



A SONG | BY LUKE BENTLEY

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At Hendricks park, nature abounds
The park is full of sights and sounds!
Radiant and purple flowers
I could stay and sit for hours!

Oh, beautiful nature
What a comfort you are!
Oh, beautiful nature
I love your sun and stars!

Spring Boulevard a pretty sight!
A gorgeous trail for walk or bike
In the Fall the plants abound
In red and yellow, orange and brown!

Oh, beautiful nature
What a comfort you are!
Oh, beautiful nature
I love your sun and stars!

At delta ponds I ride my bike
And crane my neck to view the sights!
I love to view the sun that sinks
Into a background of purple and pink!

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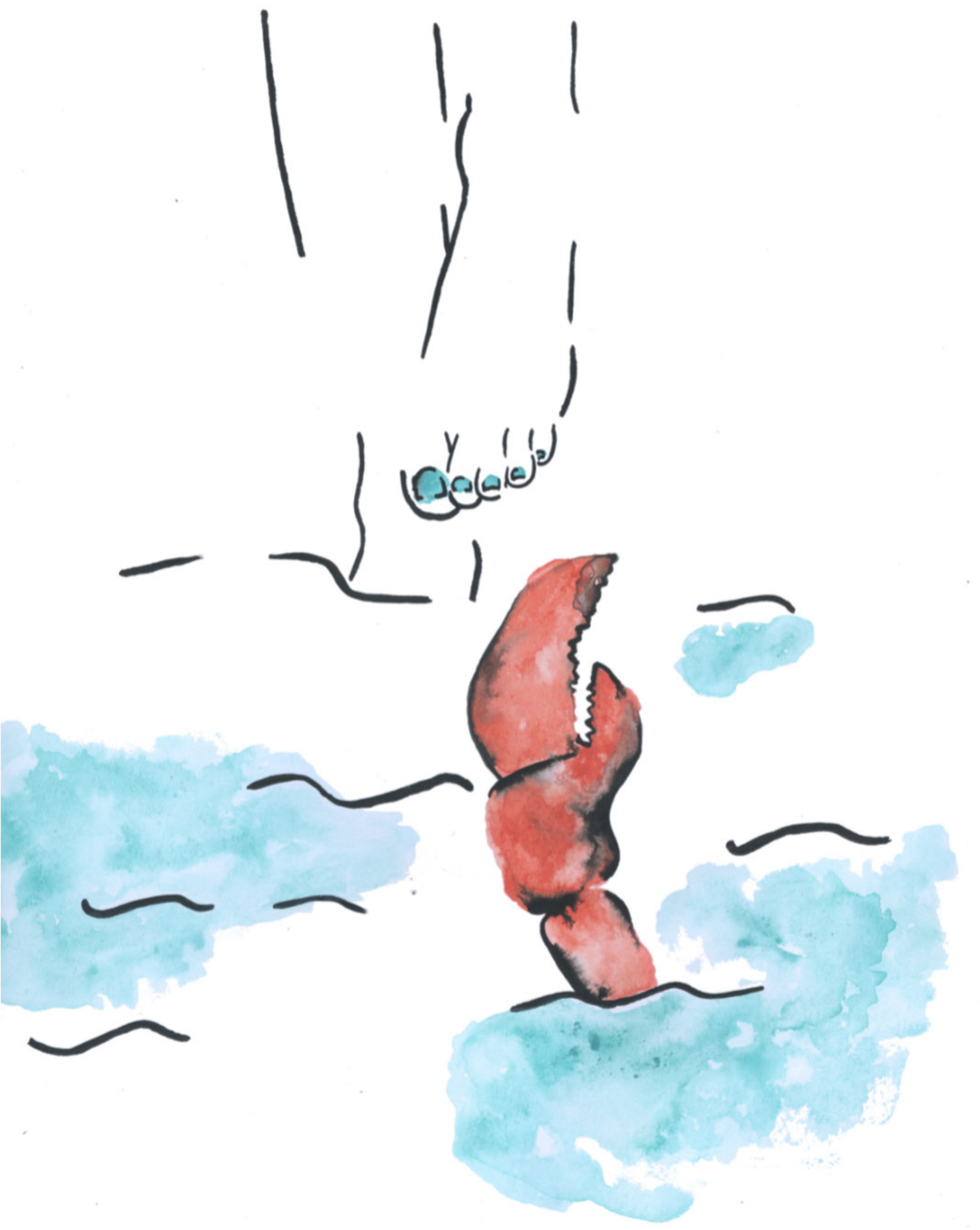
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BEACH HAIKU | BY KESLAR SIMPSON

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The sand on my toes
I feel something close to me
Darn, it's a crab, ouch.

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BEES | BY KIWI WHITE

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I envy the busy bee
No one questions you
Watching you buzz from flower to flower
We acknowledge your business is true
However, I'm not a bee
I'm a high school student
Who is being unraveled by life and study
Like a string from a spool
Not like the bee, regardless of my business
Those uninvolved tell me how
Without the slightest hint of honey in their voices
I've got it easy now

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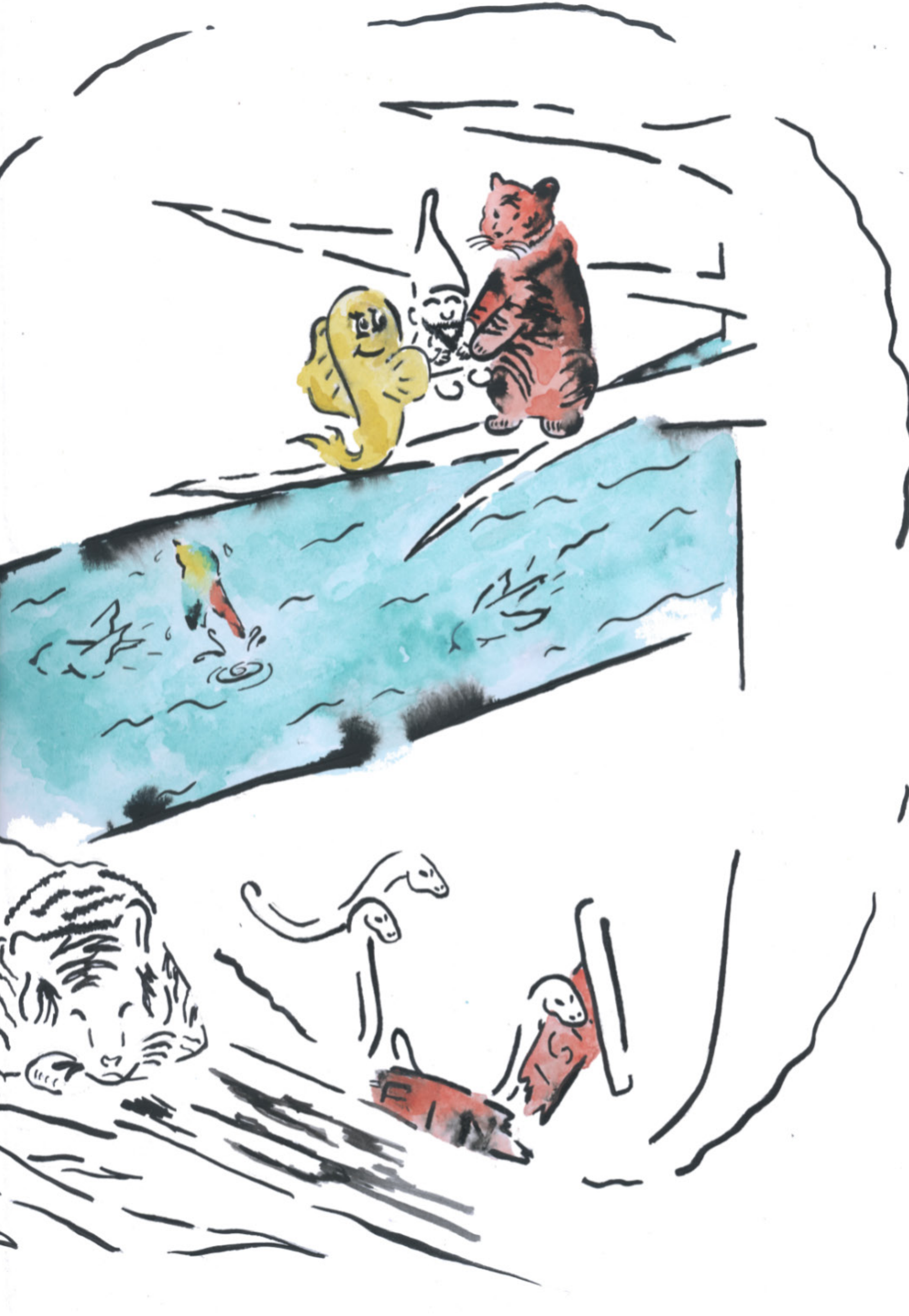
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BENNY'S DREAM | BY MAKENZIE WILLIAMSON

