OUR MISSION

As an online creative arts journal, KLIO encourages, amplifies, and celebrates a diverse range of literary and artistic media from Penn State creative artists.

Like our sister print journal Kalliope, we publish traditional creative writing and visual art intended for the page, but we also aim to use our online platform to share digital and cross-disciplinary works, including performance art, music, dance, and film.

Klio seeks to showcase and keep a community record of creative arts from all Penn State campuses. We strive to provide an inclusive community to celebrate the creative and linguistic talents of emerging Penn State artists and writers. We pride ourselves on being a multimedia publication that represents diversity in art, perspective, and culture.

Both Klio and Kalliope take their names from the Muses called upon by early Greek writers and artists for inspiration and creative guidance. The Greek word kleô, meaning “to proclaim or celebrate,” gives the muse her name and gives us our mission. Here at KLIO, we celebrate and offer a platform for all Penn State students to express their creativity.

Cover art: “Jellyfish Gloop” by Bee Barkley
Klio Logo by Sarah Nields
MASTHEAD 2021

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Loren Perry — Nonfiction Editor and Social Media Coordinator

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**MUSIC**

(“Music We Love” available on SoundCloud)

Follow the link embedded in each name to read a feature article about and hear the music of each of these artists:

Jack Roses & Eric Damiano: “Pandemic Unleashes Emerging Penn State Musicians”
LEG: “A Conversation With Leg: Electronic Music Duo”
EDITOR’S NOTE

Dear Klio Readers,

Even though it has been almost two years since the last edition of our creative arts journal, the staff of Klio 2021 is excited to present you with the fifth volume of Klio: Glow in the Dark. The title was inspired by Bee Barkley’s artwork, “Jellyfish Gloop,” which is featured on our cover this year. The amount of hard work that our small staff of eight students put in is incredible. We all worked on every stage of the edition, from revamping the website to editing the pieces for inclusion in the final edition. But we would like to thank everyone who has been involved in this semester: our readers, contributors, and interviewees. You have made this year’s edition great, and it could not have been done without you.

This year has included many new additions to Klio that have helped our staff make their own stamp on Klio’s history. We wanted to find more new and creative ways to showcase even more artists at Penn State.

Morgan Seiff, editor in chief of Kalliope, our sister magazine, became our first film editor and created our new YouTube channel, Klio & Kalliope. By showcasing student films and artist statement videos, student musicians and filmmakers can now be highlighted in this combined effort from both of our literary magazines. Morgan launched the channel with “Spring Broke,” a short film submitted to Kalliope’s fall chapbook, Folio. With no place to show the film in the print booklet, Klio & Kalliope was born.

Our website has also undergone small transformations to make it easier to navigate and use. From editing the homepage to reworking our website’s tabs, Mark Laborde put in a lot of work reworking the site. He even took on the weekly scheduling and formatting of our preview submissions, a new feature of Volume Five. We wanted to gain early interest before our final edition, especially as we planned to release in the same semester as Kalliope this year. With weeks for poetry, nonfiction, fiction, and art, we highlighted some of our early submissions and engaged readers early.

While the number of submissions may have been small, all of our editors worked hard to pick the best submissions. Our poetry section, which received the largest number of submissions, was headed by Aliyah Rios. She and the poetry committee had a tough job choosing the 16 poems in this year’s edition. One of the early poems we featured, “A Child in the World of Racial Warfare” by Trae Morgan-White, is a deeply expressive poem that embodies the current tensions in the United States. In the final edition, we will also feature “Goodbye, Father” by Payton Kuhn, another heartbreaking poem about a difficult relationship between father and child.
Among the nonfiction submissions, “Gentle Touch” and “Anna’s Heart Named Henry” stood out to Loren Perry, the nonfiction editor. She and the nonfiction committee created a section that is creepy and tender. *Anna’s Heart Named Henry*, written by Ashley Ustazewski, is a dark, almost fictional tale about a high school student who stole a heart from a biology lab. We are excited to also feature *Gentle Touch*, a heartwarming story about the relationship between a grandmother and granddaughter, written by our poetry editor Aliyah Rios.

Our fiction section contains seven pieces of various topics, from dark, fantastic pieces like “Night Falls” by Kiran Pandey and “Under the Hill” by Madison Colantrello, to upbeat, hopeful topics like *The Elevator Song* by Maysen Paul. Isabella Luciani, our fiction and music editor, combed through many submissions with the fiction committee to select stories that are relevant and thought provoking, which we hope you will enjoy. She also helped to update the “Music We Love” feature that was started by the Klio 2018 staff with new hits, by musicians like LEG and Jack Roses.

The art section, with submissions chosen by art editor Graham Millar and the art committee, was a little different this year. Graham, a comic writer and artist himself, encouraged a new kind of submission for this year’s edition: comic strips. Besides the comics, we are also featuring photographs by our fiction editor, Isabella Luciani, like one titled “Mars”, and multiple paintings by Bee Barkley, such as “Sad Snail”.

Our biggest undertaking was the blog, led by blog editor Elise Tecco and with contributions from our entire staff. Elise worked tirelessly to edit, schedule, and upload posts. She even made graphics for each upload and designed this year’s cover! From various posts about theater at Penn State (an interview with Happy Valley Improv creator Andrea McCloskey, a feature on NRT’s tech director, and a podcast about Penn State’s musical theater program during the pandemic) to a new feature of guest blog posts, our first in the form of an interview with former Kalliope staff member Erin Allport, the amount of effort put into this area of our site was a group effort.

I am so proud of the work that everyone has done this year. It was difficult to follow the 2019 edition after a long break, the continuing pandemic, and a small staff, but we worked hard to put out the best edition possible. We hope that we were able to bring light into peoples’ lives with these creative works so that we could all find a “glow” within the darkness of the pandemic. With such a small staff, we all came together and became friends, laughing and bonding as we created an edition of Klio that everyone will love. This is a place where we celebrate all Penn State students across all disciplines, and that’s what 2021 staff did.

Happy reading!

Amanda Nurse
Editor-in-Chief
Klio 2021
THE ELEVATOR SONG, by Maysen Paul

The elevator dings as it stops at the 10th floor. Doors gaping wide, many different busybodies file out. Most already know their destination in this workplace, like pre-programed robots. After three years in this illustration company, it becomes hard to tell the difference between the blurs of people dressed in their monotone colored straight-jackets. Really, only a maximum of five people stop at the secretary desk standing almost nine feet away from the elevator, and sometimes it’s less. However, today, the secretary was no longer patient enough to wait for those five people to come and ask when Mr. Harper’s next appointment is, or if Mr. Harper’s paperwork is ready, or how Mr. Harper likes his coffee.

Today, she sat in her stiff, plastic, back-ache-of-a-chair while the beeping of the elevator taunted her. Every time those metal doors opened, and someone else passed by her desk in that steady, fast-walk pace, she checked the time in the bottom corner of her computer. The little numbers read 9:20 a.m. Only 20 minutes have passed since she sat down, yet it feels like she has never left since the time she sat down three years ago.

Ding Ding

The secretary looks up from her timesheet paper and the doors slowly slide open. No one came out. It was empty, though not silent. Listening, she could hear the soft, slightest sound of violins humming between the metal walls inside the elevator.

Seconds pass by, the violins’ soft, long strums begin to grow louder, reaching her ears more audibly. Unfaltering, she keeps her gaze focused on the elevator’s empty space between those hidden open doors.

Ring Ring Ring

She jumps a little out of her chair, and her hands unclench from the fist-like-balls they were unconsciously in.

Picking up the phone mid-ring, she answers.

“Hello, this is Harpers’ Illustration Services, this is Ren speak—”
“I know who this is! Susan is out today, and I have a lot of work to do. I need you to grab me a coffee with…”

Mr. Harper’s deep, gruff voice is drowned out as the violins, cellos, and bases begin to play at the peak of their crescendo. The elevator has not closed yet, but Ren begins to anticipate that it will after a few more seconds, and her whole body flinches at the thought. It is almost like if she does not move now, she will stay frozen on the tenth floor forever. Her eyes eagerly tighten on the elevator. Before she can even consciously think her words over, she blurts out, “I quit.”

And without a moment more of hesitation, she drops the corded phone on the table and races towards the elevator that is beginning to shut. With perfect timing, she slips her hand between the drifting doors, and they glide open to reveal an empty checkered stone floor.

At this point, the music is still at a powerful forte while Ren stands in the back right corner of the miniature, cubed room. Her heart is beating as hard and fast as a jackhammer, but as the elevator lowers down to the ninth floor, the music smoothly and slowly descends into a mezzo-forte, and her breathing begins to sync up with the extended strumming of the string instruments.

*Ding Ding*

The elevator doors open on the ninth floor and a blue-tied, middle-aged man walks with his phone pressed against his ear. He pushes seven on the tree of numbered buttons and begins to tap his foot with his free hand sternly placed on his hip.

All the while, Ren continues to try to recollect and distract herself from regretting her drastic decisions by letting waves of instrumental elevator music wash over her. Though the waves of violins, bases, and cellos ramp up to a violent forte as the man’s phone conversation takes an overwhelmingly nostalgic turn.

“Do you think I paid for you to come all this way to drop out of Yale and become what? A nobody?”

The man’s voice fills the elevator, and his brief pauses are replaced by the violins sharply striking the air in swift, lethal slashes. Eavesdropping, Ren’s blood defrosts to a boil.

“Oh! A musician! So you want to waste the opportunities I have given you? That’s fine, waste your life away, I don’t care.”

Just like that, the heat in Ren’s cheeks subside, and her eyes swell with long-awaited melted tears. A sense of sorrowful déjà vu floods through her from the man’s conversation with his child, except in her case, she was the disappointment on the other side of the call who was forced to abandon her ambitions.

*Ding Ding*

The elevator doors open on the seventh floor and the man on the phone stomps out with all the aggression of the piercing string instruments. Entering as he leaves is a well-postured woman tugging her dancing daughter along. Her mature, manicured fingers press the fifth-floor button.

Seeing the two come in, Ren quickly dries the tears that escaped her eyes to avoid anyone from...
noticing, especially the animated child who precedes to pirouette from one side of the elevator to the other.

The rigid woman, who seems to be the young girl’s mother, shot disapproving glares at her rambunctious daughter while she danced in her own world to the now peaceful tones of the violins. Unlike the little girl’s mother, Ren could not help but smile as she watched the child’s carefree movements. Plus, Ren could not blame the little girl, since the allegro music led her to sway as well. Surprisingly, the little girl notices Ren swaying back and forth and stops mid-turn to stand in front of her.

“I like your drawing on your hand!”

The little girl points to Ren’s tattoo on her hand of a blossoming cherry blossom tree.

“Thank you! I designed it myself, but someone else drew it on me.”

“It’s pretty! Do you want to be an artist when you grow up? I want to be a dancer.”

“I-”

Before Ren could answer, the agitated woman turned to her daughter.

“Analisa, stop bugging her and stand still like the big girl you are.”

After that, the young girl did as she was told with her hands interlaced in front of her. Similarly, both Ren and the child try to refrain themselves from dancing to the music that was once peaceful but is now slipping into a more melancholy tone.

*Ding Ding*

Both the rigid woman and her daughter leave the elevator with a now subdued buoyancy.

*Ding Ding*

The sturdy silver doors close Ren into the solitary space of the elevator. It feels like the perfect time for Ren to reflect upon her decision to renounce her stable-paying job. Or think about how she will pay the bills of her apartment in downtown New York. Or how her parents will react when they find out.

As her brain begins to take in the weight of her decisions, flowing throughout the elevator is the dimming music, playing sequences of both majors and minors. Then vibrations buzz in her back pocket.

“Hello?”

“Good morning Ren! This is Darleen. I am calling on Mr. Harper’s behalf. He is a bit confused with your sudden decision to leave the company. He believes that you are a valuable part of the illustration industry and would like to convince you to reconsider your renouncement. In addition, he would also like to offer you a much-deserved pay raise. Would you be interested in this proposal?”
For a moment, Ren desperately wanted to concede and accept the proposition. Yet, as the base violins played, all she could recall ever doing in her job was mind-numbing work. Minor and major notes move Ren to answer.

“I apologize for my unexpected renouncement; however, I have to respectfully decline the offer.”

Once those words leave Ren’s lips, she feels the storm in her brain dissipate to a refreshing drizzle. Yet, it is not over.

“Are you sure? This opportunity is only offered once?”

Regardless of the second chance, Ren is unfazed by Mr. Harper’s assistant’s persistence. Instead, Ren gathered strength from the vibrato of the major chords of the violin.

“You know... it is my birthday today. I am turning 24 today, and the thing I am most proud of doing since graduating high school is deciding to leave this job. I want to be proud of so much more. So, I am sorry, but I do not want to be behind a computer for however longer years I have left. Thank you for the offer though.”

Just as soon as the string instruments hit their peak of a crescendo, Ren hangs up the phone.

*Ding Ding*

A wrinkly, colorful old woman waddles into the elevator and pushes button number two.

Together, Ren and the old woman wait, swaying to the elevator music as the instruments gradually decrescendo.

“You know, I hear that the weather is supposed to be beautiful today.” The older woman states happily while glancing at Ren in the right corner where she has not moved.

“Wasn’t it snowing yesterday?”

“Yes, but spring’s right around the corner, honey!”

*Ding Ding*

The elevator arrives on the second floor to let the wrinkly, joyous woman waddle out.

The piece playing from the speakers in the elevator starts to sound very distant. Descending to a pianissimo, the violins’ prolonged notes dissolve into the air and Ren steps forward to press button number one. It lights up.

*Ding Ding*

Ren can no longer hear the solo violins as the weighty, thick, metal doors slowly slide into the wall pockets of the elevator. Steadily, Ren walks out of the elevator and towards the shiny, glass doors of the building.

As she pushes the doors open and lets them shut behind her, she is greeted by the beaming sun. Swiftly adjusting to the sunlight, Ren realizes that the old lady was right, the snow is melting. Spring is coming.
Maysen Paul is a Penn State University Park student who is majoring in Elementary and Middle School Education. They are from Lansdale, Pennsylvania, which is about 45 minutes away from Philly. Some fun facts about them are that they love to do yoga and plan to become a certified yoga instructor in the future. They also love music, and that is what inspired this piece. They get much of their work done to piano and instrumental pieces, while other times they simply just listen to destress. The musical piece that inspired this fictional writing is Keaton Henson “Elevator Song.” Although not every description of the music matches exactly with the song, they found the music of this piece to be quite moving and had to write about it in some way.
THE MAD SCIENTIST, by Patrick Walsh

I’ve always been curious, and it’s always gotten me into trouble. When I was seven, I ate a bumblebee, and the next week, I had a whole hive in my stomach. When I was 13, I poked a few holes in a cow to see how long it would take to empty. When I was 18, I held the Thorpe kid over her parents’ fire pit to study how humans would take to the conditions in Hell. At seven, they sent me to the hospital. At 13, they sent me to a special school. At 18, they sent me here, Snorpington’s Home for Those of Less Than Average Sanity & Clothings Warehouse.

Norbert Snorpington built the facility in the 1980s, taking advantage of his position on the City Council to turn the push for a sanatorium that had more than an old car battery, some rope, and a handful of black licorice into a new location for his sartorial supply company. The downside is the store can’t operate between 4 and 6 p.m. (lobectomy hour). The upside is my mother buys me a new pair of woolen socks whenever she visits.

My digs at Snorps are honestly better than back home. My whole room is a bed, and the wall tastes like sponge cake. The next resident will be in for a surprise when they discover a bunch of lightly used coats in the second-to-top, third-from-right square instead of dessert.

They give me as many books as I want here. They know I wouldn’t hurt them. They won’t let me have another cat though.

I started *The Atlas of Human Anatomy* by Frank H. Netter in the morning. I finished after lunch. It said that the human finger is easier to bite through than a carrot. That can’t be true! Carrots are orange.

I looked at my own hand and wondered. I lifted my left ring finger to my mouth and clamped down until I heard a wet crunch. Hmmm. Mr. Frank H. Netter was right. This does taste better than a carrot. I spit it out, though (I had a large lunch). I grabbed a chunk of wall cake and held it over the stub to catch the blood.

