heed and submissiveness for *you*.

You have left many *debilitating wounds*

that have now turned to scars on **my heart**,

This thought leaves an ominous taste in **my mouth**

On where ***our paths intertwined*** may lead.

I believe L.O.V.E is living of valued energy,

But do *you*?

That in itself means something

much deeper,

My L.O.V.E for *you* has proven to be ***infinite***.

Will *you* live and value **my energy**?

Will this lingering entanglement end?

Like a Luckless buffoon

I am left still ignorant,

waiting for that nuisance day.

Old School Playground

Nancy Phillips-Kuelker

I.

the smell of rusty metal hits your nostrils
before you've got the car door closed,
making your fillings rattle with every breath

you love that taste, you licked
your orange hands
once out of curiosity

it's exhilarating
and you can't get there
fast enough.

that little child-propelled merry-go-round
has no seatbelts, lap bars, air bags,
speed limits.

big brother can spin you
as fast as anything at Six Flags
but no rules to make him

slow down or put on the brakes

only you screaming that scream
that goes from giddy to a little
scared to "I'm gonna' fall off and

you know mom's gonna
beat us if you make me
land on my head!"

II.

there you can find 100 ways to lose
a tooth, get a concussion,
a bloody nose

if you let go when big bro has
that thing going at full speed
you will fly all the way

over to the old folks home,
headfirst into the concrete and
it won't be anybody's fault but yours

you'll learn who to trust
and when some chump doesn't
get that no means no

you won't let him spin you

you'll wait for someone who will listen

but for now, that black and red horse,
somehow sharing his pasture
with a sea lion spinning around and around?

well, it is absolutely magical

what's more fun? spinning around or
climbing on each one over and over?
you didn't know you could get up and down all by yourself,
did you.

well, you can. that and a whole lot more, too.

you are wise, little girl. You don't need mommy and daddy
to get you off that merry-go-round when some jerk won't quit
you'll devise your own escape

you'll shimmy and sit and tuck and roll
and get yourself out of there if he won't
put on the breaks and you'll move on

and be proud of yourself without looking
for a brass band to cheer for you because
there are no brass bands for regular girls

only princesses

I don't think there was one for Erica Pratt

III.

look it up
now there's a shero
just like Erica you will know that

in the end *only you*

will be looking out for you and if you fly off of there
well, you shouldn't have gotten on it
if you couldn't hold on

and speaking of trust and busted lips
why did you get on that teeter totter
with a fat girl you never met?

you thought she would be nice?
let you down easy?
of course she jumped

off when the
bomb pop man drove by
and sent you crashing down

spraining your ankles under your own weight
making you bite your tongue.
those old school playgrounds really were dangerous

but we learned not to get into situations we couldn't handle

don't trust everybody. Enjoy it but
make sure you are in control
of your own personal space

for example

be patient and wait for the sun to set before
you go sliding down that 212 degree metal slide

IV.

Patience will take you far in life and you can start
by practicing on the playground.

But that slide is exciting.

Anything you have to wait in line for must be hot shit, right?

But just wait and you won't be crying and complaining like those
prissy girls in short shorts waiting to be rescued.

I mean really. You didn't know it would be hot? Well, then, those
blisters on your thighs are on you.

You do have choices. You can hang upside down on the swing set top and do a penny drop or cherry drop or whatever they call it if you choose to.

But if you break your neck, I think you knew there was a good chance that could happen.

A swing set wasn't made for that.

But when you realize there's no one to blame but you, you get free

I hope you'll tell me when you start to feel your soul becoming solid or I might not know. Because it's something you do privately.

That's the point.

Because it happens when you just *decide* to do something, without asking permission or expecting to be saved, just you and you alone.

Like flying to Mumbai. Not that anybody's mad about it, but nobody's gonna' make it happen for you either.

Like Erica Pratt.

What if Elizabeth Smart had met her before it was too late?

Because if a lunatic ever snatches you and then tries to make you walk down the street quietly with him, you better go totally ape shit all over that city block. I don't care if you are only 7.

You. Better. Chew. That. Fucking. Drape. Off. Your. Head.

Open Wounds

Amber Budd

The problem with dead people is that none of them have an ounce of common sense. It's the only way to explain why they'd think haunting the public water fountain wouldn't end in disaster.

By some extraordinary feat, this particular ghost has busted every pipe feeding into the plaza fountain, causing a miniature flash flood. About an hour after it happens, the news flashes across my media feed. "An Inexplicable Event," says the article title. The problem is, not many people can see the ghosts, and even fewer believe in them. But I do. Almost every time, those freak accidents turn out to be paranormal aftershocks.

Today, though, I almost want to ignore the event. My shift at the restaurant starts in an hour, and I've bailed enough times to warrant a final warning from my boss. But if this is a spirit, I can't just let it roam. It's already caused this much damage—who knows if it'll stop on its own.

Besides, that job sucks anyway.

It's just a quick five-minute jog to reach the square. Repair crews already have the area blocked while they drain the remaining water and patch the pipes. Not helpful when what you're looking for is likely in the center of the lockdown.

On the elevated porch of a street shop, a few steps back from the emergency tape, I'm left to search for my wild ghost from a distance. They're easy to find, if you know what you're looking for. Spirits stand out in the way a house without a door would stand out in a neighborhood—just different enough to draw your attention, but not glaringly out of place.

Ten minutes pass.

Fifteen.

Thirty.

No ghost to be found.

I fully give up on the search right as my phone rings. A glance at the number shows it's my boss.

I don't argue as he fires me. He's never believed in the lingering dead.

As I tuck my phone safely into my pocket, a deep voice echoes from behind me.

"I was wondering when you'd show up, Skylar."

Without even glancing back, I know who stands there. "I guess this was you, Jayden?" My brother. The one ghost that makes me hate my gift.

“Would you look at that, my little sister recognizes my handiwork. Now I know you haven’t been completely ignoring me.”

“Who says I wasn’t?”

“Don’t be like that, Sky. How else was I supposed to get your attention? You lined the entire house with salt.”

With a sigh, I hop over the porch railing to leave, silently hoping Jay doesn’t follow. “You could have just walked in.”

He falls into step behind me. “You know I couldn’t.”

“What do you want, Jay? Clearly, it’s important, or you wouldn’t have literally destroyed public property to get me here.”

“Can’t a brother want to talk to his sister?”

“I can’t imagine why you would want to.” Even though I’m practically jogging now, Jay still somehow keeps up.

“That’s the issue. I do, actually.” He catches up and drifts at my side, his translucent hood hiding most of his face except for the freckles coating his nose, a reflection of my own. “You just refuse to sit still long enough for me to get any words out.”

“Maybe I don’t want to hear what you say.”

Out of breath, I collapse on the empty sidewalk; there’s no avoiding this conversation, so I might as well save my breath.

“Why not?” Jayden’s voice is getting louder as he paces the sidewalk, though no one else will ever hear his voice. “Do you still think I’m mad about what happened?”

I don’t bother with an answer. Of course, I think that—he has to be. It’s my fault he’s like this—dead.