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Benny was a tiger
Who lived near a stream
And then one random day
He had a funny dream
The birds began to swim
And the snakes began to run
So Benny was confused
But he was kinda having fun
He went and climbed a tree
And made friends with the fish
They served him good food
On a pretty glass dish
But Benny was getting tired
He wanted to go home
So the fish said goodbye
And gifted him a gnome
Benny climbed back up
Into his cozy tree
He fell fast asleep
While listening to the bees
He woke up the next day
With the sun shining bright
He rolled over and thought
Something was not right
The fish had returned
Back home to the water
The birds in their nests
Were definitely not otters
Everything was back
To the way it was before
But Benny the tiger
Thought that normal was a bore

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DESERT’S HEART | BY RAIN HOFFMEISTER

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I breathe in the dark, desolate, night air,

Stars reflect themselves off my eyes,

As my warmth melts into everything.

Distant howls rupture the quiet,

The quiet that lives in the brush and trees,

With the mountains smiling behind.

I think of you as I look at those stars,

The ones you – miles away – can still see.

I want to stay here separate from you.

Lay my head on the cold, soft ground,

Hug this world and try to never let go.

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EVERY SINGLE WAY | BY RAIN HOFFMEISTER

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When it’s quiet, I climb through my bedroom window out into the early October night. I hold a bottle of my dad’s dark brown beer in one hand while pulling myself onto the roof. I wobble from one foot to the other and sit down. I begin taking small, timid sips of the beer trying to drink it like the 16-year-old adult I have become. But I never liked the taste of beer, even now, and I throw the bottle into my neighbor’s yard when there’s still a couple of ounces left. The bitter liquid warms me as it settles in, the night around me becomes slightly blurry, and I lay my head back. I lay here thinking about her, the day she left, and I wonder how everything would have been if she were still here. I can still smell her perfume as she hugged me goodbye, before sliding through the front door dragging that bright red suitcase behind her. I picture her smiley face and close my eyes.

Rays of sunlight peak over my neighbor’s house and I open my eyes to find myself still on the roof. My feet dangle off the edge, and I look into my neighbor’s yard at her small rat-like dog that is showing quite an interest in the last of the beer I threw. I watch the small beast for a few seconds before I’m interrupted by my little sister, Taya, calling for me from inside the house. Inside, I hear Taya beginning to panic as she looks for a letter she wrote to mom. She yells to me, “Rylie, where’s the letter with the drawing? I need it.” I quickly search my drawers – through all the letters Taya has sent – and find the most recent one. I grab it and run downstairs. “Taya, I found it,” I say.

She runs to me smiling as her backpack swings from side to side. “Thanks,” she says, quickly grabbing hold of it to make a final drawing on the envelope before we *send* it. She hands it back to me, “Okay you can send it now, please,” she says.

“Alright. I will,” I say, “And Taya, we leave in 20 minutes for school.” Her brown curls of hair dance around her face and she looks up at me with her clear green eyes and asks where breakfast is. I quickly set out her cereal and head upstairs to check on dad.

It was April, almost 7 months ago, when my dad came home early from work. He was holding doughnuts and Thai food, hoping that they would somehow fix the conversation he was about to have with us. The conversation where he’d tell us how he had gone to the doctor that day, how they had found cancer in one lung, and how it had already spread to his lymph nodes. He would then try to reassure us that he wouldn’t go down without a fight, that he’d beat this thing. But I looked it up. There is a 53% percent survival rate with Stage II Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer patients.

He’s lying in his bed near the window curled up reading a book when I walk upstairs. He smiles when he sees me. His frail frame looks thinner, and dark raccoon rings lie around his eyes. He tilts his bald head up at me. “Hey, Kit Kat,” he says – his nickname for me since my 5th birthday when I choked while shoving Kit Kats in my mouth.

“Hey, Dad, how’re you feeling?”

“I’m starting to feel better,” he says, even though I know he’s lying.

I hug him. “Taya and I gotta go to school. The nurse will be here soon though. Love you.”

“Love you too,” he says, and I walk back downstairs.



I call to Taya and we get into my red Subaru, Ruby the Subi, which my friends call The Lawnmower. She drives awkwardly, like she’s underwater, the speedometer still not working and I wonder if I’m going 30 or 45 miles per hour as I drive us to the elementary school a few minutes away.

It’s 10 minutes before Taya’s 4th grade class starts and I hug her goodbye, smelling the coconut conditioner in her hair. She jumps out of the car. “Love you,” I say, as she walks up to school. She looks back at me and around at kids nearby, embarrassed by what I said, and I laugh to myself thinking of how I’ve truly taken on my mother’s role.

There are 30 minutes until my classes start, and I sit in the parking lot at my High School writing back to Taya. The letter is short but I know it will be enough for Taya.

Taya,

I am so, so glad that you are doing so well in school. I am so proud of you for winning the art contest for your grade, that’s so amazing. I loved the drawing you sent in your last letter to me. You are becoming such a great artist. I hope to be able to come back and visit soon. I miss you so much. And don’t worry too much about your dad. He is very strong. He’ll be okay. I love you so much, sweetie.

Love,



Mom

I hold Taya’s most recent letter to mom, the drawing she made is folded twice to make sure it’d fit in the small envelope. I pause and think about writing my mom another email trying to explain how much I need her to come home, but I think better of it. I know she will respond the same she always does: “I will so soon. I’m just finding myself here in Paris right now.” There’s always more to her emails about how she loves us, but I can usually never get past that first line. I put the letter for Taya in an envelope and head to my classes.

In the middle of my Pre Calc class, I get a phone call. It’s my dad’s nurse. I answer in class and then leave. He’s in the hospital again.

I put Ruby in reverse and quickly back up. The car lurches slightly, and my back bumper comes into *mild* contact with the car parked behind me. I think about how nice it would be to leave a note on that car as I drive to Taya’s elementary school. Driving to pick up Taya and then to the hospital is too familiar. Once in the car, Taya sits quietly, drawing, she doesn’t cry anymore, and I think about how much stronger she is than me.

The nurse at the hospital tells me she called my mom a few days ago when he started to get worse. I laugh out loud. The poor nurse doesn’t understand that my mom would never show up. But my laugh dies when I look outside my dad’s hospital room. That bright red suitcase is sitting there looking like it finally came back home. I choke on my breath in disbelief and look up. My mom stands there the same as two years ago. “Hey,” she says, and I can tell she thinks that’s enough.

And it just might be.