Then, I broke the zipper off of my coat and peeled off the top layer of wallpaper. I dipped the jagged edge of the zipper into the red puddle at my feet and wrote, *Dear Mr. Frank H. Netter.* He needed to know that his speculation about fingers had been confirmed by a real researcher.

I brought my letter to Chef Sal at supper, so he would mail it, but he just ran away shouting about a hand. *Even the nice ones are so darn selfish,* I thought as I stared out his open window. Couldn’t it wait until after he took my letter? The scientific community cannot continue to function without my input. He’s putting everything—the internet, antibiotics, the Transformers—in jeopardy. I ran back to my room and penned another letter before the orderlies came, or the ink puddle dried.
I got lucky. Every day, the mail cart sat next to my bed in the infirmary. I slipped my missive in
while the mail lady gave the attending physician oral sex. Once they pronounced me recovered, I
stayed up for a week straight, shivering in my bedroom of nervous anticipation. On day eight, they
resorted to horse tranquilizer, and I went down like a sack of potatoes.

The next night at supper time, my plan came to fruition. I hurdled the buffet at the commissary and
sprinted past a shocked Chef Sal. The window was open again. I jumped.

I hit the cold night air with a gaping smile on my face. I would have a brilliant letter to write to
Wilbur and Orville Redenbacher about their principles of flight. I’d be able to write it on real quality
card stock this time, too.

For the first time, I looked down and was completely reassured. If my savior waited there already,
I’d have known it was a ruse. The Decepticons, however evil, are very punctual. But Optimus always
rushes in at the last moment to save the day.

I wondered how long it would take for all of the Energon to drain from his robotic carcass. Longer
when in truck form or humanoid? As long as the cow in either? That cow was very juicy. The
ground came closer, and I became worried. When I woke up surrounded by bright lights and
beeping screens, my heart, located behind my sternum and between the second and fifth ribs, filled
with chagrin.

My actions were crazy. The deeds of a madman. Optimus Prime is a **machine with no known
address**. The message would take weeks, if not months, to get to him through Hasbro. Next time,
I’ll send an email.

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*Patrick Walsh hails from majestic Yardley, Pennsylvania, also the hometown of Hollywood funnyman Richard Kind. You can see Richard in projects such as Inside Out, Curb Your Enthusiasm, and A Bug’s Life. With his wife Dana Stanley, Richard has three children, a son Max, and two daughters, Samantha and Skylar. Richard is also a bonafide cat lover. Patrick, on the other hand, prefers dogs. He is a junior at Penn State majoring in English and History. He enjoys playing tennis, reading, watching TV, and telling people he’s from the same place as a successful but not quite famous comedic character actor.*
A hill rises at the edge of a small village, its vigil unending. Upon its crest sits a cottage, its wooden walls cracked and curled and its thatched roof crumbled with age. A young boy, just grown into his hand-me-down trousers, stood before the door. His hand was raised in front of him, preparing to knock, but he found himself hesitating.

He heard the stories of the Healer. She was known to be a woman of beauty and kindness who could heal any wound in a matter of seconds. The village at the bottom of the hill, to which the boy belonged, revered the Healer. He recalled listening to the elders telling the story of the Healer’s arrival to their small valley. When they reached the end, their eyes glazed over as if they were truly reliving the event. Their stories went back years, decades, always unchanged.

Yet it was not the Healer’s apparent warm-heartedness that made the boy pause, but the voices in the night. After the sun retired and the village lights were extinguished, the voices crept through the boy’s window. They sounded mournful and hopeless, as if the collective voices pleaded for him to save them. From what, he did not know. He mentioned it to his mother one early morning. She furrowed her brows, her eyes widening as she asked, “Where do you come up with such lies?”

The boy disregarded the memory, assuming it was a dream. However, the voices returned the following night. He believed himself to be going mad until he woke to the moon shining through his window. The voices had stirred him, trailing its talons up his neck. He moved to sit on his windowpane, one leg dangling out into the night with only the moaning and murmuring to keep him company. It was closer to sunrise than sunset when the house neighboring his own woke up. The door burst open with a bang, and a girl his age flew into the darkness. She had lived next to him for his entire life, though they had never interacted much. The boy had always assumed her to be average, but as he watched her trip over her nightclothes, he assumed otherwise.

She struggled through the high grass. The boy followed her with his eyes, his body glued to the window frame. He watched her fall to her knees, almost disappearing into the sea of black. He narrowed his eyes to make out her figure. She faced the ground, her body moving as if–

“She’s digging,” he whispered to himself. He pushed himself off the windowpane and dropped to the ground, his bare feet sinking into the dirt. He cautiously made his way to the girl, feet spread and hands out as if he were approaching a wounded animal.

“Are you okay?” he asked into the darkness. His voice sounded like thunder in the silent night. That’s when he realized the whispering had died. Something brushed against his foot, and he
jumped in surprise. He looked down to find a pale object lying on the ground, a hand. His eyes follow up the arm to find the girl curled up inside a shallow burrow. He crouched next to the entrance and peeked inside; he could only make out the girl’s wide, fearful eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. Despite himself, his voice quivered.

Her eyes snapped to him, unblinking as she said, “The voices. They need to be let out. They beg and they don’t stop. Always whispering.”

The boy jerked away from the girl, terror coursing through him. She heard the voices too; he hadn’t dreamed it and hadn’t imagined it. He scrambled away from her, his clean clothes now covered in dirt. He glanced away from her for a moment, towards his open window, not noticing the girl crawling from her burrow. She threw herself on top of him, grabbing for him, yet not hurting. He struggled beneath but was unable to get loose. She gripped the sides of his face so tightly that her fingers turned white.

“Do not trust the one who tricks. No one hears but us, those who haven’t been deceived by her charm. Do not trust the Healer. Do not trust her.”

The boy pushed her away and bolted back towards his home. In his frantic state, he didn’t notice a dip in the ground. His foot plunged down, his ankle twisting and sending shots of pain up his leg. He barely had time to put his hands out before he hit the ground with a thud, the air knocked from his lungs. He wasted no time pushing himself up once again and sprinting the rest to the way to his house.

The boy blinked, his mind snapping back to reality. His hand, motionless, was still raised to the door when it swung open to reveal a woman. Her beauty nearly made him stagger backward. Her skin was as smooth as satin and dark as ebony, her lips as red as a rose, and her eyes matched the herbs that decorated the room. Her hair cropped close to her head, yet the designs shaved into the sides entranced him.

Her eyes flickered down to the boy’s hand, which was still raised in the air. A smile spread across her face, revealing flawless teeth.

“Yes? Are you in need of my assistance?”

A shiver traveled down the boy’s spine at the sound of her voice. It reminded the young boy of when his mother used to sing him to sleep.

The boy blinked and lowered his hand. The healer’s smile only grew as she stepped away from the threshold to allow him inside. Her question was immediately answered as he limped through the door, his ankle purple and swelling. She motioned to a stool that sat in the middle of the room, its wood looked to be older than the house in which they stood.

The boy tried his best not to collapse onto the stool, the pain in his ankle almost overbearing. The young woman stood at a counter covered in herbs and medicines, her hands brushing over everything until reaching thick bandages.

She didn’t look up at him as she spoke, “And what exactly did you do to cause such an injury?”
The boy chewed his cheek and replied, “I was running.”

“From something you shouldn't have been tampering with, I assume?”

The boy remained silent, confirming the healer’s suspicions. She walked over to him and knelt, their faces becoming equal level. She held out a hand towards his ankle, waiting for him to raise it. He did so, the fear that nearly paralyzed him ebbing away at the rhythm of her work. She wrapped the bandage around his ankle, making movement difficult. After securing it, she leaned back on her heels and looked to the herbs hanging above their heads. She pulled a leaf from one of the various plants and held it out to him.

“Chew this and it will help with the infection. Besides that, you just need time and rest.”

The boy accepted the leaf but didn’t dare put it on his tongue. The healer studied him, her eyes showing an emotion the boy couldn’t place.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked. Poison laced her voice, the type of poison one does not notice until it is too late.

The boy shook his head, his words jumbled as they came out, “No Ma’am. I only heard stories of what you can do,” he lowered his voice, “the magic.”

The woman breathed deeply, tilting back her head. “And you wish to see if the rumors are true?” The boy shook his head. The woman narrowed her eyes, “Then what is it you want, boy?”

He paused before speaking, his body locking up just as it did when he had tried to knock on the healer’s cottage door.

“I want to know why the voices beneath the hill haunt me at night,” he said in barely more than a whisper, “I want to know why only the children can hear them and why they seem to come from your home, Miss.”

The healer’s eyes seem to freeze, the green hue turning darker as they focused on him. The boy blinked, expecting to see the healer still smiling down at him. Instead, her face held a deathly glare, her smile all but vanished.

“I’ll show you,” was all she said.

The boy had the sudden feeling that he had made a grave mistake. He expected her to shed her skin for the monster he imagined her to be, but she remained beautiful. A siren atop the hill. She unwrapped his bandaged and placed her hands around the boy’s ankle, squeezing hard enough for him to flinch. She closed her eyes, and her body stilled. The boy suddenly felt very alone in the old cottage. Her hands began to warm as if a fire had sparked between her fingertips. The heat grew so intense that he tried to pull his ankle away from the healer, but her grip was steel.

Just when the boy felt she was burning his foot to ash, she let go. She gasped, struggling for breath. The boy refrained from running, if only because his curiosity forced him to stay and discover the answers he so desperately sought.

The healer regained her composer and wiped the sweat from her brow.
“Behold the magic I wield,” she said as she spread her hands to him. The boy looked down at his ankle and a gasp escaped his lips. The skin was no longer purple, and the pain was nonexistent. It was as if he had ever ventured into that field.

He gaped at the healed ankle, marveling at her work. She laughed quietly and spoke, “Does this answer at least one of your questions?”

The boy nodded, yet eager to learn more. He stared at her skeptically, still wary of this healer and the newfound power she wielded. She waved for him to follow her as she stood and turned away. He pushed off the stool and followed her to a large basin.

Its sides had been carved to show thousands of shapes, most looked like animals, shimmering and sparkling in their medium. The boy studied the basin, his eyes widening as he realized what it was, “Is this gold?”

The healer nodded, her eyes not leaving the water that filled the bowl. She waved a hand over the liquid and to the boy’s astonishment, it began to ripple and pulsate. She dipped one finger into the water and out of her skin came a black ichor that spread out like veins until all the boy could see was black.

“Look,” the healer ordered. The boy saw nothing but darkness. He turned his head towards the healer, confused.

“I see nothing but oil, Ma’am.”

She motioned for him to lean closer and ordered him to look once again. So, the boy turned to the basin and squinted his eyes. He just saw a glimmer of something human when he felt the healer’s hand on the back of his neck, forcing him down into the water. He struggled only for a moment, as the oil filled his lungs and he choked. Within a moment, the feeling was gone, and he opened his eyes to find himself in darkness.

“Ma’am?” he called, fear gripping him like the claws of a bear. The healer’s gentle touch was on his shoulder, a lantern in hand. She waved for him to follow and began to walk. The boy could see nothing but stone and dirt covering the floor around the healer. He followed her only because she held the lantern, his only protection from the eternal night.

“You wish to know why only children can hear the voices? Because not even I can hold a mind that moves so quickly. A grown man, however, does not think much past the food in his belly and the ale in his hand.”

Why would she need to hold their minds? What was she controlling them for?

“You also wish to know who the voices belong to? Why they plead for your help? Here is your answer.” The boy looked around, still unable to see. He was just about to ask what she meant when an elderly man crawled into the lantern’s light. His skin was cracked and bleeding; his body was hunched and deformed. He looked up at the boy to reveal sightless eyes and bruises on his pale face.
The boy jumped backward, trying to get away from the man, right into the clutches of another person, this one was a woman. Her body was skin and bones, her hair dull and torn out in many places. The boy had nowhere to go but back into the healer’s arms.

“Who are they?” he asked, the terror in his voice unmistakable.

“They are mine and nothing else. I am their mother, their goddess, and their prophet.”

The boy shook his head, “What has happened to them?”

The boy felt the healer’s lips curl against his ear as she whispered, “My gift is not to heal, but to deliver.”

Just then, a new figure came into view. A young girl, her skin pale and bloodied, and her clothes covered in dirt. She limped forward, agony filling her eyes as she reached for him.

He glanced down at her ankle to find it purple and twisted, just as his ankle had been. Yet her wound was also covered in fresh blisters as if she had been burned. Horror rose in his throat as he realized what the healer had done. A sudden realization of where they were struck him. They were beneath the healer’s hill.

“I want to go home. Take me home,” he demanded. He missed his mother and the sunshine on his face. He felt as if he had been deprived for months, yet it had only been minutes.

“My dear,” the healer cooed, “you are home.”

Then she shoved the boy into the girl’s outreaching arms. They felt familiar as they closed around him, preventing his escape. He screamed and begged for the healer’s help, yet no aid came. He turned just in time to watch the Siren flash her beautiful smile before she vanished, along with the light.

The boy was plunged into the darkness and hands wrapped around him, pulling at him from every direction. Those familiar arms did not let go.

It was then he recognized the wide eyes and the dirty clothes. The silence of the room was nearing deafening before the girl pressed her cracked lips to his ear and whispered, “I told you not to trust the healer.”

Then the moaning began. A pointless plea that the victims of the Siren made, calling for help. Realizing he was never to escape, the boy joined in their symphony.

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BRUNO, by Lance Colet

At the fake forest, in the zoo, they called him Bruno. Bruno the Brown Bear. That was many years ago, though. The zoo had run into financial difficulties and had to let him, and many other animals, go. He was in the real forest now, back where he belonged.

Bruno liked the fall here. He liked the way the cold breeze rustled his fur, the way fiery-orange leaves—cool with the promise of winter—crinkled and crunched under paw. Sniffing the air, he liked the crisp, sharp smells of sycamore and oak. A jolt of alertness with every breath.

Meandering around, he caused great commotion throughout the forest. Squirrels scattered and scurried up trees when he lumbered by searching for a spot to nap. Birds took to the sky when he scratched his back against the trunks of their trees and shook their world.

It made him sad. At least at the zoo he was liked.

Today, it was cold enough that a light spattering of snow had sprinkled down to the forest floor, forming a spotty white canvas. Bruno frowned. The sun had only just begun to rise, but there was a foreign smell in the air. Human. He hung his head and his strides became gloomily slow. The humans were always the most afraid of him. Sometimes their limbs turned to wood, and they remained rooted in place, wide-eyed and silent until he left out of boredom. Other times they would scream “Bear!” and run away faster than he thought them capable of.

Still, Bruno followed the scent. He knew it wouldn’t lead to a companion, but nonetheless, humans were a rarity in these woods, and rarities were intriguing. Perhaps he had just been unlucky so far and had only met the bad apples that wanted nothing to do with him. Maybe this one would be a friend.

Bruno pursued the scent, his pace picking up to a leisurely padding between the trees and strings of hope lifting the corners of his frown. What a nice thought, that this human could be a friend.

He found her in a treeless clearing. She had a lined face and frazzled gray hair, an oversized plaid jacket, and a big blue backpack slumped on the ground beside her. She was sitting on a fallen log, a book spread out on her lap, eating some sweet, salty, smoky-smelling combination of peanut butter and honey stuck between two fluffy pieces of bread.

Bruno paused at the edge of the clearing, a safe distance away, and sat on his haunches and crossed his paws. Engrossed in her book, she never looked up.

So he waited, watching intently.
She was still reading after her sandwich had long since been eaten and the sun had grown in confidence, now looming proudly in the sky, golden-white light spilling through the branches and the dying leaves that still clung to them. The air was brightly lit and frigid. She was exhaling misty clouds of cold air and shivering slightly. Bruno wondered how similar that big jacket of hers was to fur. Not very.

Finally, she looked up, seemingly finished with the book. Tired but kind eyes met Bruno’s and lit up with surprise. Bruno didn’t move, not wanting to startle her. He had been patient for this long.

“How long have you been there?” she asked, her voice lilting and curious.

She had said something that Bruno didn’t understand. He closed his eyes and remained still as stone. Was she startled? Had he spooked her?

“Oh, did I say something wrong?”

He looked again. She was still there and making sounds. An amused smile had crept across her face.

“Come here, I don’t bite.”