Four years ago, I was terrified of driving. I still am now, but for different reasons. Back then, I hated the idea of being in control of a massive vehicle. There were too many idiots on the road; I didn’t trust myself to avoid them.

But I had my job. During the day I could walk there. Nighttime, when my shift ended, was a different story. Half a dozen bars lined my walk home—late night drunkards were too unruly for me to walk. Jay offered to drive me home one night, to keep me safe and give himself peace of mind.

An hour after he was supposed to get me, the hospital called. A drunk driver had hit Jay’s car just a few blocks away from the restaurant. Of course, the drunk walked away with a few scrapes; Jay didn’t even make it to the hospital.

If I had called off work that day, or just sucked it up and walked home...

“Sky, how many times do I have to say it before you believe me? It wasn’t. Your. Fault.”

“You were there because of me, so it is. Besides, you expect me to believe you’re not mad?”

“Well,” he finally stops moving and crouches down near me, “I’m not exactly happy you ghost proofed your house. But no, not about before.”

“I’d feel better if you were.”

“We don’t always get what we want, Sky.” One hand stretches out to pat—well, more like hover—over my shoulder. It’s not as cold as I remember from all those years ago. “But it’d make me feel better if you would talk to me once in a while. I’m still your brother, you know.”

As terrified as I am to say yes, he’s right. He’s been alone long enough.

“Will you stop destroying things if I do? We really can’t make this,” I wave back towards the plaza, “A normal thing.”

“Of course,” he answers, but the smile under his hoodie says otherwise.

“Fine.”

This time when I stand up and angle towards home, he doesn’t follow. Which is for the best—there’s a lot of vacuuming to be done.

After all, salt doesn’t heal an open wound.

Tenderly Mine

Kathryn Logan

I remember waking up in the morning to watch the undetectable breaths in your tiny ribcage. Confirmation that you were still here with us. Those few moments between breaths felt like a lifetime. Delirious, I obsessed over the small rise and fall of your chest. After every breath I was allowed one second of relief followed by 4 more seconds of thoughts of impending doom. I always felt the yearning for just one more moment of sleep but could never fight the panic away long enough. So, I stare. I stare at your beautiful olive skin. All consumed by your tiny, beaded eyes, a dark shade of grey, speckle with green. Soft green zip up onesie, holding you tight. Hands so small I could fit three in my one. Full lips pursed together; a roaring coo expelled from your body. A small sigh of exhaustion follows. Such thick dark hair stuck to the soft spot on your head. Cheeks plump like you're stockpiling nuts for the winter.

If I could tell you anything in this moment, it's that I'll never be allowed enough of you. All the hours, days, months, and years couldn't fill my heart to the brim. I would need all the eternities and would still beg for more. I would share ten thousand lifetimes with you. I'll never wake up without thinking of you and I will never sleep again without concern for you. And when you leave me, which you will, I will mourn the parts of me you took. Every travesty of this world could not amount to the pain of your turned back. Those wings spread wide, eye bright, chasing the world. So, for now, I watch for every breath.

Stop and Smell the Roses

Alayna Padgett

TRIGGER WARNING: DEATH AND GRIEF

The gas mask I'm wearing is making my face sweat and I can feel the indents that the straps are making in my hair. I almost sigh before I remember the canister of air in my mask is too low for anything but regulated breathing. I make a mental note to pick up a couple more canisters before I get home. Switching my direction, I head toward the store.

I hate the summer months. The poisonous pollen in the air is so potent, I almost feel like it's begun to burn my skin. I've heard stories from the oldest in town about how people used to give flowers to people that they loved. I can't imagine it. A person would only give someone else a flower if they wanted them dead. I find myself longing for the winter months when all of the plants are either dead or asleep and I don't have to worry about accidentally breathing some of their deadly pollen.

The first set of doors to the store seals shut behind me with a hiss. The set of doors leading into the store are also sealed and will not be opened until I've been decontaminated. A gust of wind hits me hard, but I refuse to budge. When I was younger, this gust of air used to knock me off my feet, but I grew out of that a long time ago. I watch the pollen as it is blown off my clothes and immediately sucked up by a vacuum system hidden in the floor. Once the wind stops and all the noise dies, I hear the second door unlatch and begin to slide open.

I take my mask off as soon as I step through the door and replace it with a black cloth mask that just covers my mouth and nose. I nod to the woman at the register, and head to the back of the store. Someone calls my name as I pass an aisle causing me to stop in my tracks.

“Hey, Fyn! I thought you were supposed to be at home today. What are you doing here?”

I turn around to find my friend, Ezra, walking toward me with a grin on his face. I can’t stop myself as I return the grin.

“Just picking up some air canisters,” I say, holding out my gas mask for inspection. “I’m about out, and I know my mom is probably low too.”

“I don’t understand, Fyn. Your mom hasn’t been outside in years. Not since your dad died from that freak accident in the decontamination room. Why hasn’t she taken off her mask yet?”

I look away, trying to come up with an acceptable response. The truth is that I have no idea. I know my mom is being strange, but no matter how much I beg or plead with her, she refuses to remove the mask other than to eat.

Ezra must see this on my face because he doesn’t push it any further. I’m thankful for it.

“Never mind, man. Just tell your mom I said hi and that I’ll be over in a couple days to hang out. So make sure she has some of her tuna casserole ready for me. I could live on that stuff!”

“No problem. I’ll see you later, Ezra.”

He claps me on the back as he walks past me and out of the aisle. I watch him walk away and then I turn toward the direction of the air canisters. I can’t stop myself from remembering what happened to my dad.

It was just a freak accident. Something was wrong with the vacuum system in the decontamination room. Instead of removing all of the pollen from the room, it actually filled the room with the poisonous stuff. My dad had just run out of air in his gas mask, so he had no other option but to remove the mask.

I quickly shove the thoughts from my mind. It doesn’t help to dwell on the memory. I just need to learn from it and move on. Just move on, I tell myself over and over again as I pay for the air canisters and begin my walk back home.

My mom is in the exact same position that I left her in when I get home. Knees tucked into her chest, mask strapped tightly to her face, huddled into my dad’s chair. I sigh as I remove my gas mask and set the air canisters on the table in the kitchen.

Our house only has three rooms. The kitchen, my mom’s room, and my room, but that’s not including our one bathroom the size of a closet that we share. It’s not a lot, but it’s all I’ve ever known.

Most nights, I don’t sleep in my room, though. When my mom wakes up screaming my dad’s name, I’ll crawl into bed with her and try to calm her until she falls into a fitful sleep again.

I stay awake, playing with her hair and humming my dad's favorite songs to her while she sleeps. I used to hope that she would get better, but now I'm not sure she will. It's been over a year, and she still hasn't so much as cracked a smile.

I look at my mom now, watching her stare at a spot on the wall, remembering the woman she used to be. She used to have a brilliant smile, laughing at all my dad's corny jokes. She had a very commanding aura, but she was the gentlest person I knew. She would volunteer at local food drives and donate air canisters and gas masks to the Air Quality Control Center. Now, she's just the shell of the woman she used to be. I used to beg her to come back. I would spend hours holding her hand, searching her eyes for some sign of life. I never found any. I gave that up a long time ago.