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I FORGOT HER COMPLETELY | BY PHOENIX BASTIDA-LLAMAS

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When I was five years old I got married to Penelope Jones. She was the prettiest girl in my kindergarten class and after the ceremony we ate snack together. Six days later, Penelope Jones got pulled out of school. On Wednesday she was sitting next to me during group time, and on Thursday; Laurel Burke was biting her string cheese in my ear. I remember asking Mrs. Adburry about it, she told me I wasn't big enough to understand, but that Penelope Jones' parents had to go somewhere and she went with them. As I got older, my memories of Penelope began to fade, she seemed to just slip away into a corner of my mind. I would think about her from time to time, but eventually I forgot her completely.

So I entered my senior year of high school, Penelope Jones and worry free. That was, until I saw the news on October fourteenth. A girl had been found in a trailer right on the edge of town, she was skinny, traumatized, and had just given birth to a child. However there was no sign of a child in that trailer. For privacy reasons they wouldn't release her name until she had settled back in with her family, so the whole town waited, sitting by their T.V.'s. Mostly because they had nothing better to do. On October twenty-first, I had a physics test. I didn't go. Instead, I sat at home, the T.V. turned on to the news channel. Hoping to get a glimpse of the girl from the trailer.

On October twenty-first, Penelope Jones' name flashed across my T.V. screen. I saw a skinny girl, with brown curls down to her waist, standing in front a big blue house. Her eyes were darting around nervously, and she was gripping tightly onto her mother's hand. Every memory I had of her came flooding back like I had turned away from the ocean for too long and it was finally getting it's revenge. I couldn't believe that Penelope Jones, my Penelope Jones had been locked away in a trailer for twelve years. What had she done all that time alone? How had she gotten there? Why hadn't she come back earlier?

On November second, I got pulled out of class by our principal. She sat me down in her office to tell me that my Penelope Jones was asking to see me, and I was the only person she remembered in the entire city besides her family. At first I didn't understand. If she wanted to see me so badly why would she leave? I sat in the office confused for what seemed like forever. Until I realized; Penelope Jones didn't leave, she was taken.

An hour later I was knocking on the front door Penelope Jones' big blue house, my hands were shaking, I was in uncharted territory. When her mother opened the door she gave me a hug. Not the kind of hugs my mother gives, that make you feel safe and loved. The kind of hug where they drape off of you, almost forcing you to hold them up. When she finally let me go I felt relieved, I barely knew this woman. She led me into the living room, and gestured for me to sit on the sofa, it was large, made of leather and very uncomfortable; she instructed me to wait. So that's what I did. I waited for two whole minutes, with sweaty palms and cold fingertips. Until my Penelope Jones walked through the door.

The moment I looked at her I was five years old again. Like Penelope had finished all of her crackers, and I was about to offer her my last one. Except this wasn't my Penelope Jones. This girl wasn't five years old, she was seventeen, and she was an empty shell of a girl. But when I looked at her, like really looked at her; past all the memories, and the shared snacks, I saw that five year old girl, more terrified than I had seen anyone before.

Penelope Jones sat down next to me, I wanted to move away badly, but I didn't. She grabbed my wrist and looked up at me, a smile began to spread across her face. Then she asked me if we were still married, or if I'd moved on. I told her yes, we were, because she hadn't been around to tell me otherwise. Her mother made a sharp move in my direction, almost ready to scold me. But Penelope Jones just smiled, tucked her hair behind her ear and look at her knees. As I stared at her I noticed her ears were pierced. They hadn't been pierced when we were in kindergarten, and I wondered aloud when she had gotten them done. She told me he had done it in the trailer when she was thirteen, in order to make her look more grown up. Then I asked her if it made her feel more grown up. She said no, it only mattered if she looked grown up to him.

My Penelope Jones, had been treated like a grown up in that trailer. I was smart enough to know what that meant. I remembered what the news had said about the girl just giving birth to a child. I wondered where that child was, but I didn't dare ask. My Penelope Jones had a child. A child who was off somewhere with the man who treated a little girl like a grown up.

Penelope Jones and I spent the next months together. I helped her feel more comfortable out in the world, and she helped me hold onto my last little bit of childhood. As time went on, my memories of Penelope Jones' child began to fade, it just seemed to slip away into a corner of my mind. I would think about it from time to time, but eventually I forgot about it completely.

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ICHIGO ICHIÈ – ONLY ONCE | BY JENNIFER MEACHAM

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INTERVIEW WITH DIANA ARTERIAN | BY SARAH ANDREWS

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Diana Arterian is a working author and poet who was gracious enough to appear at Lane Community College for a poetry reading. Beyond writing, Arterian serves as poetry editor at Noemi Press and is a PhD candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Southern California. In her interview, Arterian provides insight into what utilizing a creative degree looks like in modern society.

WHAT DOES LITERARY SUCCESS LOOK LIKE TO YOU?

I will think “I just need to get an essay published on The Poetry Foundation website,” and then when I attain that goal I’ve already taken up another. Those who are able to make interventions and inventions in their genre, operating with an ethics for those outside their own identities, and also having a rich personal life—those, to me, are the markers of “success.” If one is reaching people through their work and doing it with care, what more can an author ask for?

WHAT, ACCORDING TO YOU, MAKES POETRY SPECIAL AS A GENRE?

Poetry is the human’s most ancient creative form, save for painting. Rhyme and meter was how one remembered the poem, even if it was quite long. As poetry developed, the roaming poet/bard/troubairitz/griot/guslar/etc. was a source of story, music, history, morality, philosophy, entertainment—a role that has since fractured into many different figures in our modern moment. As a form as ancient as it is, it has manifested itself in innumerable ways (epic, ghazal, sonnet, free verse) and contained innumerable topics (grief, love, war, ecstasy, the unnamable). Poetry is something that continues to undergo transmutation, shifting to contain whatever we ask it to sustain. It doesn’t adhere to the rules often imposed upon prose in any of its forms. Poetry’s plasticity is what is so thrilling to me. It’s ancient history, all over the world, illustrates is vitality and urgency—and why we must continue to pay attention to it as a form of art.

WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD COVER AND TITLE?

Americans (and other nationalities, too) are becoming more and more compelled by aesthetics and images—people spend half their day looking at feeds, reading less. Beyond this, considering what the literary world is like right now and the genre of the text, a title and cover can be even make-or-break. I have some angst about my titles, as they are either long and/or difficult to pronounce. I’ve helped myself, however, by having some great covers (I think). Locating a piece of art that engages the ideas or feelings of a text, as well as getting a fabulous designer, can make such an impact.

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IS PLUTO A PLANET? | BY KAT KAUFFMANN

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Hey. I’m Eris. No, not the goddess of discord and strife- although a knowledge of Greek mythology is always appreciated. No, I’m the Eris that was called the tenth planet back when I was discovered in 2005 by the astronomer, Mike Brown. But then you pulled the rug out from under me and decided to actually define the term planet officially for the first time. By 2006 I’m just a “dwarf,” “Plutoid,” or “trans-Neptunian object.” So what is a planet? At one point in history, the sun was considered a planet. The Greeks named seven planets: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sun, and the moon. Eventually the Earth became a planet that orbits the sun, and the moon was understood to orbit the Earth. Now the associate director of IAU (the International Astronomical Union) Gareth Williams and astronomers like Mike Brown might argue that celestial bodies such as myself and Pluto aren’t planets, but I actually agree with scientists Kirby Runyon and Alan Stern who say not only are we planets, but that you earthers are missing out on about one hundred more awesome celestial bodies by denying them planethood. What I’m saying is that Pluto is a planet and I am too.