She was beckoning him forward. Bruno furrowed his brow and scratched his head, backing up now. If he entered the clearing she would freeze up or run, but from here she seemed unafraid. The distance was a balancing act, taut with tension as if any more weight put on the encounter would crinkle it like a fallen leaf. Bruno did not move forward and risk ruining it.

She sighed. “Am I really that scary?” Her hands reached into the big blue backpack on the ground, and Bruno scrambled backward. One time, when he had tried to approach a human, they hadn’t run or frozen up. They pulled out a can from their bag and out came a hiss and a spray of pepper. Bruno hadn’t expected the attack, and the fiery mist assailed his eyes. That was the last time he had roared. It hadn’t been a roar of anger, more like a mournful howl. And of course, when his vision returned, the assailant had fled the scene.

But this one didn’t pull out the evil can. She pulled out a jar of peanut butter. Bruno paused his retreat. Next, she reached in and withdrew a small golden bear filled halfway with honey. The furrowed expression on the golden bear’s face made Bruno hum in amusement—it looked like it was trying to smile, but was fuming deep down for being used as a vessel for sweetness. With the peanut butter and honey set beside the woman, on the log, she withdrew some squished pieces of bread and a dull plastic knife, beginning by spreading layers of the smooth peanut butter across the two slices. Then, the golden bear farted and honey was drizzled from its noggin onto the sandwich. The lady nestled the two slices together, smushing peanut butter and honey in the middle, then set down the square in front of her and crossed her legs patiently.

It looked like a tasty sandwich. Bruno was confused as to why she wasn’t eating it. Another silence ensued.

“It’s for you, silly. Stop being so shy.” She pushed the sandwich farther away from her, towards him. The white bread looked soft and fluffy, the peanut butter-rich and creamy, the honey oozing out and glistening in the sunlight.
Bruno put one paw into the clearing. A leaf crinkled underneath and he cringed, waiting for her to run away. If she did, perhaps she would at least leave the sandwich.

But she remained. As did the sandwich. So Bruno took another step. And another. More leaves crinkled under paw as he went. Soon he was a leap away from the sandwich. He paused again.

She gestured. “Go ahead. I shouldn’t be eating all this junk myself anyway, bad for my blood sugar, you know?” Then she laughed, and it quickly turned into a ragged cough. Once she recovered, she managed a soft, “Not that it would matter anyway.”

Without the allure of the sandwich, Bruno might have retreated at the human’s cough. He had never heard the raw and throaty sound; it frightened him. But overpowering the fear were the scents. The nutty aroma of peanut butter mixed with the sweet smell of the golden bear’s honey pulled him in until he was looking down on the sandwich, only a couple of feet away from the stump where she sat.

Bruno looked up at her. She nodded, amusement lively in her eyes, and so he scooped up the small sandwich in one paw and ate it whole.

It melted in his mouth. Fluffy bread cushioning his tongue and letting the nutty-oily flavor of peanut butter mingle with the floral sweetness of the honey. When he swallowed, peanut butter and honey stuck to the roof of his mouth. He sprawled out belly-up on the forest floor with a grunt of satisfaction, looking up at the sunlight filtering through the trees while his tongue licked lazily at the remnants of wonder.

“That’s my favorite combo, you know? Peanut butter and honey. Always has been.” Her voice was closer now, Bruno lolled his head lazily to the right. She was belly-up on the ground now too, staring up at the same sparse-leafed forest ceiling.

She sat up and turned to sit facing Bruno, snow and dying orange leaves clung to her hair. “I’m Amy.”

Bruno stared blankly, still smiling at the lingering taste of the sandwich.

“Amy,” she said, jabbing two thumbs at herself. “Amy.”

Bruno rolled over too now and sat up. That gesture was familiar; it meant name. The only other human name he knew was Master from the zoo.

Bruno tried to say Amy, but it came out as a two-syllable grunt.

“Yup.” Amy laughed again. “Close enough.”

He was staring longingly at the big blue backpack. Amy seemed to notice and leaned over to once again withdraw the jar of peanut butter and the golden honey bear and the plastic wrap with two more slices of bread left. “Sure. Hungry today, are we?”

Bruno watched her hands as she worked, expertly wielding the white plastic knife in putting together the sandwich. She talked as she worked. “It’s nice, sharing my sandwiches. I wish I had shared more, you know? Wish I had given more to my friends and family. I guess I thought relationships were just
a waste of time, but they’re wired into us humans. We’re meant to be social creatures, you know? But I sacrificed relationships for success. And now look at me, not even having anyone to burden with my bad news.”

She paused to hand Bruno his sandwich. He took it appreciatively in his two great paws. “And, you know, it feels good to do what we’re wired to do. It’s a little late for me to learn that now, but,” she shrugged “better late than never.”

Bruno attempted to savor the sandwich this time, trying for three bites, but after the first bite, there was once again no sandwich and the lingering stickiness of peanut butter and honey-coated the roof of his mouth. Soon, he was looking at the big blue backpack again.

“Sorry.” Amy looked sad. It made Bruno sad. “No more bread. If I had the time I would come back with a truckload of sandwiches for you. But, you know, time isn’t really on my side. The doctors call it advanced heart disease with a heaping side of ’we dunno why it got this bad this fast.’”

Bruno nodded thoughtfully. She had made a lot of incomprehensible sounds, but he did understand one. Heart. Long ago, the zoo had a Hearts for Bruno day because apparently his mother had died. His mother hadn’t actually died—just an old bear named Buttons—but pity brings in revenue, so it was decided that Buttons was Bruno’s mother and Hearts for Bruno day was a way for zoo goers to show Bruno that he was supported. Bruno didn’t understand any of this, of course, but he had learned to associate heart with the outpouring of love and support from hundreds of people beyond his cage—warm smiles and waves and kind eyes. It was a nice, fuzzy feeling, but the cage had dulled it.

Now, when Amy said heart, he felt that same outpouring of love and support from her. Without a cage between them, Bruno padded over and licked her, smearing the rest of the honey and peanut butter across the side of her face and matting the tasty goop into her hair. Amy laughed, Bruno did too, his tongue lolling and panting.

Remembering the original gesture that Amy had used on him, Bruno beckoned for Amy to follow him. An idea was forming, he knew exactly the thing to dispel the sadness from her eyes and repay her for the two sandwiches.

So he took off bounding through the forest, heavy strides scattering leaves and squirrels and birds alike. The leafy rustle of his excited hustle shattering the quiet of midday. Filled with childlike vigor, Amy snatched and zipped her bag before taking off after him. But, after a minute of Bruno darting between trees with deceptive agility, he came to a halt. He looked back. Amy was leaning against a tree, eyes distant, swaying precariously. Bruno began to make his way back to her. She shook her head. Even through the oversized jacket, Bruno could see her whole body shaking. She made a horrible choking sound, then vomited violently at the base of the tree, muddying the crisp orange and white floor with a waterfall of chunky green vomit laced with blood. When she finished, she gave a wavering smile and a weak thumbs up. Bruno smiled back, giving his best attempt at a thumbs up, then he continued on. He had once thrown up after eating bad honey from a hive he had found. Vomiting had made him feel much better, but Amy still seemed shaken so he went slower now, padding alongside her and steering her in the right direction, letting her stroke his fur as they walked.
“Thanks,” she said, her voice quivering. “I used to run a lot, you know? I ran all the way up to my diagnosis. Then I had to start walking. It was still nice to get some fresh air, though.”

Soon, another sound was audible over the crunching of their footsteps and the intermediate songs of birds. The hum of moving water.

“Pretty,” Amy said as the trees became sparse and gave way to a gentle river. White comet trails parted around glistening rocks jutting up from the water. The cold air sharpened the river’s fishy smell.

Bruno led Amy to the river bank. He leaned forward, sniffing, scanning the river. A glimmer of silver flickered at the edge of his vision. In one swift motion, his paw slapped through the surface, frigid water shocking through his fur. In his paw, he felt the salmon squirm, then get free. Bruno barreled forward into the river with his maw agape, fully engulfing himself in the exhilarating cold. Muffled by the barrier of water between them, he heard Amy’s laugh as the icy splash sprinkled her.

Underwater, his jaws sunk into the salmon’s tender flesh. The fish’s oils and blood filling his mouth tasted fresh and raw. He surfaced with the dead salmon flopping from an ear-to-ear grin and paddled back towards Amy.

“Impressive,” she said, smiling back and rubbing his head, sending droplets of water in all directions. Then she laughed again. “Look at you, so happy just being a bear. Doing what bears do, you know? I wish I’d met you thirty years ago.”

Bruno dropped the salmon onto the wet grass and slid it towards her feet with a slippery squishing sound. She picked it up, wet blood staining the cuffs of her jacket. “What am I supposed to do with this, silly? You know I have to cook it right?”

Bruno sat on his haunches, patiently watching, not understanding. “Think fast—” Amy flipped the fish high into the air, red rain coming down in an arc as it reached its peak then came falling down towards Bruno. He leaned backward, catching the salmon in his mouth and falling onto his back with his feet in the air. He let his momentum carry him into a roll, tumbling away, and after one rotation he once again sat on his behind with his stubby legs out facing Amy. He had already swallowed the salmon.

Amy laughed and closed the gap between them, collapsing against his flank, facing the river. Bruno tried to say heart. It came out as a satisfied mhmm. Amy gave a comic “mhmm” back and—despite its soaked state—snuggled up to his fur. They sat for a while, watching the river’s leisurely flow. There were more glimmers of salmon in the water, but Bruno remained still. He was full now, in more ways than one.

“Time flies, you know?” Amy said, hours later. Bruno nodded. He didn’t understand what she had said, but he was thinking the same. The sun had dipped below the treeline, the world aglow in an orange filter. He yawned. She yawned too, then put her hand up to her mouth and coughed. There was glistening red blood on her palm when her hand came away. Bruno wondered why it hadn’t dried yet, their salmon dinner was hours ago.
“It’s cold,” Amy mumbled. “Really cold, you know?” She huddled against Bruno and his now dry fur, he could feel her body shivering. Sometimes, he shivered too. When it got cold and time for hibernation. Amy didn’t have fur of her own to keep her warm, maybe it was time for her to hibernate.

His cave was nearby. He grunted and got up. Amy slumped down and hit the ground with a thud and a poof of snow. Concerned, Bruno prodded her with a paw. She didn’t move. He licked her, warm, slobbery drool melting the snow away from her face. She stirred.

“I’m cold,” she said and began shivering again.

Bruno knelt and scooped her up gently. Standing on two legs, he paused a moment to get his balance, then began an awkward bipedal shamble down the river towards his cave.

Walking on two legs was a slow, swaying process. The sun was almost gone now, the orange world-glow had faded into a dark and dead grey one, and it had begun to snow. The first snowflake landed in Amy’s hair, Bruno craned his neck upwards. They were floating down in droves, a procession of miniature white angels—small by themselves but conglomerating into thick clumps of snow on the ground and in his fur. As he shambled along, Bruno hunched over to cover Amy as best he could. Soon, his brown fur had a soft coating of white over it.

His cave was up ahead. He entered, stooping low to avoid hitting his head, and gingerly placed Amy down in the back. Bruno shook the snow from his fur and lay down beside her, his back to the entrance of the cave, blocking the cold.

She slept in utter stillness. Bruno guessed that humans began their hibernations earlier in the year than bears. It didn’t matter though. He was tired and full. He could begin earlier than usual this year in order to wake with Amy in a few months. Bruno smiled at the thought. They would, together, catch the dawn of Spring.

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PUTRID AND THE SEEING DOOR, by Trevor Mastergeorge

There is pepper in Putrid’s eggs. Clearly, there had been some sort of miscommunication with nanny Horace, she thought.

“I don’t like pepper in my eggs,” she said, staring monotonously at her plate.

The breakfast sat there, cold and motionless, as it had done for the past fifteen minutes. She half expected the eggs to form into a face and laugh at her for thinking pepper is spicy. To her right was her father’s seat, occupied forevermore by the breakfast ruining nanny: “Nanny Horace,” or more formally “Misses Horace.”

Nanny Horace wasn’t tall and would probably be shorter than Putrid in a couple years, although one could hardly tell while she was sitting down. Every time Putrid had seen her, she wore a dress with either polka dots or tiny dog faces patterned across the soft fabric. The nanny’s own face was stout, much akin to an almond, and about the same tone. Its shape was hardly average, with an oddly pointed chin. Her eyes were always busy, looking about on her phone, to the windows, to the table. She always wore a bandana to hold her hair, but it seemed to be rather full and hardly wanting to contain itself in the cloth. Putrid glanced under the edges of her eyelids at the nanny, begging for a sour reaction.

“You saw me make them,” Misses Horace groaned into her phone screen. She had been rolling her thumb along the screen for the entirety of breakfast. It was quite possible she had hardly anything left to look at. In her right hand she held a fork but had forgotten to make herself a plate. All Putrid had to do was wait for her mother to get home, and this nightmare could end.

A defeated Putrid sighed and pulled her knees to her chest. She poked at the eggs for 62 seconds, poking once a second. When the scramble failed to entertain her she stood on the chair and jumped off, being sure to create the loudest stomp possible. The old hardwood floors creaked respectfully, assuring her they would not give way to the basement below. Putrid checked over her shoulder to make sure she had startled Nanny Horace and was mortified to find her carrying the plates to the sink, not paying any mind to Putrid’s ruckus. Pouting her way out of the kitchen, she found herself in the living room.

Of the three floors, the middle was her least favorite. The ground floor of the house was pepper on eggs. The living room, kitchen, and guest room offered no attractions, only dull social spaces. Being
social was not very high on Putrid’s to-do list, so the ground floor was avoided at all cost. Today the living room was flooded with morning light from the floor-to-ceiling windows, much to her discontent. On the other side of the window was the front yard, and beyond that, the street where Nanny Horace’s yellow sedan was parked. Nanny Horace had likely opened the old curtains and released their daily dust cloud into the room, allowing the light’s exact angle to make itself known. Putrid noticed the dust in the light of the window looked peculiarly active today, dancing with a swiftness resembling her mother rushing to leave for work. And yet, the dust adventures past the beam of light were mysterious.

Putrid decided to spend some amount of time tracing the dust around the room: onto the mantle, under the chairs, into the empty cups on the coffee table, between the pieces on the chessboard, behind the ed case, to the basement door. When she arrived at the basement door, the specks of dust seemed to flow and filter themselves invisibly between the door gaps. Putrid flung the door open, hoping to catch someone red-handed, holding a vacuum up to the cracks of the door. The stairway to the basement was usually one of her favorite bits of the house. It was old: creaky, cobwebby, pull-string-light-switch old. The dust disappeared into the musty darkness, just as the light did. The dark of the basement seemed to suck up all of the light from the living room into it, hungry to be ensconced in light as the windowed rooms were. She closed the door, sending the dust back about the room to find new nooks and crannies to fill.

Satisfied, Putrid sat in the biggest chair in the living room. It was quite dirty from her shoes, the many times she had pulled her knees to her chest in it had been punishing for the poor, old seat. The armchair was red with gold trim and feet-shaped legs. It had toes and nails that would dig into the wood if she leaned forward too far. A year ago she would sit and hold on while the chair ran about the house, out the door to the backyard, and over the hills. It was considerably more active when her father used to sit with his legs wide, leaving space for her in the middle. The chair now laid dormant, waiting for a new rider to take up the helm. Putrid didn’t have the guts, so she pulled her knees to her chest, put her head into the gap between them, and cried.

A hand soon landed on her head, rubbing her scalp. The hand was muttering, “I know, I know.” but Putrid knew better, a hand couldn’t feel what she felt. No hand on earth could know what it was like. She lifted her head a tad, puffy-eyed and runny-nosed, to see Nanny Horace.

“I was going to, uhm, go sit outside and smoke. Do you want to come out, dear?” she smiled like she was holding a crying child in her arms. “Outside I mean, but you can’t sit with me until I finish my cigarette. Maybe we can play a game, after, I mean.”

The thought was so nice that Putrid forced a weak smile. “Okay,” she mumbled past her knees. she closed her eyes for a moment as Nanny Horace left the room; probably to get her cigarettes.

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Outside is very much different than inside, but not exactly better. Inside has things Putrid likes: coloring books, stuffed animals, blankets, dad’s chair, the basement, and a bathroom. Outside has some nice things too, like the sky, bugs, the big tree in the backyard, birds, and mom’s garden. If her mom wasn’t always at work, the garden would probably look much better. The squash in the garden
are great for finding bugs, as they have long caved in from rot, and attracted lots of critters hungry for a sweet treat. Putrid tumbles off the porch and makes her way to the garden, eager to see what kinds of crawlies had set up shop.