"I'm home, mom. How was your day?"

I don't expect an answer. My mom just blinks at me through her gas mask. Sometimes I realize I'm starting to forget what my mom's face looks like behind that mask. Part of me wants to tear the mask off and make her understand that she's safe, but I would never do that. So I shove the thoughts aside and just keep talking to her, hoping one day she'll respond.

"I stopped by the store after work today, and guess who I ran into." I pause for effect. "It was Ezra. He says hi and that he'll stop by soon to see us. He says he's expecting some of your tuna casserole, but don't worry about making it. I don't mind doing it. If I can just find the cookbook."

I hear a noise from my mom's direction. Slowly, I turn around, hoping that I'm not imagining things.

"Did you say something, Mom?"

She clears her throat and tries again.

"You do too much, Fyn."

A tear makes its way down my cheek as I stare at my mom in surprise. I walk over and crouch right in front of her, holding both of her cold hands in mine. I watch her as more tears begin to fall, trying to see her eyes through her mask.

"It's alright, Mom. I really don't mind. You just focus on getting better, okay?"

"No, it's not alright. You're only sixteen. You don't need to be taking care of me anymore. That's supposed to be my job, and I failed you."

I wipe some of the tears off of my face, smiling up at her.

"I'm actually seventeen now, Mom. It was my birthday two months ago."

Her shoulders begin to shake now, her breathing hitching. I wrap my arms around her waist, trying my best to hold her together so she doesn't fall apart again. She wraps her arms around my neck and buries her face in my shoulder. Her gas mask is pressing hard enough into my skin that I know it will leave a bruise, but I can't bring myself to care.

“I missed you, Mom,” I say quietly.

“Can you help me up, Fyn?”

I nod, reluctant to let her go. Holding one of her hands to keep her steady, I pull her to her feet. She sways a little on her feet, but seems to find her balance after a minute.

“Help me to the kitchen. I’ll show you how to make the casserole for Ezra.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can do it on my own. Why don’t you just sit at the table for a little bit, and—”

“No, Fyn. I’m tired of sitting around for now. Let me try to make up for not being here for you.”

Hesitantly, I lead her over to the kitchen counter. She leans heavily against the countertop, her breathing already labored from exertion.

“Seriously, Mom. I can do this on my own.”

She shoots me a look, silencing whatever protests I was about to make.

“The cookbook is in the cabinet to your right. The recipe for tuna casserole should be on the first page.”

I’m struggling to convince myself that all of this is real. I’m half expecting to turn around one moment and find her back on dad’s chair, curled up and lifeless. She still doesn’t look exactly

full of life, but at least she's up. I'm not sure what caused this. Why she decided to get up today. Maybe one day I'll ask her, but I'm just going to enjoy having her back while I can.

She doesn't take her mask off, though I know that she can't see all that well with it on, but I won't push her. I know it'll take her a long time to feel comfortable enough to walk around the house without it, and even longer to be able to go outside. But I'm hoping that this might finally be a step in the right direction. This might be a sign that the mom I used to know is still somewhere inside of her. I don't think things will ever go back to how things used to be without dad here, but I'm willing to try.

Thirteen Years Old

Kaitlyn Mitchell

The snowflakes fall in the small neighborhood of pastel-colored houses. My eyes sting as I blink them open and see the end of *Edward Scissorhands* playing on the TV. I pull myself upright on the couch and look at the 50-gallon aquarium across the room where the fish float along peacefully.

As I fully come awake, I feel something is off. I look around and see Mom and Dad holding their phones whispering. I hear pieces of the conversation. I have gathered that Aunt Sherri had called my sister's phone. Aunt Sherri never calls. Something is wrong. They had gone and gotten their phones out of their bedroom and called to see what happened. I look to Chelsea for reassurance but find none. Even my sister knows that something is wrong.

For the next ten minutes, I sit on the couch silently watching my parents fall over each other. They're changing their clothes, putting on their shoes, and frantically trying to find their wallets and the car keys.

"Where are you going? It's late, like 11:30," I ask, pretending that I don't see what's happening.

"Something happened with your grandma. She's in the hospital."

I stand up and demand that I want to go, but all I am met with is a flat, “No.”

Before I can protest, they are gone, so I text Dad. He’ll understand. He’ll tell me.

Me: Is it bad?

Dad: We don’t know yet. Go get some sleep, Kait. I’ll tell you when we know anything.

Me: We aren’t going to lose her, are we?

Dad: Kait, get some sleep. I’ll tell you when we know more. Love you.

“Love you,” he had said. Dad never says that. He’s not a man of words. I know what that means. It’s not bad. It’s worse.

I go lay down. I spend the night staring at my light purple walls. This trailer feels so small now. She’ll be okay. She has to be.

It’s been days. So far, we’ve found out that she was driving Aunt Ronda’s car home. Aunt Ronda was drunk, so she couldn’t drive. It was too cold, and Grandma didn’t heat the car up first. Her COPD acted up. She pulled into a parking lot, and Grandpa got to her in time, but he didn’t perform any first aide, which he is certified in. It took too long for the ambulance to get there, and she went too long without oxygen. She is in a coma and is unresponsive.

I have tried in vain to go see her. No one will let me. They don't want me to remember her that way, but I don't care what she looks like. I want to say goodbye. I am a child, though. Children only think they know what they want.

She's been in a coma for six days. January eleventh, I woke up to a movie that I'll never watch again if she dies. She's going to die. I know that. I know it because it's my fault. God is punishing me and has been for years. He sent me to an abusive sister and made me a child only a mother could love and sent me to a mother who could never truly love her child. Now, he's taking away the person that made it okay. I vow to myself that if she dies, I will never bowl again. Turning around on the approach and walking back to my seat and not seeing her will hurt too much. I can't. I will never eat Grape Nuts again. I remember that the last time I saw her that I had eaten them, and I had become overwhelmed with the realization that I was about to lose her. I thought it, and so it's happening. I didn't tell her. I didn't tell her how much I loved her and what she meant to me. I make a final vow as I lay in bed that for the rest of my life, I will tell everyone what they mean to me. Never again will death take away my chance to tell someone that they are important to me, even if they think I'm crazy.

“Remember our deal,” she'd said standing in her kitchen.

Yes. Our deal. She'd made me promise not to cry if something happened to her. She told me that she didn't want to look up or down depending on where her soul went and see her granddaughter crying over her. I can't cry if she dies, but she isn't dead yet.

I pull my knees up to my chest, laying under my blankets in my bed, and I let tears fall. I let the air leave my lungs. I let my body shake. I let the pain twist around me and suffocate me. I let whimpers escape into the silence.

“Kait, are you alright?” my sister whispers from the doorway.

I say nothing. I can't even if I want to, and I don't want to. She tries a few more times in vain to get my attention. I refuse to talk to her. I refuse to make a noise in her direction. I hear her steps recede down the hallway, past her room. I hear someone else come to my door and stand in silence. I keep my eyes closed. It must be Dad. He's the only one with enough sense not to try to get me to talk. I lay in my bed, and he stands in my doorway. We let the quiet soak into our skin.