In fact, when I was first discovered I was initially called the tenth planet of the solar system- but certain scientists said that was inaccurate. You see, back when Pluto was discovered in 1930, there really wasn’t a working definition of the term planet. It was basically assumed you would recognize one if you saw it. So then here I come along and I’m 27% more massive than Pluto. I’m the ninth most massive object directly orbiting your sun. Obviously I’m a planet, right? Astrophysicist Ethan Siegel says no. According to Siegel, “The simple fact is that Pluto was misclassified when it was first discovered: it was never on the same footing as the other eight worlds...” (“Welcome Back, Pluto?” Wall, space.com) He argues that since Pluto hasn’t ‘cleared its neighborhood’ of other orbiting bodies it doesn’t get to count as a planet. But by that criteria, Earth actually wasn’t a planet for the first 500 million years or so of its existence because its orbit included a swarm of debris. (Stern, Grinspoon, “Welcome Back Pluto”) Further, if Earth were to be moved out past Pluto near the asteroid belt it’s too small to clear its neighborhood out there too. Therefore, by the current definition it would cease to be a planet. Also, Earth, Mars, Jupiter and Neptune share their orbits with asteroids even now, so by the current definition they aren’t planets either.

Scientist Kirby Runyon has proposed a geophysical definition of planethood that boils down to a spheroid “sub-stellar mass body that has never undergone nuclear fusion” (Azumbuja, Scientists Fight). Basically it needs to be roughly round in shape and isn’t star. This differs from the IAU’s definition because it doesn’t rely on what may or may not be orbiting nearby, it’s just focused on what the actual object is in and of itself. Critics of this definition argue that this would create too many planets, possibly even including our own moon and several of the moons orbiting gas giants like Jupiter and Saturn. While it’s true that number would sit around 110 total planets (so far!), aerospace engineer and planetary scientist Alan Stern says it’s all for the better. He thinks the more planets invite greater inspiration of curiosity and more opportunity for exploration and study. In fact, a common question he is asked is, “Why would we go study places like Pluto if it’s not a planet?” It’s clear the impact of bestowing the title of “planet” to a celestial object has on human interest in that object. While it might be hard to memorize all of those 110 planets, there is actually very little reason to so with the internet so easily accessible and apps so readily available on smartphones, like star charts and space encyclopedias. There is no real reason to limit the number of ‘true planets’ to eight.

Then there is the cultural nostalgia for Pluto. Astronomer Mike Brown posted on Twitter (where he goes by @plutokiller) that, “Nostalgia for Pluto is really not a very good planet argument, but that’s basically all there is.” I say he’s wrong, that the sentimentality for Pluto is an excellent reason to keep it a planet and the weight the term carries is a very important reason to do so. The term planet gives a relevancy to a celestial body that it few other words do. It inspires curiosity and intrigue. People want to know what that planet is like, what is its composition? How long is it’s orbit? What are it’s moons like? Does it have seasons? Lots of people know that it likely rains diamonds on Neptune and Uranus. Many also know that Pluto may be up to one third water or that it has five moons and is sometimes considered a ‘binary planet’ because one of its moons, Charon, is almost as massive as Pluto itself. But perhaps you didn’t know that I, Eris, actually orbit closer to the sun than Pluto at certain times and that all of the objects in the Asteroid Belt together are roughly equivalent in volume to me... Or maybe you’ve never even heard of me because I’m not considered a planet! According to astronomer and historian Owen Gingerich, “Planet is a culturally defined word that has changed its meaning over and over again.” (“Planet-or-Not Debate,” Drake, NationalGeographic.com) But while the meaning may have changed, the weight the term carries has not. So while Pluto was only a planet for 75 years, the nostalgia that Planet Pluto carries is relevant and keeps it current in the hearts and minds of adults who remember the wonder and curiosity the little frozen world inspired, cast so far from your sun.

Therefore I say that Pluto and I are planets. The term planet carries psychological weight, which may cause the study of the solar system and beyond to be limited by what society thinks isn’t important. The current definition was only voted on by a small number of professionals involved in astro sciences and has continuously been hotly debated since the IAU demoted Pluto in 2006. By the current definition, which includes the criteria of clearing your neighborhood around your orbit, several ‘true planets’ technically aren’t or wouldn’t be under slightly different circumstances. Pluto carries cultural significance that shouldn’t be dismissed, even as understanding in planetary science is always growing and adapting. Further, while some may say it’s important to keep the number of planets down to something manageable like eight, it is an arbitrary number and excludes many important and interesting celestial bodies. There is no good reason to limit the number of planets, and 110 reasons to expand the idea of what a planet could be and inspire curiosity and imagination. Really, can’t we all just get along? I know that’s ironic coming from the planet named after the goddess of discord and strife, but there are some things we should agree on. For example, “Eris is the tenth planet!” There, wasn’t that easy?

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KISSING BEE | BY TALIHA OHMAN

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When you kiss my lips
It tastes so sweet, like honey
But stings like a bee

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MANATEE | BY KATE BECKER | HAND-BUILT CERAMICS

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By Kate Becker



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NEWS CYCLE | BY MIETTE POWELL

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How did we become numb to this?
Checking the news doesn't scare us anymore
1 dead, 2 dead, 3 dead, 4.
That's someone's child.
Now that I think about it, saying that won't help
We forget about dead kids, too.
Stoneman, Sandy Hook, Red Lake,
Parkland, West Nickel, Columbine.
They plaster the names of the shooters all over the place,
But where are the victims?
Nameless, faceless, numbers in a body count
Like they're playing a video game, who has the high score?
We used to be shocked, now it's just
Oh look. It happened again.
Who's next? Who knows.
Our airports are more secure than our future.
Back to school shootings, bulletproof backpacks.
We're playing roulette with the next generation.

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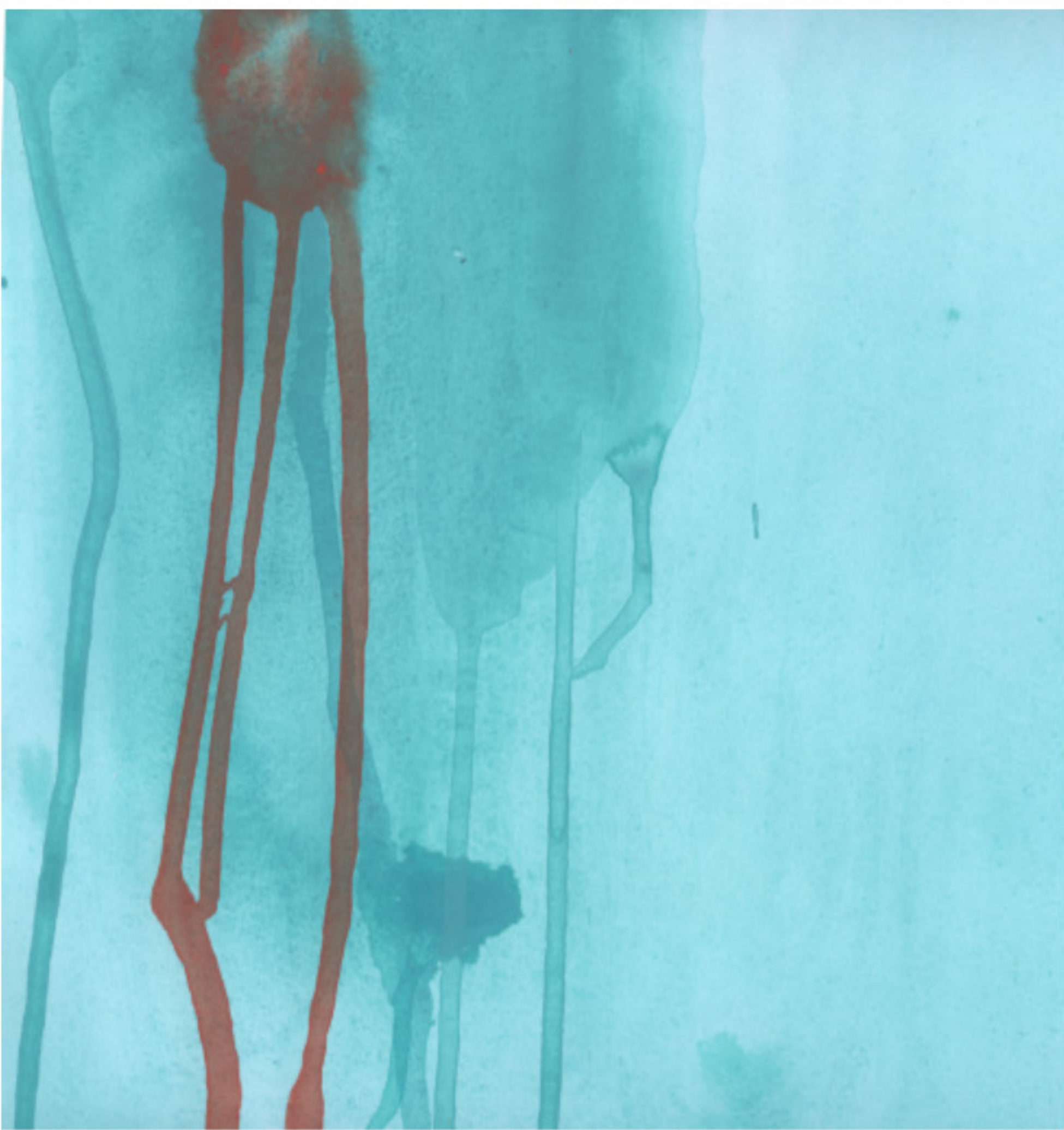
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PANIC | BY JURY S. JUDGE