The market is bustling today, with lots of ants, flies, and worms coming to see what the garden has to offer. The bugs made their way between each little shop, different veggies at everyone. They barter and bustle, running along the dry vines and through the soil, wet with dew. Putrid found them disgusting but loved how they moved. They never sat still, just like her. If she had more legs, maybe she would hustle and bustle just as they did. Grabbing a stick, Putrid began to direct the ants past the squash and into conflict with the flies. The smell of cigarette smoke and a glass shattering distracted her, and the stick dropped into the garden, quickly overcome by bugs in a hurry to move away from the conflict Putrid had generated.

Turning towards the porch, Putrid saw what had made her drop the stick. Nanny Horace was at the sliding door, a broken cup at her feet, and a cigarette in her mouth. She was completely entranced by something on the other side of the sliding door.

“Misses Horace?” Putrid called out while moving towards the porch.

The nanny didn’t answer, and as if being puppeted, opened the sliding doors. She stood for a moment, as Putrid made her way up the steps to the landing. When Nanny Horace turned around to face Putrid, it made her hairs stand on end. The nanny was vacant and stared like two cameras into Putrid’s soul.

“Time to go inside,” Nanny Horace’s tone was one Putrid had only heard when being scolded by her mother: “Putrid.” She had never called Putrid by her name before.

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Putrid sat in her room, as Nanny Horace had told her to. She hardly ever did what an adult said, but Nanny Horace creeped her out. The digital clock, crowded between toys on her nightstand was blinking, needing to be reset. The only way to know when her mother would be home was to wait for night time. Putrid grabbed her stuffed animals from her overflowing closet and piled them onto the bed. After the mountain was complete, she tunneled her way under it and began to pick at her nails. It was entrancing, and Putrid lost track of time.

When she had nearly fallen asleep, a door slammed downstairs. Putrid shot her head up through the top of the stuffed animal pile and stared scrutinously at her door, which was completely covered in motivational posters that her dad had gotten her, featuring tag lines such as: “You can do it,” and “Hang in there!” She fixed her eyes on the door handle, expecting something to burst through any moment, but the house was silent. Putrid grabbed the nearest animal’s paw, a lion, and slid out of bed, doing her best impression of a snake on the hunt. After crawling to the door, she put her ear against it and tried to breathe as quiet as possible. She heard Nanny Horace mumbling in the downstairs hallway, but couldn’t make out what she was saying.

Her door creaked open with the hesitation that came naturally with an old home. Putrid pushed the door from the lowest point and pressed her nose against the wood to see as far past the crack as she could. Putrid glanced down the hallway and to the stairs, which curved into the entrance of the
house. There was no sight of the mumbling nanny and no more sound either. The door closed, and Putrid sat criss-cross behind it. She squeezed the stuffed paw of her toy and pulled it to her chest. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door enough to fit through and crouched down the hallway. The house was empty, or at least appeared to be. Putrid had arrived at the bottom of the stairs and now faced the entrance of the house. Only one thing about the hallway was out of place, making no effort at subtlety. The door to the basement swung loosely back and forth on its bronze hinges, creaking as it reached the peak of its swing. Light from the living room windows had begun to wane, and the path of the morning dust was no longer visible, but the pull of the basement could still be felt. Putrid felt it in her toes, the urge to move toward the door. Putrid stepped into the hallway and made her way to the door.

The creak of the hallway’s cold wood announced her presence long before she arrived at the cusp of the basement, but Putrid still peeked around the corner of the doorframe. Her eyelids fluttered as she tried to understand the sight past the door. The basement was no more, in its place a stairwell leading to a clearing in a lush forest had appeared. Putrid grabbed the door, carefully closing it, turning the handle so as to not make even a click as it closed. She then quickly opened it, greeted again by the clearing to her surprise. She noticed something new, however, as she examined the clearing again. Deeper into the grass rested a regal, red armchair which was grazing as if it were an animal. Putrid stepped forward to get a better look, straining her eyes to gather any tiny detail of the chair. As soon as her foot landed on the step, the door bumped her and closed itself, sending Putrid tumbling down the stairway and landing her softly in the lanky grass.

Putrid rubbed her hair clean of grass and sat up, looking back up the stairway to see that the door was still there. And it was, only the door and staircase were suspended in the air. She stood and moved towards the stairs, just as the lock clicked shut. She instead turned towards the clearing to get a better look at the armchair and saw two legs dangling at its cusp. The armchair was the same as the one from her living room but was missing the stains from years of use. Putrid stood up shakily and made her way to the chair, the ankles waded through the grass like water, trying to pull her beneath the surface. As she neared the chair, the odd scene set before her came into view. In front of the chair was an unfamiliar table sporting an all too familiar chessboard atop it. Opposite the red chair was a small stool her mother used to fold the laundry that typically sat abandoned in the basement. As Putrid rounded the armchair, Nanny Horace’s empty eyes greeted her once again. She was sitting in the chair exactly how her father used to, with legs crossed and her hands on her knees, left on top of the right.

Putrid analyzed her for some time, but the nanny never acknowledged her. After a short time, Putrid felt her strength waning and was desperate to sit down. She glanced towards the small stool and couldn’t help herself. Once Putrid had taken a seat, Nanny Horace startled her.

“How about one last game, Putrid?” Nanny Horace smiled a smile that felt as empty as the clearing. In that smile was nothing, no Nanny Horace and certainly no Putrid.

The last time Putrid had played chess was against her father, who had always made up his own rules, so Putrid never learned how to play. Although he had created rules as the game went on, he hardly ever won. Putrid had never thought anything of it until she tried out for the chess club at school.
They hadn’t taken too kindly to Putrid’s insistence that the horse needed time to graze between moves.

Putrid stared at the chessboard, afraid the nanny would still be smiling. “Okay Misses Horace,” she said carefully, as if saying something wrong would get her scolded.

At the mention of her name Nanny Horace gazed down at her hands, looking at them as if she had forgotten whose they were. After a moment she moved a pawn three spaces. Putrid’s father had almost always started with the same move. The game played out exactly as one from her childhood, going on for hours, with hardly anything truly happening on the board. Every couple moves Putrid would laugh, overcome with the silliness of how the characters on the board acted. The knights would trip on their armor, the horses would beg for apples, and the queen would fight with the king over undercooked turkey. By the end of the game, Putrid had grown incredibly tired and had to stop herself from falling back in the chair.

“Come here, Putrid,” Nanny Horace said deeply, her voice no longer her own, and beckoned Putrid towards the armchair.

Putrid stood groggily, rubbing her eyes, and made her way slowly to the old chair, although she was suspicious of the nanny. Putrid sat between Nanny Horace’s legs and pulled her knees up to her chest. She never told the nanny her name, but in the chair, finally being held, she didn’t care. She felt tears pool at the corners of her eyes and sat back as Nanny Horace cradled her to sleep.

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When Putrid woke up the living room was dark, only the light from the kitchen kept the details of the room visible. Her back was sore, and something poked her in the spine. She grabbed around behind her and pulled out the stuffed lion she had brought from her room. As she looked into the lion’s eyes, the front door clicked, and her mother opened it. Putrid ran to her mother and hugged her like she had before her father died. Immediately she began to rant fanatically about her day and all of the crazy things that Nanny Horace had done.

When Putrid had finished her mother sighed, “We don’t have a nanny,” she gazed wearily at Putrid and tousled her hair. “One day you’ll have to stop playing pretend, Penelope,” her mother said as she stepped inside. Behind her, beyond the front yard, on the other side of the road, a yellow sedan drove away.

Trevor Mastergeorge is an English major who moved from Harrisburg to main campus in his junior year. He enjoys music, writing, and cooking in his free time. When he is not doing any of those things, Trevor can be found staring off into space or trying on clothes. He often uses poetry to express how it feels living with rather severe ADHD as a way to ground himself.
You wake up sputtering, choking on the last remnants of a nightmare. The voices fade to a faint buzzing in your ears. The phantoms burn away by the light of day, but the terror lingers—hot and wet and metallic.

You make yourself gulp down the air slow like hot soup—just like the doctors taught you. Only it sinks right through you, leaving you starved and wanting. Tongue probes at the scaling skin of your upper lip—one of many bad habits you can’t seem to kick—only to come back wet with blood. You bite down on the spongy flesh as if you can squeeze out the taste; you cannot. Brain soda pop fizzles.

   Touch.

   Touch.

   Touch.

There’s more of it, so much more of it. Does it ever end? The blood is draped on your hands and shirt like scraps of ribbon—horribly beautiful.

You don’t dare seek out the rest of it. You can’t bear to touch the truth with your eyes and cement your dread over its corpse. As long as you don’t move, as long as you stay in your room, there’s still a chance that the owner of this blood is still alive.

You aren’t surprised you can’t remember whatever it is you’ve done this time. Your mind had spotted before, left you with words unraveled, and pictures half-drawn, and nothing and no one to help you put back what your brain had stolen. Weren’t sure why your head hid things from your awake now—why it was selective. The answer didn’t matter; you’d never get the memories back anyway.

But this wasn’t like August. There were no bandages on your wrists to lock the life in. No nurses there to tell you they’d keep you safe. This time you weren’t the one in danger. This time you were the bad thing.

Your thoughts had once again run away with themselves. But they hadn’t gone after you this time.
The thing is, you hadn’t wanted to do it in ages. Well, you’d never wanted anything, save for the demon aches to be erased, to have them never licked you with their chaos in the first place. But buried deep beneath your flowerbed of yesterdays and pills, Tartarus, weak as it is, always pulsed in rhythm with your heart.

It started before you began calling yourself harmless, and sometime after you’d learned to keep quiet about your desires. Yours weren’t the digestible kind; yours were supposed to taste foul in your mouth. It was a want the others curse at, stab, burn, electrocute, paint spiraled horns on only to rip them off—cracked and splintered.

The problem hadn’t been accepting the knowledge that your impulses were wrong; you’d change them if you could.

The problem was the bleach.

Holy, absolute, death machine chemical that promised clean. When you first began to itch, you’d tried everything. But the thing that had gotten your hopes up the most was the bleach. You’d seen an advert for it as a child and had hoped it’d be the thing to purify you. But no matter how hard you scrubbed your skin with it, the stain remained, burned itself below your flesh, sunk its teeth into your bones, rotted its way into your muscles, and plucked the strings there.

There’s no getting rid of it; it will always be a part of you.

Sometimes your hands twitched when a stranger’s hair was short enough to expose the soft skin that kissed their scalp. More recently they clenched when the little girl had wandered too close to the train’s tracks. You could practically hear the crack, crunch, silence.

You’d clawed your palms bloody that day.

You tried to tell yourself they were just thoughts, pictures and words, a scary story that you prayed to at night, though surely no god was listening. You weren’t one of his children. How could you be with rot lodged in your teeth and clumped beneath your fingernails? Still, when they were just thoughts you could pretend you weren’t a monster.

There would be no pretending this away.

What are you gonna do? You’re a coward, so that counts out suicide—honesty, too. You can’t run away from what you’ve done, but you can’t stay either.

Fuck!

As reality crouches like a crow on your shoulders, you can’t bring yourself to wilt beneath its weight. All you can do is stare at your hands and pretend they’re stained from the red wine you don’t drink.

Big bang boom.

Door slams open loud as a gunshot. Slaps you awake. Except you’re already awake, but now you can feel it. And it hurts.

“Jesus, what the hell happened to you?”
You choke on your scream before it can give you away, a rush of air drowning out any remaining thoughts, until all you see is her gray. Your mother is duller than you remember. Or maybe she’d always looked that way—small, thin, and brittle. Somehow, she appears less alive than what you’d pictured her rotting carcass to look like. The thought comes out easier than it should.

“I- I didn’t- ” Your voice is a deflated balloon.

“Did you have a nosebleed?” She sets a tray of pancakes and bacon on the desk beside your door. The smell of meat wafts over to you. You try to make yourself gag. It does not work.

“I told you to start using the humidifier Grandma got you. The air is far too dry this time of year.”

“You’re-”

“Go take a shower,” she cuts you off. “And soak those clothes in cold water. Otherwise, the stains will never come out.” She shuts the door before you can say anything. As soon as she leaves, the quiet lingers, as if she were never there, air stiff as a tomb’s.

Alive. They are all alive.

The relief is static, so visceral it’s almost uncomfortable. Still, you ride the wave all the way home because your family is alive—safe and sound. You cling to that thought like a bucking bull, resist the real reason you can now breathe easy.

But as you collect your breaths, the truth leaks through your feeble thought-walls, slow at first, like trickling water, but steadily builds until you’re gagging on thought-vomit.

And it’s good to admit that the thought of the world seeing you as the monster you are had scared you shitless, that your family being alive meant there would be no white walls to greet you the next time you wake, no Nurse Ratcheds parading around their sterile smiles—the ones they use to mask their fear of you—no mind numbers or body straps or guilt tumors rotting you from the inside out.

There would be none of that because you are not a bad thing, haven’t hurt anyone save yourself, haven’t caved in to the poison thoughts, maybe never would—

A fresh drop of blood seeps into your mouth; it’s thick and bitter. Despite yourself, you do your best to remember the taste.

Kayla is a graduating senior. She is majoring in English and minoring in Classical and Ancient Mediterranean Studies. Next year she hopes to obtain a job publishing young adult fiction. In her free time, she enjoys reading and writing Beatnik poetry, working on her zine First Thought Best Thought, and making a fool of herself while doing yoga.
NIGHT FALLS, by Kiran Pandey

In the silence, Steve watched the ocean. All around him the salt breeze beat coolly, draped his cheeks like curtains, and prickled his skin with a sensation almost like touch. His eyes were fixed into the middle point of the darkness, upon the thick blue crease where sky met sea.

It was one of those long July evenings that seemed to cling onto the sun, holding fast to the ephemeral light as if a bulwark against the dark. Those gleams reflected in Steve’s slick black tuxedo and similarly slicked back hair, off his loosened silk bow tie which hung limply about his neck. Dizzied in the stillness, he gripped the coarse rail of the balcony with one tremulous hand, as if it were the stern of a ship. Between the first two fingers of the other dangled a half-smoked joint.

Beneath him, the waves crashed and soared. Steve took a deep sodium inhale and could detect something of childhood within it: the ossified shouts of summer vacation, the splintering of cedar wood and the kneading of sand between your toes. The old memories kept him calm, fixed his footing to the earth. There was no boardwalk here, but Steve could almost hear the delirious yells from the roller coasters up on the northern end, and almost taste the buttery staleness of the popcorn.

He raised the joint, took a long hit, and let the smoke escape his lips of its own accord. It drifted up, up, up, Steve’s eyes following until it could no longer be seen. He squinted. Above him was a white pinprick of light surrounded by a dim halo, and he wasn’t sure if it was a star or not. They weren’t so visible out here, and besides, he couldn’t see nearly as well with his contacts in. Perhaps there was one, or it could have just been an airplane.

The sliding door opened behind him, and concurrent with the noise Steve dropped his hand in a practiced recoil so that the joint was hidden behind one of the slats. Half-hunched, he turned to see Sarah joining him outside, her soft periwinkle dress fluttering about her heels.

“Steve-O,” said Sarah. She walked up beside him—more like floated, he decided, ethereal in the breeze—and placed her hands over the rail so that her left arm was just inches from his right. In the last light of the day, her brown eyes and brown hair, usually in curls but straightened for the ceremony, accrued a shade that was closer to gold. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” said Steve. “Yeah, I’m all right. Just getting some air, you know.”

“Is it me you’re trying to convince there, champ, or yourself?”

“What, I am!” he said, and Sarah gave him a wry smile. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Gee, why wouldn’t you be? Why wouldn’t you if all of a sudden you went all pale and ran out in the middle of my speech—”
The wind wafted, and Sarah’s nose wrinkled. It was the same face she made when she laughed, her nose all scrunched up and snorting out these delicate little wheezes. Steve thought it was the cutest thing; he had thought so ever since sophomore year of college when he had told her that joke about the bartender and the blind man, and he couldn’t help but smile.

Sarah was not smiling.

“Come on, Steve. Are you serious with me right now?”