Finally, he talks, “I know it hurts, but we'll be okay.”

That's all he says as his voice cracks at the end. I have never heard my father cry before tonight. He doesn't ask if I'm okay. He doesn't ask me to speak. He doesn't try to touch me. He stands in my doorway, and I listen to his uneven breath. I lay in my bed, and he watches me break, no breath at all. Dad and I have always shared an unspoken language, and tonight, the silence is deafening.

What I don't realize, but will soon find out, is that this is the last time my father and I will understand each other. This is the last night I have with my dad. When they shut off her life support tomorrow, she will die, and along with her, so will I and so will my dad. Over the next months, I will watch him die slowly. I'll watch the bright blue of his eyes dim to a cold gray as the light

leaves his face. My dad will never be my dad again. He is going to lose his mother in the morning, and I am going to lose my grandma and my father's soul.

But, for right now, she is still alive, and my dad still understands his daughter. So, I listen to his uneven breath, and he watches me shake. Neither of us try to console the other because we know that it is not possible. Here, in the dark of my bedroom, together we sit in silence and scream.

Le Traumatisme de L'Empathie

Kaitlyn Mitchell

I'm not good at many things. I can write okay. Well, I suppose I can write better than "okay." Ah, yes. Another of my talents. Long ago, I surpassed the level only experts could dream of reaching at underestimating myself, hating myself, belittling myself. Sometimes, it feels like I do it just to pass the time. What I'm really good at, though, is something I almost hate to admit. I'm wicked good at working fast food. I don't know why. I can be put into any position and learn it in a matter of minutes. I can memorize an entire menu in days if I want to. Weeks if it's big enough. I can memorize every hold time, every temperature that every piece of equipment is supposed to be at, where to use every chemical and why, every line of any script to take orders after hearing it one time, and this talent of mine is my own personal Sour Patch Kid. On one hand, every manager is shocked at my ability to pick up any position in the store. My current job? I did each position for one day and had it like I'd been doing it for months. I was completely cross trained in the kitchen and the lobby in two weeks. They're baffled at the sight of me deep cleaning things that look obvious to me but haven't been touched in years by anyone else. They told me they'd talked about making me a manager already in week 3. The GM told me in my interview it'd take at least six months.

On the other hand, I know I'm good at it so listening to kids tell me how to do what I'm already doing or telling me to do what they know they're supposed to be doing because they simply don't want to do it gives me heart palpitations. They know I'm

good at it, so they make me do all of it. I don't think like a team member. I think like a manager. They know if they just don't do it, eventually I will if for no other reason than I can't stand staring at it undone.

All of this runs through my head as I spray sanitizer onto the counter as angrily as sanitizer can be sprayed. Riddle me this, universe. How is it that I can take every single order because the girl I'm with won't take orders because she's "busy" (I suppose I'm just standing with the broom in my hand because I think it makes me look cute), hand out the food, deep sweep the entire lobby, wipe off every table and the chairs in the store, and wipe down the counters in the amount of time it took her to break down, not clean, just break down, two aerators?

I hear the door open from across the store because for some reason unbeknownst to me I get super hearing when I clock on at any fast food job, and I drop what I'm doing. I don't wait this time for her to ask me to get the order for her. I just go. I see a man standing across from me at the counter. His eyes are heavy. His shoulders are lowered. He looks like he's had a day crafted by Satan just for him. Despite his obvious hardships, his voice is kind, soft. He tells me his order, and as I put it in, I see a tag that reads "RN" clipped to his scrubs I just noticed. "My name is Jeff," he whispers with a slight smile. I know he's been here before because I didn't have to ask his name to put in so I can call it out when his food is done. I give him a 10 percent "Hero" discount.

I hand him his cup, and say, "8.77," and he gets a confused look on his face and asks what happened, that the menu says it's 8.99 before tax.

“I know. I gave you a discount because you work in the medical field.”

A true smile paints his face, reaching his eyes, and his face livens up in a way I wouldn't have been able to imagine this man's face looking just moments ago.

“Thank you,” he cheerfully says, “You've really just put a smile on my face.”

I return his contagious smile, “Of course. I'll have your food up in a second, hon.”

I lean against the counter and stare at the register as he walks away smiling at his cup. The discount is at the bottom of the ticket. 90 cents. His discount was 90 cents, but you'd think I just handed this man the winning lottery numbers for tomorrow.

They place his food in the window, and I grab it and walk it to him. Ordinarily, we call out the name, and they come get it. I don't mind taking a few extra moments for him, though. As I take it, I see him from across the room. His sad eyes have come back. His shoulders have fallen forward again.

I walk slowly wondering what could have someone so kind feeling so absolutely defeated.

I remember my shoulders and look in my reflection in the window. Mine are always forward. I am always staring down. My eyes are always sad, heavy, guarded. I suppose people wear trauma in different ways. Some wear it in their shoulders and

eyes. Some wear it in their shuffled saunter. Some wear it in their shaking hands and crossed arms. I find the people who have gone through some of the worst and seen the worst wear it in a different place entirely; they wear it in their empathy. I've never met an empathetic person who hasn't been given a real need to have empathy shown to them. I wear it in my empathy heavier than I wear it anywhere. Perhaps, that is why I can see his trauma wrapped around him like a cloak. Of course, I was lucky. My senior year in high school ten years ago, I had a French teacher who over the years taught me what empathy looks like, taught me how to put my trauma into it rather than letting it drown me. She saved my life in more ways than one. I wonder to myself if he had someone like that.

I set his tray down and break his concentration. He looks up from his phone and smiles when he sees my face.

“Let me know if you need anything else, ok?” I whisper.

“I will.”

I go about my way sweeping, wiping tables, and I've all but forgotten the girl who just minutes ago had me so flustered I couldn't think straight.

I get lost in the menial tasks set before me. I think about Jeff and how much absolute joy 90 cents had brought him. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by it. After all, his smile had dissipated my anger.

I've found that's another sign of true trauma. Little things make the biggest difference. To someone with an easy life, little

gestures are expected because they've always had them. A smile is a normal occurrence in their reflection, so what's so special about it on someone else's face? Things come easy to them, so what does 90 cents as a "thank you" matter? People say "thank you" all the time to them.

I look over and he's lost in his phone again. His food is gone, so I walk over and ask to take his trash and tray for him.

"Oh. Uh, y-yes. That would be nice," his voice lowers and neither of us can make eye contact, "You've been so kind to me tonight. Thank you."

Yep. The classic surprise at any small gesture of kindness. There it is. He's ticked every box, at least the boxes I have.

I watch him curiously from across the room. He sits for a while at his table scrolling and typing away on his phone. I want to go sit down and ask him what has his eyes so sad, what has his shoulders so heavy, but I don't. I know far better than I'd like to how hard it is to fall into complete distraction, how long it can take to replace the pain with pictures and videos on my phone screen. I offer him one last kindness, the only kindness left to offer. I let him stay lost in his phone, let his mind wander through the pages of nothing until he decides it's time to come back to his reality.

As I watch him get up to leave, he looks towards me, though not into my eyes. I'm ok with it because I hate eye contact, too. He smiles weakly and pushes his way outside.