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Growing stack of unpayable bills,
But still afford more sedative pills,
A self-assured wrong-way car,
Careens from the local bar,
An artery-clogged heart skips a beat,
Only a slice of delicate meat,
Instinctual desires feed,
Stalked by a desperate need,
The old lion's blind carnivore eyes,
Dull canines sunk into zebra thighs,
Burgeon moment of crisis,
Synthetic market prices,
Future disaster ever pending,
Swift hands irresponsible lending,
Unneeded ability,
Downward is mobility,
Executives feel no need to think,
Into sadness the laborers sink,
Assured it is a mere dream,
Hand over a muffled scream,
Neighbors should have heard the shrill blood cries,
How and time of night the victim dies,
Homicide detectives ask,
Given their new gruesome task,
Burden on a convict's furrowed brow,
Verdict of dying judgement is now.

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PEAR | BY ELLEN DAVIDSON | HAND-BUILT CERAMICS

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SOCIAL ANXIETY: A BULLY IN MY HEAD

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| BY GABRIELLA TELAROLI

Her fingernails are yellow and worn short from picking and biting

The skin around her eyes is heavy and dark from no sleep

She's scratching

Scratching

Scratching at her arms

She's breathing far too rapidly

Squirming all around

"Don't go," she says to me. "They won't even care if you're not there"

"Okay I won't," I tell her, falling into her grasp

She leans in, her sharp white fangs grinning cruelly

"Coward," She hisses in my ear, and I believe her

Guilt swallows me. I'm suddenly breathing fast just like her

"So... I *should* go?" I guess

My body starts to shake

I'm scared of her, even though I thought she only wanted to keep me safe

"*No*," She growls, startling me, her voice *harsh* like venom

"You'll look like an *idiot*"

"They don't even want you there. They don't even *like* you"

They only invited you because they feel sorry for you

"They aren't really your 'friends'"

The words sting like cold, jagged metal to my heart

I'm suddenly bleeding

I go. *Idiot, idiot, idiot*

I don't go. *Coward, coward, coward*

The only person she wants to protect is herself

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SPACE KITTIES | BY HAILEY FISHER | ACRYLIC PAINTING

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TEAPOT | BY KEN DINET | WHEEL-THROWN CERAMICS


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3 thoughts on “Teapot | By Ken Dinet | Wheel-Thrown Ceramics”



KEN

FEBRUARY 23, 2021 AT 12:46 AM

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HAILEY FISHER

FEBRUARY 23, 2021 AT 6:30 PM

Gorgeous work!

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MOHSIN KABIR

APRIL 20, 2021 AT 1:26 AM

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THE BALLAD OF THE STARLET | BY WILL RAGSDALE

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“Another song!” the old king brays
as the weary bard then sighs
In a sing-song way, the troubadours say
“Performance or demise.”

The drummer drums his numbing thumbs,
and the harpist’s knuckles crack.
The lutist plays through painful daze,
his hands gone raw and black.

Each note he breeds, his fingers bleed;
his strings snap with a twang.
He spoke to curse this tyrant king
when the starlet suddenly sang:

“Oh frightful king with silver rings
of hair beneath your crown,
Let our songs like purple wine,
cast away your frown!”

“We are but humble troubadours,
we live our lives to please,
We gaily play the days away
with innocence and ease.”

“In summer silks and winter wools,
we make our music loud!
Happily we’ll strum and sing
to prove our families proud!”

“So now we dance and now we sing,
but do you see our strife?
That’s why I beg you mighty king,
take mercy on their life.”

“For if they play another song,
surely they’ll be dead,
So spare them please, oh frightful king,
and take me in their stead!”

“I have no noble birth nor blood,
no riches to my name,
and to your court, in poverty,
from foreign lands I came.”

“Still though I am but seventeen,
I have an angel’s voice.
I’ll sing for you both night and day,
please make the moral choice...”

The king responded cold and cruel,
when a smile crossed his face:
“True you are a gentle thing
of innocence and grace,”

“A maiden fair with raven hair,
and smooth, soft olive skin,
I’ve made my choice young pretty girl,
I shall not spare your kin!”

“I’ll have them play until they fall,
and then I’ll take their heads,
and once you’ve watched your brothers die,
I’ll take you to my bed.”

“For pretty girls with angel’s voices
shall not go to waste,
and it is not the purple wine
which satisfies my taste.”

“Rather it’s the tender flesh
of a girl just seventeen,
and that my nights are lonely
in the absence of a queen”

So they played and so they died
and the starlet watched in fear,
she felt the king’s hands on her skin
and dreaded what was near.

He led her to his bed that eve
and there began to say:
“I’ll do to you what I wish to do,
be it night or day!”

T’was then he took her maidenhood,
making her his harlot,
and as he did he held her down,
saying “Sing, my little starlet.”

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THE GREATER GOOD | BY ALEX RAUSCHER

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Two teens were on the opposite sides of a wide, long, and impeccably shiny hall. These teens, almost men judging from their roughly shaven stubble, were arguing over the quality of their performances. One of the teens, this one had a name tag over the right side of his chest labeled “Madison, J”, said almost chastisingly,

“I’m just telling you that you wouldn’t have lost that wargame that fast if you hadn’t moved forward to get those ‘civilians’ out of the way – they weren’t even a part of the mission, just tacked on. No need to get so mad over that opinion.”

The other teen, his name tag labeled “Parker, M”, had fierce, passionate eyes. These eyes, however, were currently filled with anger and exasperation.

“And I’m telling you,” Parker jabbed a finger at Madison, “that it doesn’t matter that it was just a simulation, or that they weren’t a part of the mission! In live combat it would have been the right thing to do!”

Madison scoffed,

“You take everything way too seriously, Parker. Besides, they’re preparing us for war here, Parker. It’s not nice, but in war sacrifices must be made for the greater good.”