“What?”

“You know what, don’t even fuck with me,” she said. “Are you fucking high right now?”

Behind the irritation, there was such concern in her eyes. Steve looked up again, and in the sky above he saw what looked to be the exact same dot of light as before. So there must be a star, at least one. Or another airplane. How many planes passed by in one night?

“Steve, I’m talking to you, look at me!” said Sarah. “I am not entertaining this right now, look at me when I’m talking to you!”

He turned back to Sarah, spoke with hesitation. “Just a little bit, okay, and it’s not like I was planning on doing it anyway—”

“Steve, for Chrissake, it’s Christa’s wedding—”

“I know that, Sarah! I know it’s fucking Christa’s wedding, what—you think I got lost out here and all of a sudden forgot where I was—”

“Don’t you snap at me!” said Sarah. “Don’t you do that! You know how her family is, her mom’ll lose her shit if she comes out here and gets a whiff—”

“I’m sorry—I—I am. I’m sorry.”

Sarah sighed, folded her arms on the rail. Soft gusts whispered between them in the silence.

“But seriously, dude,” Sarah finally said, “what is up with you?”

Again Steve looked away, heaved another deep breath, and gripped the rail almost imperceptibly tighter. In his other hand, between thumb and forefinger, he rolled the cylindrical lump of what remained of the joint. Now the light was even fainter, the sun all but gone, only visible in the pale flecks cast upon the undulation of the water.

“Steve?”

“I saw them again.”

Sarah’s eyes widened, like little pools of moon they reflected her terror and recognition, and Steve rued the words as soon as he heard them on the air. Sarah moved her mouth to speak, her jaw moving like a puppet, but no sound issued.

“I knew you wouldn’t like it,” said Steve. “I’m sorry, I really—I didn’t want to say anything. Really I didn’t.”
“When did you—”

“Now. Here. Right inside.”

Sarah took a deep breath. “Steve. I was just in there, and there is nothing—I didn’t see a thing and no one else did—”

“Sarah, I swear to Christ, I know that! No shit no one else saw them, otherwise the whole reception would be going nuts—”

“Steve, please—”

“No one else can see them. I don’t know why. It’s just me.” He hesitated again. “One of them was wearing Big’s face.”

“Steve, Jesus Christ—”

“Listen, you asked, okay, I didn’t want to say it—”

“Did you stop going to therapy again?”

“That’s beside the point—”

“Beside the point? That’s exactly the fucking point! You—you need to deal with this, dude, you can’t keep unloading this on me every time you have a nervous fucking breakdown—”

“Jesus, Sarah, is that what you think this is?” As he yelled, Steve became acutely aware of the high in his throat and his nose; his eyes suddenly blazed with smoke. “What exactly do you think happened that night?”

She turned away from him, arms crossed, staring into the sea, or maybe at nothing in particular. “I’m not about to do this—”

“Sarah, you know! I know that you know! Something happened, something not right—how did Big die that night?”

“This is not—we are at Christa’s wedding—”

“How did Big die?”

Sarah turned back to him. Tears rimmed her eyes; her mascara had begun to splotch and run. “You know how he died,” she said, “and you’re a fucking asshole for making me say it. He fell. He went up to the top floor, went out on that fixture where the molding had rotted and all of a sudden it collapsed beneath him, and he fell three stories and died. Don’t you remember that?”

“Of course I remember that,” said Steve. “But explain to me this. Why do I also remember those, those shadow things—ripping him the fuck apart? Don’t you remember that? Jesus, those screams, Sarah—how could you forget those screams? The way he pleaded—he was still alive in that basement, I know because I watched it happen! How could he still have been alive if he had fallen before and died?”

Sarah said nothing, only turned back away. Steve sighed and turned again to the sky.
There it was again, the same star-plane speckle. A dot, like a signal, flickering from above.

He looked back to Sarah. “Sarah—I’m sorry, Sarah, I’m sorry.”

Again, she said nothing; she did not even look at Steve. Deepest blue filled the horizon, all traces of orange had bled from the sky. From inside the hotel seeped out music and cheers of celebration.

Steve felt the house still around him. If he reached out, just far enough, he knew his hand would meet splintered wood, rotted drywall, the gazing amorphous faces and their shriveled gray limbs like the spokes of a spindle. One memory attested that it had been six years since the weekend in the house; another crooned that no time had elapsed at all.

Despite what Sarah and the others said, he remembered. He remembered running away, leaping into the truck and accelerating out of those woods as fast as it would let him. He remembered the stillness that followed on that delicate drive, the tears and the phone calls in the ensuing weeks, the sense that nothing would ever be the same, and nothing ever was. He remembered all these things, just as he remembered every day of his life, and in between and around those recollections were always the dark truncated slivers of night, the suffocations of the shadow people, reminding him that he was still there, that he could never escape, like sweat-slickened feet pushing out against bedsheets.

On the balcony, it had become fully dark. Waves crashed unseen, their salt tingle in the air.

Steve looked at Sarah where she stood, barely a silhouette, runnels of light and music spilling out from the hotel. Her dress was a dark cloak, her hair the streams and puddles of ink. How could she be standing there next to him, when he knew she was dying in the room next to his?

“Sarah?”

“Yeah, Steve?”

“What if none of this is real?”

Her head turned, and Steve thought she might have smiled. “This isn’t college anymore, champ, you don’t get to keep using those fake deep lines on me.”

“I’m being serious.”

A sigh, far-off. “I know. I know.”

Inside the hotel, the music changed. It was an older tune, top of the charts in their college days, a strain that Steve had not heard in years. It stirred in him a familiar youthful pull, some inebriate haze that at the time had been nothing but air. He took a step to Sarah and held out a hand to hers.

“May I have this?”

“Steve…”

“Just a dance, Sarah. One dance. All I’m asking is for one dance.”

“All right.” She stepped forward. “One dance.”
Illumined by the light that drifted from the hotel, Sarah and Steve held each other in the endless night. The music swayed, and so did they. Steve felt her head slowly come to rest on his chest, and eventually the music no longer reached his ears, he could hear nothing but the little whistle from her nose as she breathed out and in. He knew he could not be here, that this could not be real. Even now were the shadow people rending him apart, forcing his lips in the shape of ceaseless scream. Steve knew all this, but did not know why, so he could only hold Sarah close to him, could only dance as long as their song still played, could only hope to absent its sound and its signal that it had not yet ended.
ART

MISTER SHOSTAKOVICH, by Julius McBride
SMALL WORLD, by Julius McBride
JOVIAN, by Julius McBride

Julius “Jules” McBride is a third-year student at University Park Campus and bails from Greensburg, P.A. An aspiring researcher, his major is physics and he works as a Guided Study Group leader for Physics 211. He has little formal training in the visual arts, but it was one of his favorite classes in high school and drawing remains a hobby of his. His favorite medium is charcoal.
SLOW DAY, by Kangian He
Kangian He is a digital art major who plans to graduate in 2022. His comics can be found on facebook.com/Panderycomics or on his Instagram @private_pandery.
PORTRAIT STUDY, by Becca Conrad
DOBERMAN, by Becca Conrad
Rebecca is an illustration artist whose work focuses on stylized portraiture. Her subject matter consists primarily of young women and animals that she captures delicately with a variety of mediums but most often uses watercolor. Rebecca graduated from Penn State University with a degree in Communications and minor in Visual Arts.

Find more of her work on Instagram: @beccaleighart
FRIDGE SHROOM, by Bee Barkley

TOFU BRAIN SQUISH, by Bee Barkley
JELLYFISH GLOOP, by Bee Barkley
LITTLE GUYS GREEN, by Bee Barkley
LITTLE GUYS BLUE, by Bee Barkley
SAD SNAIL, by Bee Barkley

Bee Barkley is a graduate of the Penn State School of Music, class of 2019. They live in western PA with their partner and two bunnies, Fergie and Hamlet. Bee spends their time hiking and caring for their plants. Much of their art is inspired by their love of the natural world and experiences navigating the world as a queer/trans individual. You can find their art at @dessindoods on Instagram!
DELI, by Muhammad Luqman Wahi-Anwar
finally, a smoke break

Oh, also,
You're on lifting duty

Why is it so dark?
Saves money
What the was that!?  
Gian + Octopus

Yeah, he makes the Sushi for us, cool guy.

What, he work here?

man, I do NOT get paid enough for this.

Keep it movin'!

Just a second. Besides, why the rush?

0.0.6

Can I at least get a weapon

Yeah, just don't hurt yourself

Can I at least get a weapon

Yeah, just don't hurt yourself

Just a second. Besides, why the rush?

Keep it movin'!

man, I do NOT get paid enough for this.

What the was that!?  
Gian + Octopus

What, he work here?

Just a second. Besides, why the rush?

Can I at least get a weapon

Yeah, just don't hurt yourself

Can I at least get a weapon

Yeah, just don't hurt yourself
“Deli” is a short, experimental comic that ties together my day job with the myths and urban legends that come with part time jobs. I wanted to explore light values and try out radical panel layouts and transitions.

--M. Luqman Wahi-Anwar

M. Luqman Wahi-Anwar is a 2020 Graduate of the Penn State College of IST who dabbles in comics assembled on paper with traditional media.
NA’ILI’ILI HAELE, by Isabella Luciani
WATERFALL, by Isabella Luciani
MARS, by Isabella Luciani

Isabella Luciani is a junior English and Psychology double major. She has been reading and writing stories for as long as she can remember. She’s also on the Fiction and Copy-Editing Committees of Kalliope, Klio’s sister magazine. She is a member of the V’olé dance organization and has been dancing for seventeen years. In addition to writing fiction stories, Isabella also enjoys writing and playing music on her piano and guitar. She loves hiking, traveling, spending time outside, and shooting archery. In the coming years, Isabella hopes to write and publish her first novel.
PLANT PRESENTS “LUNCH BREAK,” by Graham Millar
Um... should we check that out or not?

Sigh.

Fine.

BLAPPA LORCH!

The line's out of control!

Hiss.
Graham Millar is an English Major at Penn State and an aspiring cartoonist. Some would say that he draws comics in his free time, but Graham doesn’t consider that his free time—it’s his vocation. He completed his first mini-comic, ‘Mozzarella; Rumble in the Jungle’ last February. Graham has a vested interest in professional publishing. Graham believes a book can function as an art object, and not just a nice story. Fortunately, Graham also has an appreciation for arts that aren’t printed on pulp-paper.
Main Street in Greensburg, PA bustled with as much life a small suburb could manage. Hondas and minivans passed as I walked down the cracking sidewalk to the bright green front of The White Rabbit, where a glass-paneled green door deposited me in a coffee shop of college hipsters and old people sipping tea with their friends. In the back corner, beyond the people and display of freshly baked pastries, sat Anna Mowery, fishnets and chunky black boots crossed over a plush green couch. She sipped on a bright red mug of cappuccino or perhaps a latte, lifting it up with black-tipped fingers past the newly shortened ends of hair she had hacked away in her home bathroom. This was a place she frequented, alone or with her small circle of friends. At nineteen, a coffee shop was an ideal hangout for doing homework or chatting while functioning solely because of obscene amounts of caffeine. Charmingly mismatched picture frames, gilded doorknobs, and the occasional key scattered themselves lovingly across the pale yellow walls of the café, reflections of Anna’s own haphazardly methodical ways of functioning. I understood why this was a place she felt at home; its affinity for quirky chaos matched hers.

“I have a skull like that at home,” she remarked, gesturing to one of the frames housing a skull covered in swirling black flowers. “His name’s Orpheus.” She then looked at me with carefully charcoal-lined eyes, a glint of amusement shining in their green-ness. “Did you know I took a heart from my bio lab? He lives next to Orpheus on my bookshelf. I call him Henry.”

I’d always heard that people lose touch as time goes on. I didn’t think it would happen to us, but, when she transferred schools sophomore year of high school, it did. That’s not to say we didn’t try to stay in contact—we did try—but my confusion when she posted a photo on Instagram junior year of herself in a green-striped costume with a high ruffled collar holding a pig’s heart proved that maybe we weren’t in as close of contact as I thought. Especially when I assumed she was still wearing the light blue peasant blouse her mom bought her from Bon-Ton with ill-fitting flared jeans and still crying at the death of butterflies as she did in freshman year. It was, at that point, a few months before I would have my own big personality change at the end of junior year, so I couldn’t yet fathom how someone could change so much. I get it now.

The heart is preserved in a jar on Anna’s bookshelf. Henry. A result of declining mental health and teenage boredom. Where once sat a rotund pink pig figurine was a jar of bio-ethanol encasing the heart of a real pig.

It was sixth period when she took Henry.
She shuffled past the wooden door into her school’s token biology lab a minute or two before class started. Tinges of formaldehyde seared into her nose and permeated the entirety of the room: dissection day. Following the wall lined with towering glass-encased shelves of bones, jars of preserved specimens, and microscopes, Anna made her way to her assigned station at lab table number eight and grabbed a thick rubber-coated apron from the table’s drawer. Her fingers shook slightly as she tried to tie the strings of the apron behind her. Dingy cord stumbled around antsy hands into some semblance of a bow. Her mental health had gotten worse since deciding to leave her previous high school at the end of freshman year—restlessness and impulsivity were side effects of undiagnosed ADHD, made greater by undiagnosed depression’s plea for self-destruction.

On the matte black lab table were four sets of dissection kits and specimen trays atop copious layers of old newspapers. Anna quickly got to work removing the scalpel from her station and began to stab at the strange black putty-like substance in the bottom of her specimen tray. The weird putty stuff in the bottom made it easier to cut things on, she figured. She wasn’t sure. All she knew was that it was fun to poke holes in.

“Don’t touch the hearts until I tell you to,” Anna’s teacher warned her table while he reached into the white plastic bucket he was carrying with a purple gloved hand, plopping a foul-smelling heart onto each of the four empty specimen trays. “And stop stabbing your tray.”

Across the table from her, Anna’s station mates mumbled something to each other about the hearts looking browner than expected. Anna put her scalpel down and turned to the empty seat to her left, assuming her classmate wasn’t going to show up for class that day. She eyed up the unclaimed heart. It called to her from its loneliness, begging her to give it a home and end its solitude. She wasn’t sure why, but she desperately wanted to.

Lab began.

The heart sat.

Lab ended.

The heart sat.

Anna cleaned up her station.

Her tablemates left.

Anna and the heart sat.

Quickly glancing away from the heart to confirm that her lab teacher was turned toward the sinks at the opposite end of the lab and paying her no attention, Anna stacked some of the sheets of newspaper that were on the table, grabbed the heart, and swaddled it in crumpled stories. She shoved it in her backpack and left, shuffling out past the wooden door and into the hall.

“It was an oddly easy feat to get away with,” she told me. “I just kind of left with it, you know? No questions, nothing.” She looked down at the empty red mug she cupped in her hands, eyebrows upturned in a way that said ‘I amuse myself, and that’s enough for me.’ “Luckily Amazon Prime is a thing
so I ordered some bio-ethanol fuel stuff, ‘cause Google said it would preserve it. I got it two days later and *huzzah! I had a heart son in a jar and named him Henry.*”

Henry ended up making the trek four hours away with Anna from her Greensburg home to Catholic University in Washington D.C., against her parents’ urges for her to not “be weird” and take a heart to college. She herself went there against her own agnosticism. Catholic University had connections with a really great study abroad program at Oxford University in England, which was decidedly far more important to her than enjoying college life in America. Henry sat sloshing in her suitcase that looked like it was sewn entirely from 1920s floral curtains, wrapped in plastic Giant Eagle bags in case of spills.

He sat, lonely, on her bookshelf when she flew to Oxford. Then when she flew to a study abroad program in Ireland. And when she held back tears on the flight back to America when the program was forced to end early due to the Coronavirus, stress deteriorating her soul.

“I was so, so sad. I was proud of myself for not crying on the plane, though,” she remarked with subtle bitterness. “I just got back in last Sunday; I was supposed to be there for the rest of the semester.”

Being at home had proved to be devastating for her. Restlessness turned to anxiety turned to depressive spirals turned to routinely crying herself to sleep. She became shut in her bedroom, trapped by the fear of parental confrontation and learned helplessness. Her reprieve came in the form of her sister, Sarah, a spunky high school sophomore who used her as a free chauffeur service. Driving her around was a little bit of freedom in a house and town that did everything they could to take her autonomy away from her.