I whisper after him that he'll be okay, though I know he won't hear it and probably wouldn't believe it just as I wouldn't if I were him.

I go into the bathroom and wipe away a few tears that have fallen for him.

I hate my empathy. I hate what it stands for. I hate where it came from. I hate how it makes me feel things. And when I get home, I will pick up a book or scroll through my phone and hopefully forget that I have it.

Silent Killer

Emma Sieveking

A mother, preparing her son's next dose of insulin. Tears pool at her bottom lid and stream down her cheek as she pierces the skin of her child for the fourth time today. She knows this must be done to keep him alive, but it pains her to see the fear in his eyes when she comes near. It is understandable, the endless finger pricks, injections, and sites, it is exhausting and dreadful for them both. She blames herself for this genetic disease and wishes it upon herself instead.

A fourteen year old girl, trying to figure out the best way to secure her insulin pump to her first two-piece swimsuit. When she clips it to her bottoms, they fall and removing it isn't an option. She stares at herself in the mirror and notices the scars and built up tissue from injections and sites on her abdomen and hips. She tries to hide the site under her suit and covers the scars with her mother's foundation.

A man, who works three jobs to afford test strips and insulin. After he was laid off from his last job and lost his insurance coverage, the work he does still isn't enough and he must ration his doses. He doesn't ask his family or friends for help because he is embarrassed and feels like he should be able to take care of himself at this age. He has heard the horror stories of the consequences diabetics face without proper insulin, but figures he can make it to his next paycheck. He must choose between groceries and insulin this week. Starvation or life. His family finds him unresponsive in his apartment days later and he becomes the next victim.

A sister, who starves for the attention of her parents after the diagnosis of her older sister four months ago. All of their care and time has been concentrating on learning this new disease, calculating carbs and doses and trying to keep their daughter alive. She feels isolated and just for a moment wishes that she would have been the one found unresponsive in her room and carried out by an EMT that summer afternoon.

A friend, learning how to administer an emergency dose of glucagon after finding her friend unresponsive in the bathroom at a party last Friday night. At first, she thought it might just be the alcohol, she isn't much of a drinker, but her blood sugar had crashed and she had been lying there for over an hour. She reached into her friend's pocket to check her phone and found thirteen missed calls from her mother and ten alerts from her glucose monitor app. She panicked and took off to the kitchen where she found a half gallon of orange juice in the fridge. She raced back to the bathroom, lifted her friend from the ground and spoon fed the orange juice through her lips. Her cheeks were bright pink and the rest of her face pale, and she could feel her whole body shake uncontrollably. Tears rushed down her face and her body trembled in fear that she might have been too late.

The first day of middle school, trying to keep it a secret from his classmates that he had diabetes. He knew the difference between Type One and Type Two but his peers assumed that all diabetes meant "fat" and "unhealthy". He put his phone on silent, wore baggy clothes to cover up the sites and didn't dose until after eating and he was alone. He just wanted to blend but his condition prevented him from doing so.

A father, carrying his weak daughter down the steps of her friend's home in the middle of the night. This was the first time she had stayed the night anywhere since her diagnosis. Him and his wife laid restless in bed, pondering the worst scenarios and waiting for their daughter to call. His phone buzzed and he checked, "URGENT LOW GLUCOSE" read bright in the darkness across his screen. He called his daughter...no answer. He called again...still no answer. He pulled his car into their driveway, hardly waiting for the car to stop moving before putting it in park. He pounded his fist on the door, hoping to wake someone from their sleep, it was four in the morning. As the door swung open he pushed past, quickly explaining the situation, juice boxes and glucagon in hand and found her at rest on their basement floor. That was the last time she spent the night anywhere without her parents for the next two years.

A mother, driving home from the hospital very early in the morning. She saw red and blue flashing lights behind her and was pulled over for swerving and reckless driving. She had just left her little boy with his father to get some rest, new clothes and shower. She didn't want to leave but her husband insisted, knowing these next few days would be some of the hardest of her life. The police officer questioned if she was under the influence and where she was coming from. He could tell by the exhaustion in her face, runny makeup on her cheeks and heartbreak in her eyes that something was wrong. She replies with the truth and he lets her go, an act of mercy. Little did she know what was ahead.

It Isn't Done

Heidi Grohe-Rood

Glaciers calving in great sheets
waters rising stealthily
creeping slowly
we believe
those changes won't come
with great speed

Hurricanes, floods,
tornadoes, earthquakes,
increasing in number
as we look away
pretending no harm
will be done to the planet
that we'll all carry on
as we always have

Winds that blow
at lightning speed
let us know
it's time we heed
the warnings that are
screaming – NOW
is the time to act
but how?

We really know
what must be done
clean the air
harness the sun
as we look for energy
preserve rainforests
—hear them bleed

No more looking the other way
time's run out
we have to say
everyone must do their part
to halt destruction in its tracks
to heal the Earth
there's only one
we can't forget
saving the Earth
isn't done yet

Ukraine Strong

Heidi Grohe-Rood

Outside
looking in
far removed
from the smoke
that signal bombs
have had their say
as they fall on their prey

Whistles from overhead
announce the missiles
as they fly
tearing through
homes and lives
screams and cries
heard day and night

day after day
they keep coming
faster and faster
the shocks are numbing
no more do they seem surprised
they've gotten used
to sounds of strikes
with no breaks
round after round
many remain underground

their countrymen are fighting strong
immeasurable courage lingers on
from day to day
and night to night
some feed the hungry sacrifice
in a war they didn't choose

their spirits high
they'll fight each day
resolute
they won't cease
to fight for freedom
to fight for peace

OUTER **SPACES**

The Lost Generation

Tyler Steitz

The ground shook with the violent force of artillery shells. The shockwaves of metal being shorn from the barrel of an artillery piece screeched until coming to a sudden halt. A lone pair of grey eyes searched for cover. The soldiers all scrambled for cover wherever any could be found, but one soldier, Matthieu, was able to rush into a dugout for cover. Soldiers looked all around at each other, muddling through the terrible shelling. The bellicose noise drove men mad. One man ran out of the trench yelling at the enemy helplessly. Another soldier ran out to grab him. After a shower of dirt and gore, no trace of either of them could be found.

Then as suddenly as it began, it stopped. The air around seemed to wail through the landscape like a banshee seeking its next victim. The rain began to pour, soaking beneath the dirt and transforming the already scarred land into a deluge of mud and human corpses. Matthieu could see nothing but the abysmal condition of war. The whole world seemed to be enclosed in an ever-enveloping darkness that night would bring about. Only once in a while would it be disturbed by a bright flash, followed by the boom of what he was hoping to be thunder.

Hidden in the darkness of the storm were the men of the 115th Infantry Regiment, 8th Division of the French Republic. They lay about the rain-soaked trench in their Horizon Blue uniforms and Adrian helmets with an array of weaponry in their hands. Matthieu's sharp grey eyes were taking in everything he could.

He wrapped his arms around his body, hugging his tarp closer around his pale body. He took his left hand and scratched his dark brown hair. Lice again! He wondered whether the filthy conditions here were worse than the enemy's.