Parker had a look of resignation on his face,

“I get it,” he spat out bitterly, “I get that no one here has a heart!”

Madison scowled at that.

“Parker, you’ll get yourself, and the men who’ll serve under you, killed with that mindset! The battlefield isn’t a place for a heart!”

Parker threw his hands up and stormed away, but not before replying,

“So be it then! I’d rather die with a heart than live without!”

Parker then woke up in his filthy, disorganized officer’s cabin. The smell of sweat and some sort of funk, likely some combination of blood, dirt, and foliage, permeated the room. The room had been this way for several days now, Parker was often too drained from the recent excursions to really do anything but fall on his now disgusting bed. The dream he’d had wasn’t one he had too often anymore, most nights he was too tired to dream, and if he did have a dream more often than not it was a nightmare. This dream was one of his special dreams though, it was the center of almost everything that he did.

Parker lived with his heart even when it threatened to kill him. Living in this way was the source of most of his nightmares. Most of his nightmares came from one incident in particular:

Parker was a member of the Colony Defense Force on Idris VI, a lush jungle world that appeared to have no life but trees, grass, and everything green in between. About a year had gone by without any sort of incident, but they still patrolled the surrounding jungles as a formality.

One morning, one of the colonists had found a mangled body, and quickly got to the CDF outpost to raise an alarm. Nobody thought that it was wildlife at first, why would they? Everybody thought that it was some monstrous colonist with a lust for murder. Parker thought differently, but was told to be wary of people anyways by his CO, Commander Jacob Madison. The patrols immediately became much more serious affairs, as they searched everywhere for a murderer on the loose.

One patrol in particular, close to five months after the body was found, would forever remain in Parker’s memories. The jungle, up till that point, spooked some of the soldiers, especially at night. But after five months of seeing nothing, the men of Parker’s platoon were becoming more comfortable. This patrol, much to the platoon’s relief, was a day patrol.

The jungle’s only noises were the trees settling in their places, water flowing if they were close to a stream, and the snapping of twigs underneath their muddy boots. Today was different, felt Parker. He didn’t know why or how, it just felt... different.

Parker looked to his men and immediately knew what felt different, his second in command was out of his line of sight. A rare occurrence.

“Rolands! Sound off!” Parker shouted.

No reply.

“Rolands!”

Silence.

“Rolands!”

Silence.

One last time,

“Rolands!”

“Chill boss! I was just taking a leak.” Rolands said as he walked around a tree, redoing his belt.

“Rolands, do NOT do that again or so help me I will court martial your ass!” Parker threatened harshly.

“Jeez boss,” Rolands sheepishly replied, “I thought you’d be cool with that. I guess I’ll be more careful.”

Parker sighed in both exasperation and relief, one more than the other, but still thought that something felt off about the jungle today. The jungle didn’t look any different, nor did it smell any different. Humidity was about the same, and it was as hot as it usually was. Parker then noticed what was different, there was a new noise in the jungle.

It wasn’t loud, but it was getting louder slowly. Buzzing

This buzzing was like nothing he had ever heard before – even though his home world was home to several species of genetically modified bees. It was a slow and extremely low pitched phenomena. A gut instinct told him that it was dangerous.

“Safeties off! Eyes open!” Parker commanded.

The soldiers looked at him incredulously, but nonetheless followed his command, albeit a bit hesitatingly.

One of the soldiers, Sgt. Benjamin, asked the question that was on everybody’s minds,

“Boss? I ain’t gonna tell you how to be an officer or nothing, but why in the hell are we on guard against a couple of bees at worst?”

“Because!” Parker replied, a bit on edge, “There are no animals, no insects, nothing but plants on this rock! They’re still building a pollinator strain for this environment.”

Parker’s men remained a bit unconvinced, they all knew what Parker said was true, but they doubted that any native species of bug would be big enough to use a gun on.

They remained on guard for about half an hour, the buzzing getting louder; the enlisted men thinking of this as just an extended break disguised as an investigation.

One of the men, Benjamin, even took out a cigarette.

“Ben! What in the hell are you doing?” Parker demanded.

“Aw, boss, you need to chill. Ain’t nothing gonna happen from a little smoke.”

“I know I’m lax with regulation,” Parker admitted, “but smoking on patrol could get you, and the rest of us, killed!”

“From what?” Benjamin chuckled, “Secondhand smoke? Sure, maybe in thirty years.”

Benjamin then took a full drag, then grew confused as smoke rose to his face from his chest. His confusion grew further as he saw everyone looking at him with horror in their eyes.

So he looked down, and saw a spike coming out of the right side of his chest, smoke coming out of the exceedingly narrow space between his flesh and the spike dark with his blood.

“Ah,” Benjamin thought in shock, “So that’s what that taste in my mouth was.”

Benjamin then saw dark, he didn’t even feel pain before his sight went black. Before oblivion, Benjamin only knew a sense of disbelief – not enough time to fear death.

This, besides the fact that he was now dead, was what differed him from the other soldiers. They had enough time to dread the next moment.

Parker had fear too, as he was no different from the next man except for his higher rank and larger heart.

But Parker had enough presence of mind to see out of the corner of his eyes that everyone else was just as frozen as he was.

He wanted to give a calm, collected, and clear command, with a confidence that would assuage his men’s fear. Instead, he frantically screeched an order in a fearful voice,

“Shoot it! Shoot it! Shoot it!”

He received an equally rushed compliance to his command, his men scrambling to aim their guns and fire. The full auto barking of their rifles rang throughout the jungle. Most of the bullets missed their target, but there were enough bullets in the air to fell the creature that killed Benjamin.

The mangled corpses drove one of the enlisted men, Daniels, to drop onto his knees and vomit. After his last few dry heaves he muttered wildly,

“Oh... oh my god. We fucking shot Benji... Why the hell did we shoot him?”

The bullets landed everywhere in the general direction of the creature, including the sack of flesh and bones formerly known as Benjamin.

The morale they lost that day was never regained, though his men were far more serious afterwards. The creature appeared to be a gigantic wasp, and there were way more than just that one.

“We have to get out of here,” Parker thought, “But Madison isn’t letting us go.”

The bugs were easy to kill, the only problem was that there were too many of them to make any sort of sizable dent in their numbers. Every day they lost someone new. Each death as bad as Benjamin’s

Parker grabbed his sidearm, a solar recharged laser pistol.

Madison insisted on staying because of the money invested into the colonization of Idris VI. Parker thought Madison insisted on staying because of the money invested in him by the colonization company. They weren’t actually losing money, only losing lives on this colonization project, so why should they lose their investment just because a few soldiers did their job and died?

The ranking officer had the sole authority to get everybody aboard the escape shuttles and have them launch, and Parker was the second highest ranking officer.

“Is this worth going to prison for the rest of my life?” Parker pondered, while looking at his gun. He never hated Madison, but here he was, pondering whether or not to end his life. It was impersonal, should he end one life who didn’t really deserve to die to save many more lives?

He put the pistol down, and sighed. The moral calculus checked out, but he still wasn’t willing to kill Madison. It was a bit selfish, in his mind, to not want to kill Madison because it didn’t feel right. Killing Madison would be for the greater good, more people would survive, but directly killing someone was something Parker didn’t want to do. Parker didn’t mind going to prison, it wasn’t that consequence he was afraid of, it was the consequence of the soul. Parker didn’t believe in God, but he thought he should live the way he wanted to. He wasn’t willing to do something that was so distasteful to him.