During the days she now spends inside her bedroom rather than on the shores of Galway, I learned that she looks to Henry as a reminder of her spontaneity and freedom. That she has some form of control, even when it feels like she doesn’t. She took a heart, she can survive another day at home. She can go for a drive, sneakily light incense. Stealing a heart was easy, and so, she hoped, would be trying to heal her own.

I watched as Anna left The White Rabbit, making her way past the walls of eclectic treasures, out past the storefront windows, and up the sidewalk of cracked cement with heavily falling booted feet. The fragrant smell of freshly made coffee tickled my nose where I remained looking at the empty plush green couch. Something like determination wove throughout my body; I hoped to one day find my Henry that made life feel a little more okay. Anna, on the other hand, stepped back into Harriet the Noble Chariot, her maroon Honda Passport, and drove to nowhere.

Ashley Ustazewski is a junior majoring in Psychology and English with the hope of pursuing creativity in her future wherever she can, whether that be as an author, or something else entirely. Aside from writing, Ashley enjoys drinking coffee, hanging out the tunes on her ukulele, guitar, flute, or trumpet, painting animals wearing little hats, and dyeing her hair impulsively. She has been published in Penn State’s Kalliope and hopes to become more involved in Penn State’s writing community.
A MAN AND HIS VIOLIN, by Ethan Liebross

A webcam stares back at him in his Philadelphia apartment. At eye-level stands a recording mic. He plucks up his violin and drags his twenty-nine-inch bow off his shelf, smooths the horse-tail with rosin, and lets the wooden chambers sing.

Emmanuel “Manny” Houndo was born and raised in Togo, a country bordering Ghana in West Africa. He played soccer barefoot and went to a private school where he spoke in French with his classmates. After school, he returned home to his peach-yellow house framed by a row of untamed and abandoned railroad tracks. Inside, the language of Ewé filled the spaces with that warm feeling of home. At eight years old, Emmanuel and his family boarded a plane for America.

Years later, in a Philly elementary school, a teacher approached Manny and asked him to give the violin a try. Soon, recognizing his talent, instructors took a special interest in Manny and gave him private lessons for free.

Manny is one of the 20 classical violin majors at Penn State. Shaping his own educational journey, he’s merged his interests with healthcare and has plans to graduate with a Health Policy and Administration degree. With two parents as nurses, he’s poised to follow in their footsteps but in his own way.

“Reality is so much more nuanced and complicated than most people think,” Manny tells me over lunch. He’s speaking to me about the recent push for doctors and administrators to look at new ways to solve problems. There’s many things scientists still don’t know—how cancer patients bounce back from illness into recovery, the miracle that is waking up out of a coma after nineteen years, how exercising can prevent early-onset Alzheimers. There’s a lost art to healing. An art desperate for a musician’s creativity.

Manny is a slim-cut, five foot six inch twenty-two-year-old with a stylish look and an infectious smile. He grips his violin in his palms, prepared, composed, and always ready to go. And on his face, swan-like confidence. This time, a roomful of animated eighty and ninety-year-old patients stare back.

“Music can heal the wounds which medicine cannot touch.” —Debashish Mridha

What makes Manny so unique is that he’s not just a violin player. Described as “a social butterfly on steroids,” Manny’s equally charming, disciplined, and introspective.

He drags out his notebook hesitantly from his JanSport backpack to show me something.
I can sight read fine
I can sight read fine
I can sight read fine
I can sight read fine
I can sight read fine
I can sight read fine
I can sight read fine
I will play what is exactly on the page
I will play what is exactly on the page
I will play what is exactly on the page
I will play what is exactly on the page
I will play what is exactly on the page
I will play what is exactly on the page

“This is me, and this is how I train,” Manny tells me, flashing a grin. He somersaults the page of his 5-star notebook.

“Oh, and this drawing…” It’s a scribble of a man I don’t quite recognize.

“I had this weird vision of seeing exactly what the future me is going to look like. When you draw out your goals you’re forced to go after them.”

To this day, the thought of being from Togo puzzles Manny. Recently, when he was on a date with a girl and she leaned in and asked him where he is from, he hesitated for a second. Then, by routine he replied, “Togo.” To him, the word felt fake, almost like a fuzzy memory.

“The Manny in Togo, the Manny in Philly, and the Manny today, they’re all completely different people.”

His eyes gaze back down at his book.

“I couldn’t do any of this when I was in Philly. I can’t be showing that to my friends.”

“If I were not a physicist, I would probably be a musician. I often think in music. I live my daydreams in music. I see my life in terms of music.” —Albert Einstein
We walk across the energetic campus from the HUB to the Music Building, which lives on the far west-end next to the Forum Building. Every minute he passes another face. He knows them, and they know him. We walk down a set of hallways and face a wall of “High School Musical” chalk-white lockers, where Manny unlocks and tugs out his four-string Stradivarius replica.

At the bottom of the steps, we run into Kelly, a piano-major, who stops on her heels.

“Hey! How are you? Off to some practicing. Some warming up. We have a violin studio recital today.”

“Hey, that’s exciting,” she replies with real enthusiasm.

“Yeah, I mean, it should be fun. I’m doing a duet with Rachel Zimmerman.”

“Oh, what are you playing?”

“Navarra. It’s a really cool piece. Really hard though.”

We walk through the labyrinth of practice rooms where the sounds of flute, trumpet, and viola compete for my ears’ attention. In the musty and uninhabited room, Manny looks at himself in the mirror to hype himself up. It’s all part of the routine. The part of practice that is warming up the mind.

“Wow! I look amazing!” he tells himself, combing at his flattop.

He stitches his sheet music together with a roll of Scotch tape. The Spanish romance he is about to play is so long that it requires two stands to rest on. He tapes down the midline in such a way that he’ll be able to twist the pages over in one fluid motion midsong.

He sets one of many timers before confessing, “Being stressed and rushed is my reality.” He practices blindly without the sheet music in front of him, catching me off guard. Most musicians that I know use their music as a crutch like training wheels on the back of a bike.

“I can normally memorize a lot of the piece because I practice by ear. When I was younger, the only reason I was able to cover pop and rap songs is because I would learn the music very quickly. With pop songs, they’re slow enough that I can figure them out.”

Through a breezeway, we walk back into the architectural stunner that is Music Building II, passing more smiling faces staring up at Manny. He catches sight of his professor, Jim Lyon, “a dramatic violin soloist,” and gives him a big hug.

“So you’re very close to him?” I asked, somewhat jarred, realizing I’ve only hugged a professor once in my lifetime.

“Oh, absolutely. Absolutely!!”

Later that day, I catch Jim in the hallway and pull him to the side to ask him about Manny.

“Manny is one of those rare students that comes in beaming with energy. Every lesson, he runs in with a ninety-second pitch explaining to me everything he’s had trouble with. I really like this. It means I know exactly how to teach my lesson.”
Inside Esber Recital Hall, natural light pools into the voluminous venue from all different angles. After an hour of violin solos, at 4:15 p.m., Manny saunters out on stage to an audience of clapping parents, friends, and an assembly of older men in the front row whom I suspect treat coming to these performances as a hobby of sorts.

He’s joined by Ian Duh, a pianist, and Rachel Zimmerman, a gorgeous tall blond. They bow and serenade the audience with Navarra by Pablo de Saraste (1844-1908), a seven-minute-long piece. If a love letter was made into a song, this would be it. I watch and admire Jim the professor in the third row, all the way to my left. He has the biggest grin on his face as he sways his body to the rhythm and bobs to the violinists’ pizzicato. Plastered to his face is a pride that usually only a father can wear. Rachel and Manny look at each other throughout the piece, staring into each other’s eyes, their sweet smiles radiating across the room. They keep the synchrony alive through what I can only describe as a telepathy-like superpower.

“If music be the food of love, play on.” —William Shakespeare

In private, later that night, Manny opens up. “You know how intimidating it is? How intimidating it is to be in a lesson with her? Or just a one-on-one? She’s going in bow flying and I’m over here just trying to keep up!”

Following the recital, at 5:15 p.m., I follow Manny outside where he rendezvous in the parking lot with Kyle. The two of them lived together freshman year in a supplemental room in Simmons Hall with eight kids crammed inside. Kyle played the guitar. Their one friend John rapped. And Manny, not so surprisingly, played the violin.

“People heard us play and they just loved it,” Manny says in the car as we ride over to Kyle’s apartment in his silver Honda. I learned from them that it wasn’t just about the music they played. It’s who they were and what they represented together. They made it big the very first week of freshmen year after being featured on Penn State’s Snapchat story. Quickly, everyone began reaching out. Soon, Kyle and Manny found themselves getting paid to play at alumni events, THON, the Penn Stater Hotel, Indian cultural festivals, and more. That same freshman year, Manny became the only freshmen first violinist in the Penn State Philharmonic Orchestra.

Miraculously, he would balance the gentle classical music with covers of not-always-so-gentle rap, hip-hop, and pop songs. In high school, he posted these covers to his YouTube Channel. His pivotal moment came when Beyoncé, the icon and ‘Queen B’ herself, reached out in response to his “Drunk in Love” cover. Through these pop pieces, he was able to connect with people in high school on a different level.

“I was no longer ‘the immigrant;’ now I was ‘the violinist,’” Manny tells me proudly.

Back in Kyle’s downtown State College apartment, they were having their first rehearsal in over a year in preparation for a March 20th performance.

“This is literally the band coming back together,” Kyle laughs, reaching for his guitar off the pre-owned chesnut couch.

They had separated in Manny’s junior year. Manny was the one to make the call. As a music major, he wanted to push himself as far as he could go. Plus, he didn’t want to have to drag Kyle along if
that wasn’t what he wanted to do professionally. But, now, since it’s Manny’s senior year and final semester, he reached out to Kyle to do one last performance together. Leaning forward, very earnestly, he comes clean: “This is more for me than the event itself.”

In the apartment, they take out their instruments and tune-up.

“Throw some chords on. Let’s just see,” Manny suggested to Kyle. Within minutes, they’ve composed the most beautiful, folksy-sounding, electrical, and impassioned symphony.

Afterward, they jump up and down screaming, “We still got it!!” And they have that smile, the type of smile that is impossible to shake off.

They finish the night running through a list of pieces they’ve assembled, ones they magically still remember through muscle memory even a full year later.

“There are plenty of talented people out there in the world making incredible things happen. What separates them from Manny is that Manny cares about people,” Kyle explained looking over, smirking at Manny. “There’s just something about him.”

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Ethan is a junior majoring in neuropsychology and minoring in English. He hopes to attend medical school to become a primary care physician. He loves to read, drink (too much) coffee, run, and meet new people. On campus, he’s a proud member of Remote Area Medical and Outing Club. He also runs a non-profit that helps high school students, especially from low-income communities, apply to college.
BLUE TUESDAY, by Pete Weber

My first therapy session was when I was 13 or so; I cannot really remember. What I do remember is the feeling of sitting in a doctor’s office waiting to be called. The office had a synthetic homeliness to it, making it truly disgusting. My mother was anxious and maybe my stepfather as well. It was hard to tell why we were necessarily there. Apparently, I had problems; I was too much like my father.

A man I knew and loved instinctually, but in reality, I knew nothing about. He would pick me up every other weekend and every Tuesday. Tuesdays became the worst day some weeks. I would go to school and then to daycare and then home, my mother’s house. Eventually, I would wait and wait for my dad because he worked a lot, and when he finally showed, we would drive almost an hour across the other side of town to get to his townhouse in the city.

Once there, I would try my best to be familiar with recent history, but some days I was too tired or lacked interest. Every Tuesday visit felt the same after a time. I would work on homework mostly to avoid my stepfather’s and mother’s speeches, which went something like this:

“You shouldn’t even go over there; you never get anything done. You always have to stay up late when you get back to finish your homework, and you miss the bus the next morning because of it. I wish you didn’t go to your dad’s.”

If I had no homework or lied about it, I would watch T.V. with my step sister until it was time to eat dinner. Throughout the whole affair, I saw my dad for 45 minutes to an hour. He would be working or trying his best not to fall asleep on the couch, and I never stayed too long before making the hour ride back to Mom’s.

“You smell like smoke,” my mother would snarl every time I entered her house in the suburbs. It was true, though; my dad could smoke like a chimney. I would shower right away because I had to get the smoke out of my hair. After the shower, for an hour or so, I could watch what I wanted or play a video game or more likely than not, I would get to listen to my stepfather talk about my future and how I could be great if I ever applied myself. Regardless of my actions and whether I completed my homework, I would stay up for a couple of hours listening to how I could be better. Tuesdays were long and tiring.

I eventually began complaining and protesting like my mother about going to my dad’s on Tuesdays. I got my wish and, along with it, a newly created rift. Every other weekend alone was hard. Maybe that is why we were in the office for therapy. I remember being called into the doctor’s personal office and getting asked why I was there. Before I had the chance to answer, my stepfather began speaking. I could not remember what was said in honest truth, but I remember having the sensation
of laughing. You could see it in my mother’s eyes as well: “Here we go, Jesus Christ Superstar.” That is how she refers to him in his moments of righteousness.

The therapist’s face was priceless because when you listen to a speech by my stepfather, you get lost. He is coherent and well educated, but he just goes on and on, and it gets hard to place where you started from. The therapist looked at me again and asked me, a 13-year-old, “Why are you here?”

I just dumbly shrugged my shoulders, muttering some things like, “I don’t know, my grades.” Grades were a big thing. One year, when I was in 5th grade, I was handed a brochure for military boot camp with my stepfather saying that if I got a C that is where he was thinking of sending me.

My mother chirped in, “We want to talk about his father.” Her voice was flat and to the point. It seemed my mother was already exhausted from the process. Instantly, the therapist realized how my eyes swelled, and my jaw clenched. She began to pull out her notes and ask about my Dad. “Fuck” was all I could think; I hated talking about my Dad, especially in front of my mom and stepfather.

My full name is Peter John Weber II, a name my father proudly gave me. (If you had known my father, that is all you might really need to know about me). I remember being so proud of my name that once I boldly pronounced my name in its entirety, Peter John Weber THE II, to company my mother had over for dinner. The name Pete or Peter was like poison, the worst type of curse. Unknowingly saying my full name revealed that we were not a “perfect” family. I got yelled at once the company left and was told not to embarrass anyone.

“His nickname is P.J. We like it better.” That was the extent of my mother’s input, and she never truly appreciated that even with my stepfather’s ramblings, they were the most hurtful words.

“P.J.,” the therapist began, using her new knowledge of my nickname and hoping to form a bond with me, then called on me again to answer another question. “Want to talk about your father?”

I remember hating that woman from that moment forward. Our therapy helped my mom and stepfather come up with more nicknames, like “Bio Dad,” or reinforced old ones like “Dad-Pete” because we did not want me to confuse who my “real” dad was. Therapy was also filled with guided one-way conversations and medication.

Thankfully, my mom stepped in and realized that therapy was not helping. I became a zombie and often felt sick after taking my prescribed meds. She has always been a kind and warmhearted woman, but it’s well-documented that she hesitates to do the right thing, especially at the start of a conflict. A lot of voices chirped in her ear, berating her every decision. In the beginning, she would freeze under pressure and let people control her thinking.

My young childhood was filled with moments such as these. Brief periods of time that highlighted the lunacy in my life. They also caused me to lose touch with my father. For a couple of years, I would barely see him, if at all, and talk to him only when I saw him.

So, it came as a huge surprise when my mother dropped me off at the front door like I was a baby being dropped off at a firehouse. My brother had cried himself to sleep during the ride, asking, “Am I ever going to see P.J. again?”
I was so incredibly enraged that I ripped chunks of hair out of my scalp when I took a shower later at my dad’s. My dad was confused, but he was a little happy when I look back and think about everything. My stepmother, not so much.

“I don’t want him here. He hasn’t been a part of this family, and we shouldn’t have to take care of him.” These were words that she never directly expressed to me but that I overheard between phone calls with members of the family, including my dad.

I stayed there for almost three weeks before my grandparents (mother’s side) stepped in to share responsibility so that I could stay in the same high school. Those three weeks were shitty. I was sleeping on the couch, there were (honest truth) about 30 cats in the house, and my clothes were in plastic bins in the bathroom next to the cat litter. The cats pissed on everything, adding to the heavy dankness that my presence presented. It provoked heated words, and eventually, the process of my dad and me losing touch repeated, leading to my full-time residency with my grandparents.