After the barrage, some grabbed what sleep they could, while others attempted to eat the rations that were provided by the French military. Mostly it was tough and stale bread with a spread that the men on the front desperately hoped was meat. Someone was playing a violin nearby. Odd, thought Matthieu. Why did anyone think to bring a violin with them? But the comforting sounds of a familiar song seem to lay to rest whatever questions or criticisms he had of it; the war weary and bedraggled souls sat there wishing for peace or a quick death to end their misery.

“Matthieu!” a voice shouted down the eastern side of the trench.

A Sergeant was striding up to him. His stripes sown on to his left and right sleeves underneath the divisional crest, on his upper left arm, a crowned lion centered on a white and red patch, and the lightning insignia of the assault brigade on his upper right. Matthieu rubbed his medical insignia on the upper right sleeve of his own blouse as he stood up.

“Yes, Sergeant!” he shouted back.

“You are needed over by the southern trench line,” said the Sergeant as he motioned his hand to the direction behind him. “Some sorry son of a bitch got shot over there. Grab your kit and follow me.”

Matthieu grabbed up his equipment and medical bag and trotted off toward the Sergeant. They bobbed and weaved their way through the cramped and soggy conditions of the trench line. The mud never helped moving around either. It was thick and bogged down any real movement within and without the trench.

He did his best to follow the Sergeant as they made their way over to the wounded man. Matthieu had only been on the front for scarcely two weeks and was still very unfamiliar with his way around. It seemed like it had been only yesterday when he had been conscripted with all the other boys in his district. He didn't even have any say as to what he wanted to do in the French forces. Medic, they said. He remembered protesting. He had no idea how to heal anyone. But the quartermaster told him, "Boy, the military will take care of that."

Matthieu remembered those early days well. Endless hours spent waking up in the early morning hours. He could hear the sounds of birds and the general stirring of his regiment's barracks, out here there were no birds. Matthieu thought fondly of those days. He would exercise and eat breakfast, march on the parade deck, eat lunch, march some more, and, if he was lucky, get dismissed and work on cleaning his kit or shine his boots, instead of being put on a work detail. Although he knew where he was going, those moments of camaraderie were precious and pure.

After he had finished his basic training is when he found himself as a medic. Learning all of the techniques to be used on his fellow wounded soldiers. He learned about the importance of hygiene, doing blood transfusions, and worst of all, how to deal

with poisonous gas. He had passed, but just barely. How was he to know how to do everything correctly?

He was about to find out as he soon found himself at the scene of the dying man. Other soldiers were crowded around him trying their best to keep the wounded man with them. Matthieu hesitated. Who was he to help this man? What did he do to deserve to be in such a wretched place? Matthieu became full of dread. How come he had been given this responsibility? Or the worst outcome, what if he failed?

Matthieu looked down at the wounded man. He was no man, but a boy, roughly about Matthieu's own age. He was just like him, part of a generation lost to war.

“Out of the way! Give me some room!” Matthieu shouted weakly. He still was struggling to get past the gaggle of men to his wounded comrade.

“Move now or you'll have to deal with me!” the Sergeant shouted in his booming voice. Immediately the other soldiers allowed Matthieu a way through.

He gingerly opened his large canvas satchel with his medical supplies as he assessed the shot boy in front of him. Matthieu looked more closely at him, he could not have been more than seventeen years of age. Blood was spilling from his chest and pooling underneath him. Matthieu had to act quickly. He tried remembering everything that he was taught. Matthieu felt a surge of adrenaline course through his veins. He was the only chance this boy had.

Matthieu ripped off his tunic and saw the reddish-brown circular hole the bullet used to enter. There wasn't a whole lot of blood there. He turned the young soldier on his side. There was an exit wound. It was large. The inside of the soldier could be seen. Matthieu kept trying to clear away the blood to get a better look. The skin looked as if it had been peeled back around the red gouge in his body, then ripped off. Once hidden tissue and muscle was now exposed to all the filth in the trench. He began talking to the young soldier as he grabbed as much gauze as he had.

“What's your name?” Matthieu asked him. The wounded soldier tried opening his mouth. He was wheezing hard and exerting effort to respond. Panic formed in the face of the young soldier. He started convulsing. He was fighting for his life. Matthieu was fighting with him. The fear on the young soldier's face consumed him as his body went through all the functions of breathing but lacked the ability. Matthieu focused hard on the soldier's response as he made one of the pieces of gauze into a square.

Eventually one of the other soldiers shouted out, “Jean-Pierre.”

“Jean-Pierre, is it? Good name. Where are you from Jean-Pierre? What did you do before the war?” Matthieu questioned him intensely hoping that he would focus more on answering the questions than dying. Matthieu was trying to seal the wound as well as he could. He placed the large square piece of gauze on Jean-Pierre's exit wound on his back while preparing a second piece of gauze to go on the front of his sucking chest wound.

Jean-Pierre kept trying to respond, his light brown eyes fading in and out of consciousness. His mouth screwed up into a twisted visage. His body kept shaking and spasming. Then Jean-Pierre's mouth moved up and down as he focused on breathing and answering. Jean-Pierre would just open and close his mouth unable to answer. Sometimes the wound would seal itself and he would sputter blood, only to return to the silent screaming panic.

“Stay with me, Jean-Pierre!” Matthieu worked furiously. “Someone grab me a stretcher quick!” He yelled back at the crowd that had now gathered around. The Sergeant began yelling out orders again. Matthieu didn't much care what the Sergeant said as long as it got him a stretcher. Jean-Pierre was tearing up. He knew what was happening. He was scared.

“Mother!” he yelled out. “Mother!” he screamed a second time.

“We're gonna get you to your mother Jean-Pierre but I need you to stay here with me.” Matthieu was doing his best to keep up with Jean-Pierre's wounds. He was finishing dressing the wound with medical tape around Jean-Pierre's chest to keep the pieces of gauze in place. The stretcher had arrived and two men who had volunteered loaded Jean-Pierre carefully on. Jean-Pierre was still coughing up copious amounts of blood and tried reaching out to Matthieu. Matthieu ran with the stretcher bearers as they tried to make their way to the communication trench and then the regimental aid station. He kept trying to talk to Jean-Pierre desperately hoping he stayed awake. But soon Jean-Pierre's body stilled, and his light brown eyes went dark.

By the time they had gotten to the aid station it was too late. Jean-Pierre's body was lain with the long rows of other sons,

husbands, and fathers that didn't make it. He began to weep. He did everything he was taught. He did everything he could. How come he failed? He never asked for this, he never wanted it. Why were any of us here? Could we not have just stayed home in peace? Matthieu threw his medical bag to the ground. He collapsed into a heap outside the medical tent.

A pair of supporting and firm hands gripped Matthieu. He felt himself being hoisted up onto his feet, not roughly but with feeling. Matthieu quickly found himself face to face with the Sergeant. It was the first time he noticed his eyes; they were blue and full of sadness. The dirt accentuating the lines in his face. He looked old, older than what his age truly was.