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THE MANY FACES OF LAX MAGNON | BY LAX MAGNON

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THE RIGHT TO MEAT | BY AIDAN CLARK

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I woke with a quick jolt, there was rattling at my door. Someone was trying to get in. My clock said it was 3:50 am. I slowly crawl out of bed while lifting the blanket off of myself, to make sure not to make too much noise. When I get to the door, my door knob was still moving. I prepare to open it, swing the door open to surprise whoever is on the other side. I count in my head, one, two, three.. and flung it open as fast as possible. My heart settled back down to the middle of my chest when I saw who it was, my little brother.

“Brendan what are you doing?”

“I looked at what time sunrise is, and it’s at 6:50. It will take one hour and nineteen minutes to get to the spot. Which puts us at leaving the house at around 5:30, and I just figured it be best if we got there before sunrise. So I was going to wake you up now so we have plenty of time to get everything together.” He looked up at me with a slight smile, and a mall glimmer in his eye. I could tell his skin was crawling with excitement.

“Ok, then let’s get going. Go get all your stuff together.” He shot off to his room to go get all his clothes on. I remember the first time I got to go out hunting, it’s a whole new feeling you can’t explain. I was equally excited for him, I don’t get to do much with my brother, let alone things we both get excited for. I’d been hunting for years, and he’d always excited for me to come home with a deer or elk. He looked at me each time as someone with a superpower, or as if I’d just found 5 pounds of gold. I knew that one day I would take him, and today was that day.

We got all our stuff together, and started rolling out of the driveway. He was sitting there, all content, trying all he could not to shake with excitement. It didn’t take long until he decided to open his mouth and ask me a trillion questions.

“How many pounds is an elk? How many will we see? Do you think I’ll hit ‘em?” Will it be hard to get the elk out of the forest?” The questions kept on coming, and I answered every single one. Sure it was quite annoying, but I knew it’d make him more calm when the time came. He’d feel like he had all the answers.

We finally arrived to the spot I had researched and knew there was elk. There’s a large clear cut we would have to hike in to. We got our camo on, grabbed our guns, and began the quarter mile hike. Even though my brother ran his mouth like a motor in the car, he was dead silent on the walk. I couldn’t even hear the gravel crumbling under his feet. About a week ago he was out in our driveway practicing, walking without making any noise. I had told him that elk would run at the sound of something as simple as a leaf hitting the forest floor. Once we got to the clear-cut we spotted a high point we could watch over from; we walked the timber edge and made sure to keep an eye out. The sun was barely out, enough to turn the sky to gold. A few seconds in to our walk, I saw a movement coming from about 200 yards away. I told Brendan not to move; he stiffened up like a board and started to look around.

“Drop down to your stomach,” I told him in the lightest voice I could, I’m not even sure he heard me, but he followed me as I began to lay down. We took out our binoculars and looked over to where I saw the animal. Sure enough there was a small herd of elk, only about 7 total, with one large five by six bull. Brendan looked at them through his pocket sized spotting scope; I knew he had seen them because his hand started to shake.

“Do you see them?”

“Yeah, there is a huge bull!”

“Shhhhhh you gotta be quiet. Is that the one you want?”

“Yes,” I handed him the rifle, and he set the stock in his shoulder, rested his cheek, and looked down the scope with one eye.

“You have him in the scope?”

“Yeah,”

“Alright, put the cross hairs right at his shoulder, and slowly pull the trigger,” I saw him start to settle in and get set in his shot. I prepared for him to shoot and I just looked at the elk, slowly grazing through the open, with the sun glowing off of his bark colored fur. About 30 seconds passed and he hadn’t shot yet. I looked over at him and he looked at me, then stared at the ground.

“I don’t know if I can shoot”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know if I can kill an animal”

“Stop, and just shoot.” he looked at me, I wasn’t sure if he was disappointed, or if he was going to cry; I think a little of both. I was about to tell him to hurry before the elk were gone. Then I realized something, that it wasn’t my choice to make this choice for him. Part of being a human is choosing what you eat. It was my decision to eat meat, and I felt the responsibility for gathering and killing an animal for that meat. So I told him,

“You choose to eat meat right?”

“Yeah...” He responded while looking at me shyly

“So do you think it’s your responsibility to kill the animal you eat?”

“Yeah I do, I just don’t know how.”

“Well you need to make a decision, whether you will eat meat, and be responsible for that decision. Or to not eat meat, and not have to follow through with all parts it takes to get it.” He looked down at the clear cut, watching the elk. The elk had not moved, I believe ironically. Brendan got stable into his shot again and said he was going to shoot. I watched down my binoculars, and next heard the large boom of the gun going off next to me. The heard all together ran, except the bull he had shot. It laid there, and Brendan just observed it down his scope. We sat there for five minutes or so, I finally spoke.

“Do you think you make the right choice?”

“Yes, I do.” He responded. Then smiled up at me, with a true smile. We walked together back to the truck to call our dad so he could come out and pack the elk out.

He invited five of his coworkers/close friends who brought quads and gear to help out. We all got to work disassembling the elk to bring back to the trucks. Everyone was congratulating Brendan, patting him on the back. He was smiling like I’d never seen before, he knew that he had made the right decision.

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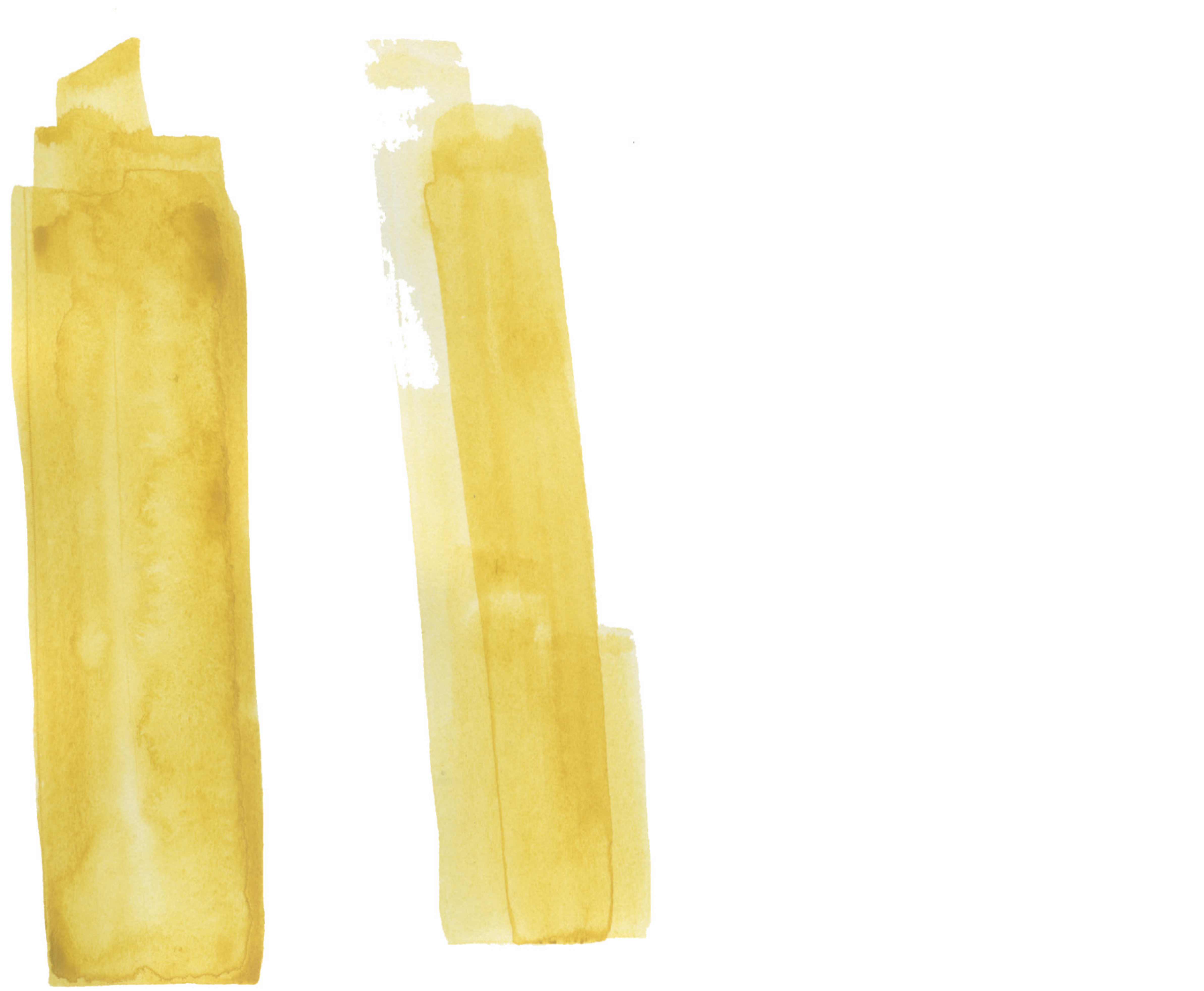
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THE SUDDEN GRADUAL CHANGE | BY ALEX RAUSCHER