The experience with my grandparents was thrilling as it brought change. I was in college and adopted every excuse in order to get out and be with my friends. For the first time in my life, I had some freedom, and I blew it time after time. I got into small debacles here and there, like missing work because I got lost in the vast cornfields of New Jersey. GPS was not invented yet, so it took half a day to find the right roads that led to the highway. I came home to find my proud Italian grandfather quite disgruntled, and that was before I told him that the brake line broke because I hit so many ditches driving down backroads.

Needless to say, it was chaotic. My grandmother and I butted heads daily. She is a little high-strung and says the most ridiculous statements; I was a smart angsty teen full of hurt and disappointment. Sometimes the quarreling got so bad that my grandmother told me not to come back; I even managed to get thrown out of the will a couple of times. By dinner, I was back home, and we were watching Jeopardy or a new movie on STARZ.

I learned later that the field of psychology had libraries and thousands of studies with fancy words and research describing emotionally dysfunctional families like mine. In college, I bounced around from house to house, making and breaking up repeatedly with my family, reliving the same experiences. It was like a high school relationship but with my parents, all while my grandparents watched and helped where they could, secretly wishing everyone would grow up.

It took almost two decades, six of them with me in the Navy and with a divorce for each of my parents, for the healing to begin. Time matured us and helped us to reevaluate what was important in life. My parents removed some toxic elements from their lives and were more receptive, and I was humbled by my time at sea.

The Navy was the definition of stress. I was a nuclear electrician aboard an aircraft carrier, and there was constant pressure, someone always watching over you all the time. Some even hoping for a fuck up so they could burn you and demote you, setting an example for other sailors.

Leave was always a fantastic time, and what made coming home great was seeing my relationships evolve with my parents. I remembered the hurt in my dad’s eyes when I said goodbye and left for the Navy. He never actually thought I would leave. My mother came around later when she realized
that six years was a long time. It awoke something in them, and they began taking the effort to appreciate the time we had.

“I am proud of you.” Words I never really heard growing up came so easily to them now. They had changed; both moved out on their own and chose to be happy with themselves rather than miserable and trapped in suffocating marriages. Each became much happier by doing so.

They also took notice of my personal efforts: driving countless hours, squeezing in visits every chance I could, and showing up to movies, baseball games, and family vacations. Once, after many drinks, my dad secretly crept into his room and took a hit of weed, embracing the excitement of the visit. When he emerged, he was a hacking and intelligible goon, laughing so much that I could not understand him.

I always knew my dad smoked pot, but I never witnessed him doing it so blatantly. It was a family taboo. Everyone knows that everyone else smokes, but we never talked about it. I had picked up the habit before I joined the Navy. I never drank or smoked before getting kicked out of my house, but when I was finally on my own and had the chance to let loose and feel something other than anger, I did. It became my favorite pastime, and I was proficient. My father himself seemed equally experienced, handling himself well, laughing at his own jokes before he could tell them.

“That haircut is awful. Makes you look bald.” Snickering, my dad knew my early baldness bothered me, and it was an easy way to distract me from sinking the eight ball. I lost every time.

After winning, he walked right by and slapped me on the shoulder, saying something about his victory. Then a seriousness overtook him, and he looked me dead in the eye and apologized. We talked for hours, our first man-to-man conversation. He apologized and told me he loved me more than I think any other person has, continually reaching out for a hug. The whole time he was in control, never over-emotional, confident and direct.

“I was his son, and he fucking loved me.”

It was a plain and simple message. The acknowledgment made all the stress and pain worth it. It was one of the happiest moments in my life. I was so inebriated that I asked to smoke with him, thinking it would be a great honor. My dad became even more serious than before, if possible: “I will never smoke with you.” We never did. We smoked in the same house, we smoked at the same parties, once we even smoked back-to-back, and after our respective hit was over, we resumed our conversation. We never shared a bowl or a joint; it was against his principles. If we smoked, we smoked, but we did not need it between us.

I left the Navy two years later and came home, much to the pleasure of both my parents. It was my father who called multiple times a week like a sporting agent, trying to get me home so we could play basketball every Sunday like when I was younger. It was a favorite pastime of ours, with a crazy amount of wonderful memories, and it was an opportunity to beat and shit talk my uncle; it was bonding.

Life after the Navy was a unique and special time. My mother and I were on good terms, and my dad and I began developing a special bond, and if I were to be cliché, I would say he was my best
friend. As a young man, I understood my parents better and could empathize with their previous decisions, and they showed dynamic growth in rekindling our relationship.

But life is random, just like the strange man I met on the flight back to the U.S. from Manchester City. The gentleman turned around in his seat and asked if he could sit next to my friend and me. As a weary traveler, I said yes, unenthused and dryly (Never say yes to strangers). After telling me a gory near-death story, which included him seeing death along with a list of crazy shit you would hear from a crazy patient in an asylum, he remarked kindly, “sorry, I felt I needed to tell you that,” since he saw death’s presence around me.

Ten months later, my dad passed away. Tuesday, June 12th, 2017. From Stage 4 esophagus cancer. All I could think of was that I always hated Tuesdays, and I lit my bowl, hoping to spend a little more time with my dad.

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**LOVE & PEACE, by Pete Weber**

A full glass of white Moscato wine sits on the table, barely touched. I am completely sober. I am a completely different person. I never imagined that my heart could have been reawakened as it has. The love and support she has provided me has been unconditional, and it has broken the shackles of my depression.

“What are you looking at?”

She smiles because she caught me slipping away. Sometimes I get lost in her, thinking how lucky I am that we met. Every so often, she catches me looking at her, and she smirks and accuses me of being up to something.

“I love you. ¡Te quiero mi amor!”

I slip in the Spanish, trying to be extra romantic as we spend a date night together. It is her birthday dinner. We are in Niagara Falls; I am head over loafers; this woman is amazing.

“I’m happy. I love you, and I’m glad you’re not grumpy anymore,” she says with a playful smile. I can feel her radiant love. I am happy. “¡Yo también!”
I am killing it.

Peter Parker is gone; I am in complete control. I have not been drunk in a year. I am applying to grad school, and I am genuinely happy.

It has been a year since we met, a year since she first rejected me after I awkwardly took a selfie on her birthday. We bumped into each other a week later at “The Brew.” I was there to play pool, and she was grabbing a drink after the Bob Dylan concert at Penn State. I can remember it clearly as we sit here laughing.

“You!” she yelled as I approached her. I saw her walk up to the bar, and she stood out with her bright red lipstick and captivating demeanor. She was a woman, and there was something about her. I could not stop looking. I felt confident. “It’s you! You were in my picture!”

It has been magic ever since.

We paid the bill and thanked the owner for a wonderful dinner. It was delightful. I still needed to work on my irritability, but a year with her in the worst pandemic since 1919 taught me about love again. I am a believer. I found the “Peter Pan” in me rather than the “Peter Parker.”

I grab my phone and set my alarm because tomorrow I will wake up early and make sure to get to the aquarium. She loved aquariums.

“We should invite your mom to thanksgiving.”

“That’s a good idea!” We are a family.

I am happy; we are happy. We were going to host Thanksgiving.

“Do you want to get a Christmas Tree?”

“Yes!!” she jumps with excitement, and I grab her and give her a peck on the cheek.

Life is beautiful.

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Pete Weber is from Allentown, PA. He joined the Navy in 2011 and served as a nuclear electrician for six years. It was a great learning experience for Pete and gave him the opportunity to explore the world in a way he had never imagined. Now, Pete is a senior at Penn State University, earning his Bachelors’s degree in psychology with minors in neuroscience and biology. In the fall, Pete will be attending Mississippi State University for his Ph.D. in cognitive science. Beyond his studies, Pete enjoys writing fiction, especially in the horror/thriller genre. All of Pete’s writing is greatly influenced by his family, friends, and experiences around the world.
GENTLE TOUCH, by Aliyah Rios

My grandmother stands over the stove, her freshly painted nails stirring a pot full of white rice. Her floral t-shirt and khaki shorts are snug against her frame as her feet make sharp steps on the hardwood floor, her body leaning with each footstep. I plop onto her couch and lean against the armrest, where the droplets from my shower fall from my hair onto the stitched patterns she left on the pillow. She sat on the couch with me, and grabbed her thin bristle brush from the armrest. She positioned her body sideways and told me to do the same, my back facing her. While she brushes my hair, removing every knot my curls carried, she told me about when she was my age.

“Oh, Mami was always working since we had a big family to support. However, Mami always made sure that we were taken care of by the older sisters. My hair was long and curly like yours, would carry many knots too, so Nildia and Nelly would have to help out with my hair. Nildia was always gentle, making sure every strand was soft and smooth without causing a pinch of pain.” She caressed my hair, lightly passed the brush on the ends of my hair. “But Nelly was very rough, I only let her do it a few times because she would just leave me in tears,” she chuckled.

I turned my head towards the side to meet her gaze.

“Can I brush your hair?” I ask.

She laughed lightly. “As long as you make me look beautiful.”

We switched positions, her back towards me while I began to brush her hair, my legs folded together. Although she declared she had hair as long as mine, which reaches midway down my back, her hair now barely passed the nape of her neck, dark and thick. I first started to pass the brush on the back, separating her curls, which made them loose waves.

“Am I being gentle?” I ask. Abuela nods.

Once I finished the back, I told her to position herself facing me so I could start the front. She removed her glasses. Her brown eyes stared back at me.

“Remember, try to make me look beautiful.” She chuckled. I wasn’t quite sure which way to brush it. Should I brush it to the side? Brush it back? I started to brush her hair forward, leaving it matted onto her forehead. She asked for the mirror to look at it, and I hesitated before I handed it over.

She looked at me with a mischievous stare and smiled before she said through her faux deep voice, “You made me look like a boy.” We both started to laugh, eventually gasping for the air that had completely left our system. “Let me show you the right way.”
We walked out of her living room towards the hallway, old pictures of my brother, my father, and even my grandmother were pinched behind edges of circular mirrors that hung on the wall. We look at our reflection on one of the mirrors hanging behind a bedroom door. She then proceeded to brush her hair, she combed the pieces in the front, creating more volume, and then combed back the rest. My small frame and height barely allowed me to reach her shoulders. I glanced back and forth between her reflection and my own, thought to myself about the day I will replicate these skills and can make myself look beautiful.

Aliyah A. Rios has come a long way from her days of writing Austin Mahone fan-fiction and rereading all of John Green’s books. She currently attends the Pennsylvania State University as an English Major with a minor in Business. Aliyah spends her free time participating in poetry slams and staying in touch with her ethnic roots as a member of the Puerto-Rican Student Association. After graduation, she intends to go after a career in book editing at a publishing firm.
**THE GIRL IN THE WINDOW, by Jordan Liverant**

Whenever I have a hard day and find myself feeling down, I always like to look out my window. You can see so much through a window. You can see the cars drive by, even at hours that most people would be sleeping. You can see people walking down the sidewalk; you can see them laughing. I live in an apartment building with 18 floors and I live on the fourth. From my bedroom window, I can see different apartment buildings, some big, some small, and I can see houses, too. Not a lot of them, though, because I live in New York City. It’s especially nice during the winter, when the tall trees outside my building that usually block the view of the surrounding buildings with their big, green leaves have shed, leaving them bare. This way I can see every single window around my building.

You’re probably wondering why I like seeing other people’s windows. Trust me, it’s not as creepy as it sounds. How I see it is that a different window is a different story. If I can see 20 different windows, there are 20 different stories, 20 different lives being lived. Even though I’m sitting by myself in my bedroom, I don’t feel as alone as I am. It’s a feeling of comfort that wraps me like a blanket and keeps me warm from my fears. It all comes from being surrounded by so many windows.

I can see when other people have their lights on. Some apartments have Christmas lights hanging on their windows, some have snowflake lights, and some even have Halloween lights year-round. My favorite time to look out the window is the week of Christmas. During that week, I peer through windows, and a lot of them have decorated Christmas trees sitting peacefully in their living rooms. I don’t celebrate Christmas, but seeing Christmas trees always brings a smile to my face. I like to imagine the apartments with the Christmas trees are filled with loving people who are spending time with family, enjoying every second of it, even if I’m not. And for a split second, I’m taken away from reality, and suddenly I’m in a cozy apartment with my family and a Christmas tree, listening to “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” and laughing around the fire. Even though it’s for a second, that second feels so long, so real, and the feeling stays.

I’ve never seen anyone through their windows, but I like to imagine how they might be living their lives. Maybe the apartment on the sixth floor of the building a couple of blocks away from me is occupied by a small family, and they’re eating dinner right now, laughing at the dinner table about a joke that was said. And maybe the room of the apartment right next to them belongs to a small girl, six years old, and she’s squinting out her window trying to find the stars that her mom talks about every night to help her fall asleep. Maybe she’s thinking about her future. She might want to be a
princess or a doctor when she grows up, something generic because that’s what most little kids think. Imagining her childhood helps me cope with the fact that mine is over. I like to think that the apartment above hers belongs to an old married couple, sitting by the crackling, warm fireplace, reflecting on their beautiful, long-lived lives.

Sometimes when I find myself crying so hard that I think I won’t even be able to sleep, I get up from my bed and sit by my window, looking for the lights. They make me feel warm when I’m feeling cold inside, and they brighten up my life when it seems to be really dark. Maybe I’ve heard the line “there’s a light at the end of the dark tunnel” way too many times. Either way, I love looking for lights outside my window. My favorite are the lights on this one apartment’s patio on the ninth floor of my building. They are the string lights that teenage girls usually have in their room. Even though they probably don’t mean anything, they are a sign to me. If I’m stuck in my own head, I stare out my window to see those bright lights staring back at me to say that things will get better.

There are times when I feel like there’s really no one else out there like the walls are caving in around me, but then I see so many windows outside. We live in a huge world with millions and millions of people and we’re just a speck in it all; seven billion people have their own lives, their own struggles, their own love, their own adventures, and somehow they’re figuring it out, so I can too.

Looking out my window makes me feel like even though I’m stuck in my small room, there’s a whole world out there with so many people to meet, so many memories to make, so many experiences to have, even though right now I’m only a girl sitting by a window.

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Jordan Liverant is a Journalism major at Penn State and is originally from Brooklyn, New York. Ever since she was young, she loved to write, but never submitted her work, so she was so excited about this opportunity. Some of her hobbies include reading, watching movies, reading books, and hiking. Jordan is also on the Penn State fencing team!
A CRITICAL MASS OF MONSTERS, by Leorah McGinnis

The veil thins in autumn.  
It is a season of transitions; as the natural world is full of death  
and a descent into dormant sleep,  
the barriers between us and… the places beyond… grow as translucent as a cobweb,  
swaying in the breeze  
and long abandoned  
by its eight-legged maker.  
By the end of October, the things that go bump in the night are bumping their loudest.

Every night I see a face in the mirror.  
When I rise groggily from bed,  
Because I drank too much tea,  
I slink to the bathroom  
With eyes trained on the floor.

In the corner of my eye,  
I see movement in the mirror,  
a pale face,  
but I do not look.

My house is full of monsters because I choose not to look for them. All the long forgotten dark things from all the corners of the world can find a safe haven in my attic and under my bed and inside all the closets that don’t quite latch shut. Sometimes I hear them rustle, and I feel their cold eyes weighing me. I lie in bed in the dark, and I see glowing eyes peering from the corners, and patches of purest black creeping across my ceiling. And still, I do not turn the light on.
I do not call out,
do not inquire of their presence
or motives
or identity.
Because I do not want to hear the answer.

I do not look into mirrors in the dark. If I cannot see the pale face and black eyes and gleaming teeth looking back at me, she cannot reach out through the glass to stroke my cheek. If I do not see it, that pressure I feel is merely a stirring of the air. As long as my eyes remain averted, they cannot make contact to form a bridge and connect me to my nightmares.

I do not need to fight what I refuse to see.
The longer I refuse to look for them, the more monsters I accumulate.

I know that they’re there, biding their time. I know that someday, at critical mass, my house will hold no more dark and dangerous things, and they will come spilling out to devour me. I know I cannot escape them, and yet I choose not to see them.

Run away, little Cat
before I catch you in my web
and spin you into something dark

And do not look in the mirror.