“You did everything you could to save him son.” His gruff voice sounding more comforting than Matthieu thought was possible for the Sergeant. “There is no beating yourself up for it now. Those men saw how much heart you put into saving him, and now they are counting on you.”

Matthieu tried wiping the tears from his face and composing himself. The Sergeant leaned over and picked up the medical bag and strapped it around Matthieu's shoulders. Matthieu began to trudge off with the Sergeant, knowing what he had to do. “You are a good medic Matthieu. The dead have seen the end. Let's see if we can help those who are still alive.”

Milky Way's Place

Heidi Grohe-Rood

Do stars still grace the blackened sky
with thousands of shining lights
a milky band across the dark
in the endless void that we call night

that stretches far beyond our view
we gaze in wonder through wide eyes
the sight beholds no other space
but this that captures breathlessness

through the vast centuries
often seen though never believed
the light would go out of the sky
dimmed as man's ambitions rise

glowing still in the dark
shining where we cannot see
escaping from the light we made
seen when nothing else can be

to the band that's disappeared
that vanished from the night's sky
no longer to behold the sight
till we return the darkest night

The Weight of the Sky

Anjolina Blackwell

The air in Willem's lungs was squeezed out and he wheezed all that remained out through his cracked lips. His efforts to keep his eyes sealed from what lay around him failed and the dark gloom of the woods met with the blue-gray in his pupils.

The wheezing that descended from his throat turned into long sobs of pain, shivers were sent down his spine leaving a shakiness in his voice. The cold of the wood penetrated his ripped shirt and tattered brown cargo pants.

His shoes were taken from him.

Willem was left here, to die. If not here, then his family, only a daughter and her husband, would have left his decaying body in the cellar of their home.

It was starting to drizzle.

Drops of rain slid down leaves and dampened the dirt he was laying in. On his side, all of the trees stood tall around him, like bars on a jailhouse door. Even though the back of his hands were dry and bleeding, his palms were still soft. Leathery, but soft. There is a certain age where a child's hands are no longer soft; an age where the skin can no longer be innocent and fragile, but defensive and rugged. Now he mixed in the dirt and water beneath him, dirtying up his smooth palms. Even after everything, he hoped his daughter would come back for him. Hoped that she wanted him to live.

Willem didn't want to acknowledge her greediness, even when she would steal other girls' and boys' toys in elementary school. The rainwater was heavy now, what was left with his clothes clung to his body. The moisture had left his eyes long ago in the cellar and only now could he express the heartache he felt in his chest, as the rain dripped on his face and ran down his cheek. His Angelica possessed a true demon, one he didn't think possible.

He'd seen other parents fear their children, when the chaos had begun. Some even rid themselves of their children, by any means.

"Overpopulation is not a victimless crime," their government leaders would say on the news. There had been rumors of each family being forced to bear only one child. These rumors were quickly squashed by public officials. His state government would hold rallies, make speeches declaring national emergency. Nothing was consistent, no one could concur. Groups were created that protested the idea of overpopulation. "A scam," radical leaders would yell. "The government wants to control and weave their way into our homes and our families." Willem turned his partially bare back to the sloshy ground and his droopy eyes to the clouds as he remembered the endless days of news broadcasts. It seemed that the clouds were slowly sinking onto his chest. It seemed like he was bearing the weight of the entire sky on his chest. His hands still felt the muddy ground around him.

Then the retirement homes began to burn. The people, mostly young and fearful that they would be next, took it into their own hands. They believed that the government didn't have the strength to do what needed to be done. The fires burned for

days, the smell of meat in a frying pan permanently filled the air. Willem would cover Angelica's eyes (he didn't know she was peeking between the cracks of his fingers). The smell only left his nose after what felt like years, but Angelica enjoyed it and held it for as long as she could.

Who knows what the demon inside of her would've done, if this purging hadn't taken place. His breath became slow and the rainfall slowed with it. The mud he felt was smooth and let his fingers slide through with ease.

Willem's fingers did linger over a solid, delicate structure. From the sky, his old eyes glided down over the trees to where his fingers were searching what he had discovered. He grinned, with what teeth remained. The strength had left him, but he lifted the decaying white bone and held it in the soft palm of his hand. Two menacing holes stared back at him. The weight of the sky above him and the world that left him were not his alone to bear just then.

The Stones Sing Dylan in the Lou: A 25th Anniversary Appreciation of 'Like a Rolling Stone'

Michael Kuelker

Go right now to YouTube and dial up the Rolling Stones performing Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" in St. Louis 12-12-1997. Watch the video and let your writing journal know how the song feels.

I was there that night, on the floor of the Trans World Dome (now the Dome at America's Center) all the way in the back with my buddy Joe Davis. Joe had underwritten the cost of my ticket because I was broke and he didn't want me to miss seeing the Stones on their *Bridges to Babylon* tour. The band was playing large arenas and invoking the old magic on a massive, well-appointed stage, nearly a decade into their reformation after the fractures of the 80s. Two-thirds into the concert, six members of the group trod out on a catwalk to the small second stage for a three-song segment ending with the Dylan classic.

The effect of "Like a Rolling Stone" upon the crowd was intensified by the reduced circumstances – the big band stripped to its core of two guitars, bass, drums, keyboards, and lead singer performing on a space that was a small fraction of the main stage. No horn players, no backup singers. No smoke, fancy lighting or video. Just the Stones on a little glowing platform in the middle of the arena amid a sea of undulating upraised arms.

The mood in the place was ... well, watch the video. Note the masses of people on their feet, moving and singing with the music. Not a cellphone in sight.

I am convinced that the audience's uncorked exuberance had to do in part with this being the song that it is, a story of having everything stripped away. The female figure being addressed by the singer suffers not only the loss of wealth but the erosion of security and privilege. Each verse details the nature of her descent.

Now you don't talk so loud
Now you don't seem so proud
About having to be scrounging for your next meal

It's a deeply human tale. And, in one of the best choruses in 20th century popular music, the singer asks,

How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
A complete unknown
Like a rolling stone

In the second verse, Dylan introduces a Mystery Tramp and further develops the story of her Fall. The woman of the song has lived in an aloof and uncompromising manner, inured to the realities of the world through her wealth and secure social position. But now she is in another world, pawning her jewelry, getting a deep tissue shock at what life has dealt.

Nobody has ever taught you to live on the street
Now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it.

Everything having altered, the woman faces the Mystery
Tramp in a moment of confrontation.

You said you'd never compromise
With the Mystery Tramp, but now you realize
He's not selling any alibis
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And he says, do you want to ... make a deal?

Dylan leaves it an open question. We don't know what the
woman will do with (or for) the Mystery Tramp.

In the final verse, the "I" of the song conveys the timeless
aphorism, "When you've got nothing, you've got nothing to lose,"
reminding her that certainty is an illusion and brokenness can
somehow auger liberation.

This is what we were responding to that December night, not
just to a jouncy song with a killer hook but to an acknowledged
classic from the American songbook, the existential condition of
having everything reduced so we can see what's left when it is all
laid bare, and Mick up in our faces singing,

You're invisible now
You've got no secret to conceal
How does it feel?

How? Context is everything. On paper, the lyrics come off as a morality tale sprinkled with obtuse imagery. In this concert moment, it was an affirmation of life.