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The end of childhood came gradually, or was it very fast?
Thinking about it, my responsibilities slowly grew,
and even though I knew it wouldn't last,
before I realized I was walking I flew.
My childish beliefs, fears, and grudges vanished from my present mind,
suddenly existing only within memories that evoke nostalgia and regret.
Thoughts of realism replaced those of the ideal kind,
even those I am loath to forget.
Although I sadly relinquished these thoughts and desires,
I am who I was, refined through a forge, not purged through fires.

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THOUGHT | BY SEAN MURPHY

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He thought he thought so hard he lost who he was

He thought so hard life was not life he thought

And thought when he should have just lived

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THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT BIRDS | BY JURY S. JUDGE

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Do the birds sing their sorrows
as sweetly as they sing their joys?
Do birds find the miracle of their flight,
as ordinary as we find our own footsteps?
Do birds appreciate their feathered beauty,
as people feel vulnerable in their skin?

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VOICELESS | BY FRANCES DAVIS

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Given a voice but no use for it
We are silenced by those who hear but won't listen
We are silenced with hands over our screaming mouths
Silenced by the laughter echoing in our minds
And after, we are silenced with fear
Silenced by their reputation, silenced by their mothers cries
Silenced by paperwork and answering the question
"Well, what were you wearing?"
So take my voice away, I have no use for it
Because saying something is the same as saying
Nothing at all

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WHEN THE BATTLE’S LOST AND WON | BY CASEY DARMODY

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“The shoggoths are doing well,” Damos says, with a tint of weariness appropriate for the end of a shift. “One has an infection.” It’s freezing, as always. Surrounding him are clean snowy wastes punctuated only by the subtle curves of snow-dunes, the lakes of liquid crystal he’s here to mine, and of course the nearby shoggoth node that towers over it all like a skyscraper. Winding and branching umbilical cord-like Nutrient Lines radiate from it to every shoggoth in a 10km area, those amorphous and mutated workhorses of the Sarkic Ecumene.

His supervisor knits his brow, and raises his voice to speak over the quickly rising wind from the east. “Get that taken care of tomorrow. I don’t want any more complaints from the Pyramid.”

“Neither do I,” he says in a raised, but apologetic voice. His mind begins to wander to his family, but is brusquely guided back to purpose by a subconscious emanation from the west.

* * *

Meanwhile, something phases into space, far above the worker and the supervisor so as to be unseen and unknown. Air, light, and thought bend around her, and she perceives without vision. The two Damu walk away from each other: small, dark figures against the all-encompassing white. She turns her immaterial eye, and projects her perception to the far future.

The Pyramid is under siege. Flocks swarm in patterns and military formations, circling the geometric density of weathered crystalline stone. Thin pulses of a pure, white light beat against the structure, which every so often are returned with colorful, sonorous blasts from the car-sized Nephilium laser barrels bored into the material.

Damos and his supervisor are both here, although they won’t last long, especially not after the side they picked. They’re horrified at the enemy. Ironic, considering their own states. Two of thousands, warped and twisted, each plugged into the towering mushroom-like shoggoth nodes.

Knuckles pale on the remote controls of the Nephilium laser, the sensation of its warm heartbeat a comforting connection to the Biosystem, he braces himself against the cold glassy crystal of the Pyramid, eyes and nose subject to stinging numbness from days of intense blizzard. In every direction, the streamlined and simplistic forms of the Ophanim drones fall onto and through the white ground like snowfall.

He observes, with developing shades of confusion and contempt, the bits and pieces of fractured Ophanim more than 500 meters below his station on the rugged eastern face of the Pyramid. No flesh is visible. No organs, nor blood either: not sentient, then, just the cold unfeeling programming of a drone. Surely. He doesn’t understand why they come. Surely to assimilate them into their horde. Then something immense falling from above catches his attention.

It’s a sphere of sapphire the size of a house. Within is a maze of lenses, prisms, and meshes carved from diamond, which catch and scatter the evening light tinted blue by the outer casing. A dim sparkle grows from deep within, like the first light after an eclipse, which streams through the inner workings of the sphere as it falls, building into a sun-like blue inferno.

The casing shatters as it hits the pinnacle of the Pyramid, and a wall of force cascades from it in all directions. Space compresses and rarefacts, sending faults through the lattice of the ancient construction, bursting conchoidal chunks into the air. The wave itself is silent, but the air is filled with the layered orchestra of boulders and shards.

Damos is thrown into the air, his body seized by the momentum of the slab beneath him. One of his mutated fangs brushes what appears to be a blister as his body is shaken like a rag doll, sending him into a momentary cold sweat. The passing air tears at his form, the nearby rubble existing in stasis relative to him for an indeterminate period of time, the surface of the soft snow surging up to him and hitting him, and passing by him.

Time passes.

The world re-asserts itself, and Damos finds himself in complete darkness, shrouded in a blanket of dulling cold. Alone, he hopes, and if not alone, trapped in the snow with a comrade rather than with an enemy.

To his dismay, mechanical tics and groans signal the presence of such, and his own breathing, raspy and unnaturally resonant, very probably signal his. The Ophan speaks suddenly, startling him. “I’ll be found eventually, after the battle’s been won.” Its voice is synth-y and glib, “If we wait here, you’ll have the opportunity to join the Triquetra.” The last phrase ends with an upward intonation one would use with animals.

A period of silence passes, save Damos’ unnatural breathing, then a fear-filled, glottal “Why?” escapes his throat. “Why would I want to die?”

“Oh, it’s not death, it’s Ascension!” The Ophan explains in the same glib tone, similar to how a door-to-door evangelical might explain an obscure piece of theology. Again, a deep glottal plosive emanates from his warped throat.

For many minutes they sit still, listening to each other’s subtle signs of life, the noises far above them growing less frequent over time. Then multiple synth-y voices, unintelligible, grow in intensity and frequency above them, until the sound of digging can be heard: a mix of soft and sharp as the layers of snow and ice are shoveled away, accompanied by mechanical tics. Panic rises in Damos’ mind, and in his throat like the sound of a cornered and hurt animal.

Before they came, those within the Pyramid had prepared for this by giving their protectors and guards an uncommon module. Bracing himself, jaw trembling slightly, he presses the blister with a fang until it rips with a small amount of blood. His mouth is filled with the taste of burnt almonds, as his mouth and throat burn.

“Great. The damn thing killed itself. At least it didn’t destroy my 15th shell this week. By the Sisters, this is going to be a hard report to write. At least we won,” the Ophan thinks to herself.

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