Originally from Colorado, Leorah McGinnis is now a master’s student at the Penn State School of International Affairs. When she’s not studying dispute resolution or teaching labs in the Biology Department, she enjoys writing short stories and poetry.
A CHILD IN THE WORLD OF RACIAL WARFARE,
by Trae Morgan-White

Inspired by “Mother with Toddler in Wartime” by Julia Kasdorf, “Poetry in America” (2011)

During a pandemic, we ponder
on sugary-sweet solitude
for the newborn child
stretching their arms out
to the gruesome, the unjust
the divide of society
there were Trayvon’s and
Philando’s, and we were patient,
but to knees, our necks are floor mats,
our necks are George Floyd,
our homes, invaded,
like laser tag areas, like
Breonna Taylor’s, invaded
another black soul gone.
What do we tell the black child
with aspirations larger than
black excellence,
that diminishes by every bullet,
Every knee, every assumption,
Every stereotype?
That hope is lost,
or all is gone?
thanks to your damage, i’m stranded in dark paradise,
but i’ve made it a permanent home,
gnawing on my flesh and coconut shells,
sheltered inside stick houses and stuck with myself.
i’m writing you this message in a bottle,
but i also put in a special surprise—
the old me,
once this gets to you,
take care of him,
force-feed him with lies and deceit,
because the new me deserves my attention,
and i’m feeding him with self-worth
and serenity.

Trae Morgan-White is a senior at Penn State University, University Park. Aside from majoring in Digital and Print Journalism with an English minor, Trae is a singer-songwriter, poet, blogger, and graphic designer. He publishes his music and poetry under the moniker “blancoBLK,” and is also a current member of Penn State’s W.O.R.D.S. and Onward State. He performed in his first poetry slam in 2019, influencing his writing of love, friendships, mental health, and social justice.
A HOUSE, NOT A HOME, by Payton Kuhn

She lives, stuck, in a kitchen
where thick smoke hangs in the stale air
and sticks to the brown cabinet doors.
Every inhale leaves her lungs protesting
in anguish at her mother’s cigarettes
that balance off her thin painted lips.
The dirty dishes pile in the sink
and the grime collects on the counters.

She lives, uneasy, in a living room
where a whiskey bottle is permanently attached
to the wooden table next to her father’s chair.
Every night, her eyes water as she watches
his brain rot like burning acid until all
his decisions are as coherent as a melting candle.
The dust gathers next to the bottle and
the musty smell creeps from the chair.

She lives, exhausted, in a bedroom
where her head is shoved between a pillow
and the mattress. Her ears bleed
from the arguments that send an earthquake
rolling through the foundations
and tearing her family apart limb from limb.
The door squeaks on its hinges and
the cold draft sweeps under her blanket.
MY BODY, by Payton Kuhn

The November chill stung my cheeks into a rosy pink, outside of Chicago’s Mercy Hospital and Medical Center where I had just finished a back-aching shift. But he was the one who sent the shiver down my spine when he appeared in that lot asking for the ring back. But he didn’t really come for the ring. The glare of the gun caught my eye and he pulled the trigger and now it’s my blood that stained the pavement, and now it’s my breath that has slowed to a halt just because I cut off our wedding.
My name was Dr. Tamara O’Neal.

The car rumbled into the driveway dropping off my baby girl from class. But he wasn’t just there for the errand. The venom lacing his voice and the darkness clouding his eyes told me that. All I waited for, wanted for, was a divorce, but he couldn’t handle it.
The knife was an extension of his hand, pulsing in and out of my skin, my organs, my muscles. Our daughters watched their momma’s blood spatter and mingle with the dirt on the driveway until he ran off and left me to die.
My name was Aisha Fraser Mason.

Past the subway stop, his voice shouted through the night air, ringing in my ears. My lips remained shut but that only fueled the fire within him to follow me into the parking garage. But still, I refused to talk. My family car became the place where I was violated and strangled, the breath squeezed from my throat just because I was afraid to use it in your direction. I was an honors student, future physical therapist at the University of Illinois. But he broke me before I ever had the chance to heal a single person.
My name was Ruth George.
I am asked why I say “no” with a smile or lighthearted laugh.
I am asked why an apology is included.
For it’s my right, right? The right to choose
what I want to do with my body?
So, then it should be a given that what I say is the final answer, right?
That I wouldn’t feel the need to sugarcoat the decision
of what I want my body
to do or not, right?
Wrong.
The rejection killings of
Dr. Tamara O’Neal
Aisha Fraser Mason
Ruth George
have taught me that some men refuse to hear the “no”.
So, the firmness is replaced with a suggestion,
the frown is replaced with a smile,
and the anger is replaced with kindness
because in the end, it is not always
“my body, my choice”
but instead,
“my body, your choice”
ODE TO COFFEE, by Payton Kuhn

This is for the beans steaming in the corner
The slow rumble and drip of the filtered water
Plopping into the glass pot below

Sometimes you are dressed
In a thick and shiny bow
Mixed with milk and sugar
Topped with caramel and chocolate

Just one mug and you enslave
An entire army with your taste
For the spell you cast is strong
And, oh, so hard to resist

You shake skulls and rattle bones
Insisting that you are depended on
Each and every day
For you are the first longing
When rolling out of bed
And the comfort in the evening
When supper is digesting

You are the timeless shackles
Made of burning liquid
Tightly binding and sinking into
Wealthy, weary, but all hungry minds
Who choose to become your captive
So you can become the wizard of time
GOODBYE, FATHER, by Payton Kuhn

Father, you are the biting taste of whiskey, glaring at me from the clear bottle in the corner. You tear apart the room when I say your name, the flames burn every corner and scorch every memory. Until all that is left are bones.

Father, you are the fresh and salty tears flowing freely down Momma’s hot cheeks and around her red nose, which coats her upper lip in mucus. Used tissues tossed in the wastebasket are spilling over the top within minutes.

Father, you are the wafting smoke from the cigarette perched between your greasy lips and invading every single pure ounce of oxygen until my eyes are rimmed with red and my lungs don’t work properly anymore. You gave me life, you give me death.

Father, you are the angry and pounding heart in my brother’s chest. Rage pumps adrenaline through your veins to every limb that lashes out and every word that spits deceiving lies. You are the purple bruises painting his skin.

Father, you are the gas in my car as I drive away.

Payton Kuhn is a sophomore majoring in forensic biology and minoring in creative writing. She likes to read, travel, and meet new people. Her favorite tv show is “Friends,” and she loves finding new places to go hiking. It’s on her bucket list to go hike Mount Nittany this summer!
Caramel visions of lazy days dance,
Sending spools of honeyed sun down my spine.
The room dulls to beige, but though fantasies melt,
The faint wisp of a smile remains.

In newfound stillness, my mind sets to wander,
To a thicket of overgrown thoughts.
The path is all torn, but nothing has changed,
And I’m forcefully drawn to the dark.

Play in the past when today can’t be suffered,
Toy soldiers will win over war.
As days disappear, and those left dwindle,
The worst are most vibrant and real.

Obliviate regrets, don’t risk retaining,
Toss them like rags in the sink.
Or wring them dry, and savor the water
To quench parched wisdom’s lips.

When children are given years too few,
Care to not wallow in mire
The figure is fixed, Time’s made its decision,
To steal seconds is strictly forbidden.

Fighting won’t work, though many have tried,
The hourglass grains have ended.
Numbers may vary, but the state’s the same,
All the sand fell down and drained.

Impotent will, it always seems lacking,
Too weak to make even a dent.
At times it feels crushing, to be so fragile,
uncertainty guides unrelenting,

The smile long gone, a blank slate stares,
Looking forward while vacant inside.
My swarm of low spirits flock to the light,
And obscure any bulbs from vision.

Now the beige is all black and the rooms become heavy,
I frantically search for the door.
But, a pinprick of hope stabs through the muck,
The caramel scent of summer
Eitan Perlin studies Mathematics and Philosophy at Penn State Main Campus. He’s new to poetry because like many people, he picked it up as something to do in quarantine. Eitan has always been a singer, so he also started learning guitar and writing music. In his free time, he tries to play DND, but when the schedules of five plus college students don’t align—which is most of the time—he gets his fantasy fix from video games.
“I AM GOING TO DIE”, by Trevor Mastergeorge

My Britta is blinking red;
I continue to use it.
The water tastes fine but
Deep down I know
I am going to die.

I’m sorry, I say, I’m sorry, I am so sorry
I’ll get it next time
I’ll write it down;
A list, on my phone,
On a paper,
In my head.

So, the next morning
I take my iron pill.
I put on a different pair of socks
Than what I was wearing yesterday
And sit at my desk.

I get thirsty.
I go to the kitchen and fill up my water cup.
The Britta is blinking red.

Trevor Mastergeorge is an English major who moved from Harrisburg to main campus in his junior year. He enjoys music, writing, and cooking in his free time. When he is not doing any of those things, Trevor can be found staring off into space or trying on clothes. He often uses poetry to express how it feels living with rather severe ADHD as a way to ground himself.
LADIES LIKE YOU DON’T GO DOWN EASY, by Kayla Monteiro

My teeth have begun to peel
and my hair’s all split.
The doctor said not to worry.
Ladies like you —
with bricks for knees
and cinder block hands —
don’t go down easy.
I figure maybe if I paint my cheeks Ivory, or coat my voice box in leather,
he’ll take some notice.
Nothin’ to be done about that now.
When I shuffle my suitcase home
I retire.
Wrinkled up sighs
and wind heaving,
the empty corners groan.
I lay my head
on my crooked neck
and invite the ceiling over for tea — even she ignores me.

...  
I look out the window and picture
Witch Doctors and Shamans,
of whom I should belong to.
Their hands that cradle
Belief.
Their stares that would have seen.
At last, I jar my eyes
and set my hair in its nightly tomb,
pretending all the while,
that tomorrow will promise something better.

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Kayla is a graduating senior. She is majoring in English and minoring in Classical and Ancient Mediterranean Studies. Next year she hopes to obtain a job publishing Young Adult Fiction. In her free time she enjoys reading and writing Beatnik poetry, working on her zine First Thought Best Thought, and making a fool of herself while doing yoga.
LONG NIGHTS, by Maysen Paul

I want to fall into my bed like a bird,
Flightless and in quicksand.
A trip to the sun and back, and one cruise
Around the earth, yet in darkness
No cow nor sheep nor star can lull me to silence.

I want my eyes to plummet shut like a door,
Two boulder stones off a cliff.
I drift through the black Mariana Trench, yet
Natural Melatonin is still too deep
to find in this impalpable sea of forget

I want to negotiate with the gold sandman,
Sprinkle moments in my ear.
That car ride home, playing “Come Away With Me”
Sinking into the window side
With molasses blinks to watch the moon trail near.

Maysen Paul is a Penn State University Park student who is majoring in Elementary and Middle School Education. They are from Lansdale, Pennsylvania, which is about 45 minutes away from Philly. They love to do yoga and plan to become a certified yoga instructor in the future, and they also love music and get a lot of work done throughout the day to some background jams. Another hobby of theirs is writing, although writing can be a bit stressful with some assignments, but writing for fun is a great way for them to express themselves. In this poem, they wrote about sleepless nights since sometimes, life gets so stressful being in school, having work, or living in quarantine.
OCEAN, by Tommy Malz

Sandy shores and bright blue skies
Waves that boldly tower
A manic force that cycles with the tide
Look no further for nature’s true power.

The ocean is a temperamental vice
Serene and turbulent, peaceful yet violent.
Promising adventure and peril.
Its voice a deluge, hushed and silent.

Floating atop the crested sea
One can only admire and witness.
With horizons as far as the eye can see,
You are a passenger now.
Roaring and flailing like a petulant child
Or sleepy and languid, unnervingly mild.
The ocean conquers all the same
With no excuses, reason, or blame

As the days grow warmer it beckons to me,
I long to go join it indefinitely.
The smell of the salts and crashing waves melody
That irresistible call of the sea.

______________________________

Tommy Malz is a freshman at Penn State University Park campus. His piece “Ocean” was written as an ode to where he spent most of his time growing up. Being from Long Island, he has been around all aspects of the water from swimming, surfing, and lifeguarding. Tommy is currently undecided but growing more and more eager to get involved with writing.
THE BEAST CALLED CANCER, by Hannah Moyer

Creeping and crawling through skin and bone  
It takes up space and makes its home.  
Sapping energy and feeding bitter moods,  
Ruining even the best of days.  

A not-so-silent parasite that ruins lives,  
The beast makes up its own mind  
Evading the medicine pumped in  
Burrowing deeper, hiding better.

Laughing in the drawn, weary face of patients  
As they lose their patience, their hope.  
Killing them slowly, draining them.  
And taking over body functions.

Skin turns thin, face pallid.  
Bruises mar elbows and wrists  
From repetitive needles and IV’s.  
The wires and tubes trap them further.

Stomach revolts against medicine meant to heal  
Eyes sink deeper, sleep strays further,  
Joints ache at stillness, throb at movement,  
Cancer makes itself more permanent.

Yet patients muster the strength:  
As knights facing the dragon  
And pirates riding the storm,  
Soldiers banding together to win the war.

Testimonies to give others inspiration.  
Support groups to build hope,  
Facing the common enemy  
With hard earned knowledge and advice.

A quiet, husky laugh from damaged lungs.  
First steps after surgery, no longer bedridden.
Keeping water down, managing some toast.
Seeking progress in the little moments.

Pill bottles emptied, one by one,
Color returns, bruises clear.
It continues to lurk and wait
But slowly the beast will be tamed.

Hannah Moyer is a nursing major from Jersey Shore, PA, which is a small town in central Pennsylvania. She really loves reading, but she prefers to read novels, so poetry is pretty much out of her comfort zone. She doesn’t have a lot of experience with writing but had fun with this piece. Several people in Hannah’s life have cancer, including her dad, and she took a lot of inspiration from his experiences for this piece.
THREE YEARS AGO, *by Caitlin Burns*

i felt the air prick at my skin,
not in a cold kind of way,
and all i could think
was that you’re not supposed to be able to feel the air
but i could,
like a thousand knives touching me at once.
it wasn’t a stabbing pain though,
just a light touch, or a prick.
a simple ache
that did nothing
but remind me
that i wasn’t happy.
i wasn’t happy with life
so, i looked at the fading sky
and tried to figure out where it all went wrong
and if there was any possibility
of fixing myself.

_Caitlin Burns is a junior at University Park studying English and is from Scranton, P.A. She enjoys writing poetry and fiction in her spare time, as well as reading when she’s done homework. Caitlin enjoys spending time with her nephew, having game nights, and painting, even if she’s not very good at it!_
TIME, by Olivia Giovannini

All you have is time.
Constantly there, haunting
The clocks tick, moving in one direction indefinitely.
Seeming like it will last forever

You start to get used to it.
The fragile air that surrounds,
Watching us as we grow
In love with the uncertainty that follows you.

There will always be tomorrow, they say,
Will there be?
The mesmerizing sun shining every day,
Readying the moon that passes us on our way to sleep

Exhaling and inhaling,
Blood circulating the intricate maze designed by our insides,
The delicate tissue of our beings
Starting to decompose the thin lining of our skin.

All you have is time.
Take it
The hourglass runs out.
It’s too late now.

Taken for granted
Wished to be sped up
There’s nothing left but the clock,
Ticking as time goes on without you.

Olivia Giovannini is a freshman and nursing major at Pennsylvania State University. She has three pugs: Lulu, Gigi, and Mika. Olivia has written nonfiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry before, but poetry has always been her favorite! She likes to hang out with her friends, family, and boyfriend while at home in Kennett Square, PA.
AN INVITATION TO BELONGING, by Maggie Dressler

I used to long for belonging
with a person
or in a place

All through my childhood I imagined
a feeling
that could belong to me someday.

Does a feeling like that exist?

I searched
I failed
I screamed

I heard
your voice as you called me to you
and I saw
everything I longed for

—belonging—
in your being.
WHAT’S THE DEAL WITH MY DOLLAR?, by Maggie Dressler

Maggie Dressler plans to major in English and comparative literature. Her favorite colors are navy and dark grey, and platypuses are her favorite animal because they evoke so many questions. She enjoys using her writing to experiment with new things and often finds herself searching for some of the more whimsical aspects of life and reflecting her findings in what she writes.