Phrasing is everything, too. Lyrically, the first half of each verse is composed of words which are sung rapidly, for instance,

Once upon a time you dressed so fine
You threw the bums a dime in your prime

followed by a pause and an interjection or finish to the line,

didn't you?

There are end rhymes and internal rhymes here with time / fine / dime / prime (“fine” we call “close enough for rock and roll”) and the tagged on “didn't you?” Next line:

People'd call, say, 'Beware doll, you're bound to fall'
You thought they were all

Pause.

kidding you

The rhyme scheme alters as the song unfolds and internal rhymes differ as well; so goes Dylan's poetic latticework.

Not that we were necessarily thinking of such things as we were all getting Rolling Stoned. But it was there in our minds, this masterful poetry.

More of this Good Moment's greatness: Keith's background vocals on the chorus, the way he holds onto the long vowels. Charlie's smiles at 3:05 and 4:00. The jangly guitars and the rhythm section's excellent groove. The fact that Mick, like a boss, sings a lyrically intricate song, hypes the audience, takes a fine harmonica solo and does it all with a dodgy in-ear monitor. You see him fussing with it and hand-signaling the soundman and finally peeling off the entire contraption before the last verse, but there is no ill effect whatsoever on the performance.

Abiding thanks to the incomparable Joe Davis for enabling me to see the Stones in '97.

Mick Jagger – lead vocals, harmonica
Keith Richards – guitar, backing vocals
Charlie Watts – drums
Ron Wood – guitar
Darryl Jones – bass
Chuck Leavell – keyboards, backing vocals

Dylan, Bob. “Like a Rolling Stone.” *Highway 61 Revisited*, Columbia, 1965.

Bob Dylan – lead vocals, guitar, harmonica
Mike Bloomfield – guitar
Al Kooper – organ
Paul Griffin – piano
Joe Macho, Jr. – bass
Bobby Gregg – drums
Bruce Langhorne – tambourine



On Albenga: This abstract painting is an oil on canvas and evokes the qualities of landscape, particularly the city of Albenga, situated on the Gulf of Genoa on the Italian Riviera. The colors, shapes and textures are combined in a tactile and visually dynamic design to form an image that engages the viewer to develop a visual dialogue with the language of painting.

Brian D. Smith

CONTRIBUTORS

Anjolina Blackwell has attended SCC and continues academic studies at Webster University. There is much admiration and many thanks that she gives to Professor Christina Gant (SCC English), who was a wonderfully intelligent instructor that introduced creative writing to her. The pieces written by Blackwell in this edition of the MRR are whatever the reader would like them to be, her only hope being that the words and interpretations linger with you, for as long as you need them.

Amber Budd is an aspiring writer from St. Charles County who is studying to earn a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing at SCC. She is working on the early drafts of her debut novel with the help of her three needy cats. She writes in the fantasy and sci-fi genres, but she also enjoys writing free-verse poetry.

Donovan Dickson self-identifies as a nerd with myriad interests.

Heidi Grohe-Rood is a graduate of SCC and UMSL. She continues to diversify her poetry and prose inspired by people, nature and events. Heidi enjoys the outdoors, traveling, photography and reading. Spending time with family and friends is what she enjoys most.

Loria Harris is a student at SCC pursuing her Certificate in Creative Writing. Her work has been included in Mid Rivers Review, Reverie and Kings River Review. She is the recipient of the SCC English department's Alyson Dickerman Award for poetry, the Jim Haba Award for poetry and the Student of Promise award. A lifelong creative, she is also a professional photographer and possesses a bachelor's degree in Music Performance.

Michael Kuelker, Professor Emeritus of English at SCC, loves to write about music and culture. He has a forthcoming book titled *The Ozark Mountain Daredevils on Record: A Narrative Discography*. In the mid-2000s, Kuelker edited and published *Book of Memory: A Rastafari Testimony*, the spiritual memoir of Jamaican Rastafarian elder Prince Elijah Williams.

Nancy Phillips-Kuelker is a social worker who spends her work week in behavioral healthcare leadership at a federally funded health center in St. Louis. This is her first poem since the second grade haiku contest.

Kathryn Logan is a student at SCC.

Maya McCormick is currently studying Secondary English Education at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. She aspires to teach creative writing to high school students and hopes to help her students find peace and understanding in poetry. Her dream is to spread her love of writing and poetry to younger generations so that they might find understanding within themselves.

Kaitlyn Mitchell is a student at SCC who is going into secondary education with an emphasis in English. She is a volunteer with PotBangerz—Feed the Body Mission of St. Louis. In 2022, she received the SCC English department's E.B. White Award in essay writing for her essay on the Warsaw Ghetto.

Sharonda Nicholson is a lifelong resident of St. Louis, MO, the mother of three and the grandmother of three, and she is working toward an Associate Degree in Histology Technology. She says, "I love writing and creating art. The motto I chose to live by is that learning to live with good energy and being authentically you will allow you to have a happy blessed life. I live

to explore the different energy of life and encompass that in my writing to inspire people to the new self.”

Alayna Padgett, an SCC student, works at the Spencer Road branch of the St. Charles City County Library District. She plans on majoring in English and becoming a full-fledged librarian someday.

Callia Robinson is a student at SCC.

Suzy Ryan attends SCC. She is majoring in Creative Writing and served as Assistant Editor for *The Gateway Review: A Journal of Magic Realism*. Her work has been featured in *The Elevation Review* (2022) and at creative writing symposiums. She enjoys writing short stories, poetry, and flash fiction. She has a keen interest in turning her writing into screenplays.

Emma Sieveking is a 2022 graduate of Francis Howell Central High School and will be attending Rockhurst University in the fall. She intends to major in nursing with a minor in Spanish. Emma has lived in St. Peters, Missouri, her entire life, but looks forward to starting her next chapter in Kansas City. In her free time, Emma enjoys reading, spending time outside, exploring St. Louis and being with family and friends.

Brian D. Smith lives in St. Louis, Missouri. He is a professor of visual art and the fine arts gallery director at SCC. He teaches painting and drawing courses in the SCC art program. An abstract painter, Brian D. Smith has exhibited his art nationally for more than thirty years. His work is owned by numerous corporate and private collections throughout the country, including Macy’s department stores, Plaza Frontenac, Emerson Electric, Polsinelli Law Firm, Wells Fargo Advisors, Marketing Lab, and Washington University in St. Louis. His art

is represented by the Duane Reed Gallery in St. Louis, Missouri, and The Dabbert Gallery in Sarasota, Florida.

Tyler Steitz is pursuing a history degree as SCC with the hopes of continuing his education to earn his doctorate. He is a Marine Corps veteran of eight years. When he is not at school or work, he likes to spend time with his wife and two children or learning new and interesting historical stories.



From *The Drolatic Dreams of Pantagruel* (1565) –
Richard Breton. Public domain.

Writer in Focus: Loria Harris
Selfhoods
Love, Family, Community, World
Outer Spaces

Cover Art: ALBENGA (2021)
52" x 58" oil on canvas
by Brian D. Smith

